

## Notes from the Forest: Engaging with a hunter's world of materials

**Date :** November 22, 2016

[Thorsten Gieser](#), Lecturer in Anthropology, Department of *Kulturwissenschaft*, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany



*A winter's day, in a forest in central Germany. At dusk, more than fifty hunters and beaters stand around the 'gallow', a wooden structure with a long beam on which the dead bodies of hunted game are hung after they have been field dressed. A small group of hunters play their horns and the eerie melodies of 'Sows dead!' and 'Halali!' fill the air, accompanied by the occasional dog who howls along. It is the end of a hunting day. After several hours on the beater's track, I feel exhausted and tired. My boots and my trousers are smeared with*

*blood and mud. Although I washed my hands briefly in icy water, there is still dried blood under my fingernails and in the lines of my skin. Having been exposed to the currents of the wind and the warming beams of sunlight all day, my face feels 'weathered' and my eyes are small and tired. In an hour or so I will be back home, lying comfortably on my IKEA sofa in my suburban flat and, after having had a hot shower, I will enjoy a mug of tea.*

In Germany today, there are almost 400,000 non-professional hunters, killing an average of 4.5 million game animals per year. Who these hunters are and why they hunt is hard to say as there is no sociological, quantitative study yet (Schraml 2012). An indication could be a recent survey of hunting trainees, initiated by the German hunting association *DJV*, which suggests that most new hunters are of urban middle-class background, working in the service sector, in civil service or office-based jobs, in technical professions or still studying at school or university (DJV 2013). According to this survey, among their main motivations to start hunting is that they enjoy hunting (73%), being in nature (86%), doing practical conservation work (74%) and eating game (56%). Interestingly, the number of female (often urban) hunters is on the rise, reaching almost 20% among those in training (although the number of women in total is far less). A non-quantitative source regarding the composition of hunting trainees and their motivations is provided by Helmut Herbold's (2013) twenty years of experience of teaching hunting trainees (he was one of my trainers at the hunting school *Gut Grambow*). He assumes that most of his trainees so far have come out of a family tradition of hunting, although there is also a high number of those from non-hunting families who became interested in hunting through acquaintances and friends. Summarizing trainees' motivations, he cites hunting passion, enjoying and relaxing in nature, being outdoors, access to 'healthy' meat, and knowing more about nature and animals.

In this essay, I am interested especially in those urban middle-class hunters for whom enjoying nature is central to their hunting practice. In Germany – as in most countries – this urban middle-class is often characterized as being alienated from 'nature' but longing to re-connect with nature, with more 'raw' and 'wilder' practices that might help to counter the negatively conceived effects of 'civilized', regulated city life and the uneventful monotony of indoor office work (Kirchhoff *et al.* 2012). Hunting, for many, holds the promise of returning practitioners to nature by providing unusual, new outdoor 'experiences', thus turning 'urban bodies' into 'bodies of nature' (Macnaghten and Urry 2001).

Hunting as a cultural practice is a way of being alive to the world (Ingold 2011). It organizes the way hunters perceive, move and engage with the environment. Hence we may ask if hunting organizes 'hunting experiences' in a way that makes it possible for people to re-connect with and feel less alienated from nature. We may answer this question by investigating how hunting practices provide certain kinds of sensory experiences and material engagements. In particular, we may look at how the hunter's body partakes of the material world and the tactility that is involved in handling materials which are ready to hand during the performance of relevant tasks. One such task is field dressing of animal bodies (called *Aufbrechen* in the German specialist language of

hunters), i.e. the material transformations that come with the unbinding forces of killing and death. What are the materials, the material world of hunting, as revealed through field dressing? How do hunters engage with and thus transform these materials? What kinds of tactility are given in the handling of substances and surfaces? Can these questions shed light on the relationship of urban hunters to what they call nature?

It's the beginning of May, 2015, the opening of this year's hunting season. It's the third hunt and the first that has been successful for us. My mentor D., an experienced hunter and forester, killed a roe deer buck and he wants to show me how to field dress the animal.

*[he] lays the buck in a belly-up position and begins cutting the skin from the breast bone right up to the chin to lay open the rib cage and the windpipe. He drives the whole length of the blade into the torso, below the breast bone, and cracks open the rib cage by forcing the knife through the ribs. We hang the body by the sinews of its hind legs onto a hook on the 'gallow' and D. continues his work by cutting free the end of the small intestines. Having removed some pellets of dung from the anus, he makes an incision around the anus until the small intestines move freely inside the pelvis. Then he passes the knife to me: "Your turn." I freeze. I was not prepared for this. I thought I would just watch the first time. But I can't get out of this now and take the knife. He points to the testicles and penis. Although I still don't feel prepared, though I feel revulsion rumbling in my stomach, I gather myself, focus my attention and overcome my hesitation. I can't embarrass myself in front of D.! I try to focus on the task at hand and nothing else, grab the soft, furry testicles and cut them off together with the penis. Urgh, what an unpleasant feeling! I cautiously slice open the belly, right down to the open chest cavity, and the intestines and organs pour out, smooth and glistening, over my hands, over my arms, still strangely warm, steam rising out of the carcass into my face, smelling of flesh and blood. Don't start to think or feel too much! Focus! There is the heart. I hold it in my hand; it is bloody and so warm, so alive somehow. This feels weird. I put it aside, return to the dead body and make a small cut here, a cut there until the whole bag of innards falls down through its own weight, only attached to the carcass now by the windpipe. I grab the pipe with both hands and rip the bag from the flesh and it drops to the ground like a big blob, still steaming. Now I feel the tension that had taken hold of my whole body during the whole time and I breathe in deeply and I see the blood on my hands and the distinctive smell of buck blood seems to envelop me like an atmosphere. I don't know what to do with my bloodied hands, how to hold them without smearing myself with more blood; I can't touch anything because this would make it dirty, contaminated...*

Before I made my first kill, field dressing was the most disturbing experience of my sensory apprenticeship as a hunter. As an urban-dwelling academic, the comparison between my familiar material world and this new, 'foreign' material world of hunting was striking. Here, a world of material objects: veneer furniture, laminate flooring, concrete walls, ceramic tiles, glass, synthetic

materials – clean, shiny, hard surfaces –, clothing in cuddly soft cotton and wool. Even leather (as in furniture, shoes, etc.) appears clean and shiny, hardly recognizable as animal skin. Contrast this to a world of materials with hardly any (made) objects: skin, hair, sinews, bones, flesh, blood, dung, urine, digested vegetable matter. My human, living body becomes entangled in the material animal body, touching and feeling materials usually hidden and enclosed in a living body. The German hunters' language recognizes this phenomenon when, for example, blood in its 'proper' place, i.e. inside the body (in arteries, veins and flesh), is distinguished from blood outside the body: *Blut* (inside) becomes *Schweiß* (outside).

Field dressing thus affords the urban body with a range of materials that are considered 'out of place' at home but necessary 'out there', out of doors, in 'nature', in the engagement with an animal. With these materials come new forms of tactility and gestures: incising, piercing, slicing, ripping, breaking. This is the tactility of killing and death. When, as Ingold (2011) has argued, life binds substances and media (blood, air, water) into living forms, then field dressing continues the unbinding that started with the entry of a bullet into the animal's body. With each gesture of the knife in hand, the animal body that was a *thing*, in the meaning of a *gathering*, transforms into an *assemblage* of parts, with less and less holding it together. This process culminates in the final butchering (German *Zerwirken*) of the body after it had hung a few days – the animal body now turned 'meat' is cut into kitchen-ready pieces, 'game' having turned into 'venison' (this transition is not depicted in the German hunters' language where *Wild* (the live animal) stays *Wild* (venison)).

I hunt with seasoned foresters, most of them from established hunting and/or forestry families, who have grown up with the practice. But I also hunt with urban middle-class hunters – a retired school teacher, a retired pharmacist, a historian and archivist and many more I meet regularly during the big hunts (driven hunts) during autumn and winter. I have seen many struggle with field dressing and my forester-mentor confirms my observation from his life-long experience with hunters. Field dressing and butchering (even more challenging) are certainly not favourite tasks for many hunters but they cannot avoid them. Feeling immersed in nature during the long wait on an elevated hide or when stalking through the woods, the chase and the moments leading to a kill are the themes of hunters' narratives, not the bloody 'red work' (*Rote Arbeit* in German hunters' language). Yet there is hardly any other task in hunting that provides such material 'evidence' that one has left the 'clean' urban life and its material world. Many urban hunters may not enjoy that part of hunting but field dressing not only invites or affords what many perceive as 'raw', 'wild' or 'natural' experiences. Field dressing *forces* the materials of animal bodies onto the hunters' bodies, it *forces* the material engagement with something *Other* that has the capacity to transform urban bodies into bodies of nature. However, the urban life world does creep into the forest in the form of hygiene legislation which asks (and perhaps soon demands) that hunters use one-way rubber gloves when field dressing ...

## References

DJV (Deutscher Jagdschutzverband). 2013. *Wissenswertes zur Jagd in Deutschland*. Berlin: DJV

Herbold, Helmut. 2013. Vor und nach der Jägerprüfung. *Gut Grambow Magazin*, December 2013: 16-21

Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. London: Routledge

Kirchhoff, Thomas, Vicenzotti, Vera & Voigt, Annette (eds). 2012. *Sehnsucht nach Natur. Über den Drang nach draußen in der heutigen Freizeitkultur*. Bielefeld: Transcript

Macnaghten, Phil & Urry, John (eds). *Bodies of Nature*. London: Sage

Schraml, Ulrich (2012) Hunting in a sociological perspective – approaches and benefits. *International symposium on hunting, »?odern aspects of sustainable management of game population« Zemun-Belgrad, Serbia, June 2012*