

**FAIRY TALE ACTIVISTS:
NARRATIVE IMAGINARIES
ALONG A GERMAN TOURIST ROUTE**

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In 2005, the German Fairy Tale Street or Märchenstrasse will celebrate its 30th anniversary. Themed auto routes began to take shape in the 1950s and at the time when this particular initiative took shape, there were already around sixty registered themed auto routes in Germany¹. One might consider such routes a special instance of what the Austrian ethnologists Bernhard Tschofen terms “hyphenated landscapes” – that is, regions that take on a label which stresses an economic as much as a cultural resource (Tschofen 2003). Cars had become more affordable and allowed individuals to plot their leisure and vacation trips in more individualistic ways. Instead of hiking tours, people undertook motorized journeys – and travel guides with titles like “The Automobile Driver as Hiker” (Ess, n.d.) or “Hiking by Car” (Springorum 1963) attest to the transformation of locomotion if not terminology. The experience of built and natural environment was mediated in considerably faster speed than on foot or bicycle, and points to elements beyond John Urry’s “gaze” that are of relevance in understanding tourist experience (Urry 1990)². Travelling by car enlarged the sense of how much could be taken in during a single journey and privileged a “stop and go” mode: stretches of high speed travel could be followed by intensive interaction with selected places. The “themed route” developed then in part in tandem with faster means of locomotion. Simultaneously, such routes reached topically and symbolically back to the idea of “historical routes” – foot paths, river routes, Roman routes, even the Silk Route – with their connection to imagined and real pasts (Scharfe 1991). The “Romantic Street”, the “Half-Timbered Housing Street”, the “Street of Mills” or even the “Asparagus Street” employ what is considered a culturally attractive resource to assist automobile tourists in plotting their travel routes thematically. For the route running from the Grimm Brothers’ birthplace – Hanau – to the city of Bremen, the cultural capital in question is narrative. So at least it was decided by an enterprising politician and a few entrepreneurs in and around Kassel,

host to the Grimm museum and a city where the Brothers Grimm worked as librarians for a number of years. Had it not been for the division of Germany up to 1989, the route would undoubtedly have run to Berlin – the last place of work and residence of Wilhelm and Jacob. In 1975, one chose instead the city prominently associated with one of the tales – the Bremen town musicians (KHM 27).

In the course of nearly thirty years, more than sixty towns and villages have joined this loose touristic collaborative³. Some places, such as Hamelin of Pied Piper fame, are extremely active with a play, statuary, legend-related foods (“Do not bite into the baked rats, they are meant to be ornamental”), as well as a musical. Others use the folktale theme only as one among a number of options to market themselves. In addition, the generic term “folktale” is employed very liberally: legends, historical materials, and literary biography (such as those of the author, illustrator and satirist Wilhelm Busch or the poet Annette Droste-Hülshoff) all mingle into one “fairy tale imaginary” at least as far as the central coordinators’ plan is concerned⁴.

Despite all idiosyncrasies, the Fairy Tale Street as a whole works on the principle that this central German landscape is deeply interwoven with the folktales and legends collected and published by the Brothers Grimm and others of their time. While natives will naturally associate familiar narrative plots, especially legends, with their region, the idea behind the endeavor was to invite tourists into this imaginary, and to help them envision it through festivities, plays, representational figures and readings. Much as tourism theorists Coleman and Crang (2002) have argued, performances are being utilized to activate and associate the imaginary with a given place. How successful reifications of narratives are in providing visitors with a feel for their magic is not the focus of this essay⁵ – though we have heard even gentle elderly ladies quite cynically talk of just how fairy-tale like even the soap in their hotel seemed to be⁶. Despite all efforts to craft travel in terms of narratable journey, the meeting of enacted folk narrative and automotive traveler is, in terms of media, speed, and temperament hardly harmonious⁷.

Rather, our project seeks to explore the extent to which narrative imaginaries appropriate the minds and hearts of individuals who work to promote them. Drawing on fourteen months of ethnographic and archival research from eight such communities, this paper focuses on what we term “fairy tale activists”, that is individuals who have engaged with particular vigor in the potent combination of landscape, built environment, and narrative imaginary. The paper offers brief glimpses into the differential biographical investment of actors involved in productions of highly diverse caliber. The activism of the figure of Dietrich the Knight is explored in greater detail. It has to be stated at the outset that while these biographical investments are in some cases phenomenally strong, the Fairy Tale Street is economically extremely frail. The fast pace of tourism promotion demands – or so at least tourism professionals feel – constant innovation in order to draw visitors back to places they have already seen. For the individuals working along this route, however, narrative imaginaries with their often quite outdated or at the very least mixed and home-made aesthetics are life-long commitments and hence traditions in their own right which have long grown beyond the economic impetus that brought them forth.

A Sample of Fairy Tale Activists

The longest running narrative imaginary in our sample is Hamelin's Pied Piper. Festivities around this legend are documented already for 1884. In 1955, Mr. Flügge, a high school teacher, took on the task of organizing a Pied Piper play with lay actors and many school children⁸. For half a century, Mr. Flügge invested himself into this activity and in the process he won over a number of additional individuals to embrace the legend and its performance into their lives. For the Hannover Expo of 2000, a "Rats Musical" was added to the Pied Piper program. Up until 1994, the lead role of the Pied Piper was personified and thus owned by one actor alone which required a time investment far beyond summer Sundays. The figure of the Pied Piper – like all fairy tale personifications – must be ready for countless representational activities at city functions, tourism fairs, and events deemed relevant for Hamelin's profile. Pied Piper tourism works, there is no doubt about it, but there is a social investment behind it that has little to do with the success of tourism⁹.



1. The Pied Piper Play in Hamelin with Kalle Schmidt as Pied Piper

Photo: Dorothee Hemme 2003

Kalle Schmidt has been with the Hamelin play since 1974 and has personified the Pied Piper since 1986. He was handpicked by teacher Flügge and embraces the role with a complex mix of fascination with the character, responsibility toward the city, and veneration for his old teacher. For decades he shifted his vacations to fall or Easter, and accepted the fact that summer weekends were Pied Piper times. "The play is a tradition", he feels, and while it may not correspond to glitzy Broadway entertainment, he regards the community building aspect as phenomenally



2. Entrance to 'Neukirchens Märchenhouse' where Mrs. Grünberg is presenting reified fairy-tales and story telling. *Photo: Dorothee Hemme 2003*

important. He would never give his time to guide tourists through town, however. Correspondingly, he views Hamelin's latest efforts to raise sufficient funds for building a giant rat as a rather misguided tourist venture¹⁰.

A contrast in scope and orientation, but an activist in her own right, is Mrs. Grünberg. She quit teaching school twenty years ago and trained to become a professional story teller, attended seminars of the European Märchen Society and was booked for telling stories all over Lower Saxony and Hessa. She has learned about twenty Grimm tales by heart – a process which requires approximately four to six months, as she remains completely true to the text as edited by the Brothers Grimm. Her hometown Neukirchen has been part of the Fairy Tale Street for a long time but did not really get its act together to pick a focus. Mrs. Grünberg at any rate did not see herself in a tourist setting. The tourism promoters in her opinion know next to nothing about the power of Märchen. "They are asleep"; she says, "they sleep Sleeping Beauty's sleep" – otherwise they would not dream up such blatantly commercial tale worlds but instead would recognize the depth of narration and fairy tale plots¹¹.

When a house became vacant, Frau Grünberg seized the moment – she called the mayor and said "this house has to become Neukirchen's Märchenhouse". The house was officially dedicated in 2003 and it is open year round for story telling and for a limited number of other dramatic and visual stagings. Mrs. Grünberg is utterly committed to communicating what she perceives as the depth of folktales. She

believes deeply in their being rooted in the landscape in which the Grimms collected their materials and she will undoubtedly keep up her efforts on behalf of Märchen whether the Fairy Tale Street officials honor her services or not. Thus while Neukirchen is financially in a disastrous position and had to cut its tourism budget, Mrs. Grünberg keeps going, and busses of particularly Japanese tourists apparently keep coming.

There are many other individuals who have taken hold of particular stories and made it their task to give them life and live through them. Adolf Hahn has portrayed the historic figure of Baron Münchhausen¹². Until the German aviation bureau forbade it in 1992, he flew on a “canon ball” suspended from a helicopter to the annual Festival of Lights in Bodenwerder, he performed the play countless times in this little town. Also, he learned the Münchhausensong in Russian and in Japanese in order to perform it on tourism fairs in such far away places as Russia and Japan. His paying jobs have been far less spectacular and his primary identification is undoubtedly with his fictional character¹³.

The disciplinary genres of folk narrative research are of little interest to activists along this route – legend, history, biography and fairy tales belong together in one larger imaginary. Most importantly, through narrative performance and enactment these fairy tale activists achieve levels of self-realization their regular lives do not permit. Recognizing the power or charm or nostalgia, or all of the above, that these activities yield for their individual lives, leading enactors are for the most part also quite at ease with the touristic dimensions of their doings. Most fairy tale activists receive nothing or next to nothing for their efforts – but most of them regard their volunteering as a means to bring tourism revenue to their home towns.

Dietrich the Knight¹⁴

Living a personal fantasy while contributing to the revenue of one’s region is perhaps best exemplified in the most stunning activist we have encountered, namely Dietrich the Knight who is also the most thoroughly involved in experiencing and interpreting the landscape as both home of, and foil for, narrative fragments.

Dietrich Uffelmann is an employee of the tourist information bureau in Hofgeismar, another community along the Fairy Tale Road, located in Reinhard’s Forest. This nearly primeval forest can be termed the richest landscape along this



3. Adolf Hahn, alias Baron Münchhausen, performing the “Münchhausensong” at the grand opening of the Weser-Boat-Tours
Photo: Dorothee Hemme 2004



4. Dieter Uffelmann as Knight Dietrich in the Reinhards Forest

Photo: Dorothee Hemme 2003

themed auto route. Within and around it are Sleeping Beauty's castle as well as Rapunzel's tower.

For a good part of his work time and for some of his free time as well, Mr. Uffelmann turns into Ritter Dietrich. A product of Mr. Uffelmann's lively imagination, Dietrich is a seven-hundred-year-old knight who strides through the forest as he pleases. He inhabits the forest with a certitude and pleasure that few other fairy tale activists along the route can claim for themselves. People who book his tours are given a meeting place and at the appointed time, he magically appears as a knight in chain mail. The tourists amble under the guidance of this guardian of the woods through the forest and listen to excerpts of his vast store of knowledge and fantasy. Guiding his guests to a deep pond, he will tell the etiological legend about the evil giantess Trendula who was killed by lightning. Hence the name of the pond:

"The watery green grave of Trendula the Giantess". Dietrich then goes on to tell of the legendary gambling Count Reinhard to whom the forest owes its existence. He has no problem with weaving in narratives from other cultures: pointing to ancient, gnarly trees he will describe them as turtles, mammoths, or the three-headed hell hound Cerberus. With these mindscapes, which Orvar Löfgren (1999) considers typical for touristic experience, Dietrich transforms the forest into a symbolic space. He points to a circle of oaks and beeches and thinks out loud what a Germanic assembly space might have looked like. With younger participants, he tests and deepens their botanical knowledge of trees. He also makes maximum use of his knightly stature to propound moral lessons: "Only the weak pull the sword, the mighty fight to keep their composure" is his guiding principle. Foolhardy medieval knights who fought too often and too hard could easily die of gangrene. The visitor emerges from a walk with Dietrich imbued with the forest's magical nature and beauty. A receptive mind will be filled with a mixture of legendary mystery and botanical diversity.

Mr. Uffelmann was born in Trendelburg – where today Rapunzel lowers her hair. He is a native of the forest, so to speak. In his youth he did not only explore the woods and the ruins, he was also a passionate reader of chivalrous romances¹⁵. He invented Dietrich eight years ago, after having heard complaints from visitors that there was not enough of the "fairy taledom" to experience. Representational figures like Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella, the Carrot King of Heiligenstadt or the Rose Queen of Hann Münden are, for Dietrich's own taste, too static, in particular for

performing the regional treasure trove of legends. Thus he worked out this *alter ego* which creatively draws on his reading preferences and travel experiences as well as on, his own explorations of the region and conversations with other connoisseurs, stints within the re-enactment scene and many years of working with tourists. He embodies the knight with ease as the performances are genuinely part of him, “I do not have to think about this anymore, it is just fun to do”¹⁶.

Successful touristic advertising offers a mixture of tradition and trend, and Mr. Uffelmann analogously ties traditional collective fantasies connected to the German forest to a late modern reality, thus creating a tension between expectation and surprise: appearing suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, is an important element of his performance¹⁷. Seeing a living and breathing knight at the edge of a forest is not part of the everyday experience of the modern visitor. The moment one begins one’s tour with this apparition, one also leaves a piece of everyday reality behind. On the other hand, the knight belongs, as Simon Schama has observed in his *Landscape and Memory*, to the collective imaginary geography of the German forest (Schama 1996: 113–117). Thus the mere appearance of the knight rekindles recognition and imagination and potentially allows for an experience under a mythic-fairytale’esque premise.

Knight Dietrich’s personal reading of the forest at once enriches *and subverts* traditional interpretations of landscape: facing a tree that resembles a turtle, he narrates a creation myth from the South Sea. For his intention is also to clarify for his guests that “their own world <...> is but a puzzle piece in a very large world, even if they and I do not know it well. [Stories of this sort] can be found everywhere; instead of the South Sea story with the turtle I could take another one (to explain this)”¹⁸.

Choosing material from international folk literature, Uffelmann brings, analogously to general social trends, new elements into this forest thus far connoted – and marketed! – with national and regional narrative traditions. The familiar medium of folktale and legend transports what he considers timeless and supra-individual values and structures of understanding with ease. As Knight Dietrich, he thus contributes to making an unfamiliar, globalizing modernity more understandable. He is the narrator of traditional forest mythologies and simultaneously their transmitter into the present. The descriptive title Knight Dietrich has chosen for himself is “preserver of old legends and a bridge between past and present”. Working for many years with vacationers, journalists, and tourism professionals, the persona of Dietrich the Knight has gained clear contours and become a figure that can be deployed in many contexts performs on marketing fairs from Hamburg to Shanghai, representing more than one tourism association. He serves as Master of Ceremonies for Sleeping Beauty or Rapunzel at small village festivities as well as at New Year’s receptions for international business associations. Tourists as well as regional inhabitants favor his tours through the woods and the castles. He guides through the primeval forest as well as through an animal park located near the Saba Castle and through all the castles and ruins of the region. The downtown areas he leaves for other tourist guides to do – his armor is, in his opinion, not suited to represent bourgeois urban history. When disappointed guests ask for Dietrich the Knight, his guiding colleagues are instructed to say that he is “on a crusade”.

Conclusion

From the point of view of creating an intimate connection between narrative and landscape, Dietrich the Knight is at present the most successful character along the Fairy Tale Road. His versatility in deploying the legendary as part of local tradition, environmental consciousness raising, and touristic promotion within one landscape is unique. Yet other fairy tale activist pursue other linkages – to narrative wisdom, to their community, and – not to be denied – to the market.

The success of any site along this themed auto route depends almost entirely on the voluntary involvement of one or two individuals. The question is, however, what is the measure of success? Looking at the front stage once more, that is, the one the visitors are supposed to take in, we can turn to the available promotional material. The German Tourism Association's site entitles its entry on our research subject "Back to Childhood on the German Fairy Tale Street". The text begins with "Welcome to the world of brave princes, graceful fairies, modest peasant lads and puss-in-boots". On a wintry day, the writer surmises, one might see Frau Holle shake out her pillows. The cities are described as beautiful as if set in fairy tales and the traveler is thus reminded of imaginaries carried with her since childhood¹⁹.

We would suggest that such imaginaries present themselves to the tourist best while driving – in the fleeting moment of passing forests and hills, foggy riverbeds and snowy landscapes. Listening to a narrator in the Märchenhouse, watching a marionette performance or shadow play may succeed in drawing a visitor into the promised never-never land. But the confrontation with plastic statuary, lay actors' plays and fellow humans in fairy tale costumers may rather create a break in this imaginary born of memory and passing landscape.

Indeed, the quotidian breaks through the frame of performance as a matter of course. In MacCannell's by now classic suggestion concerning the tourist's search for everyday authenticity, the glimpse behind the touristic front stage appeared as a quintessential mark of touristic success (MacCannell 1976). Along the Fairy Tale Street, with its open-air stages, exhibits, signs, and spaces of encounter, staged, imaginary and everyday instantiations mix, often without the clear-cut framing devices expected of "performance"²⁰. A number of the Cinderellas and Sleeping Beauties encountered speak a hefty dialect and converse in the vocabulary of a twenty first century teen who rides a motorcycle when she is not in her princess costume. Hence a good portion of good will and versatile pleasure-taking is necessary on the part of the tourist: Biting into a slice of Pied Piper cake, a Cinderella cookie, or a Münchhausen cannon ball, purchasing fragments of narratives as postcards, puppets or key chains and witnessing fairy tale plays that bespeak the talent and budget of enthusiastic volunteers open one's eyes perhaps not so much to the fairy tale imaginary, but to the intensely personal and communal endeavor to build and maintain real world rather than tale worlds in the middle of Germany.

Recent theorizing in tourism studies accords a crucial space to the conjunction of place and performance in creating effective touristic imaginaries (Coleman and Crang, 2002). The focus may have rested too strongly on sites that intend to project

complete worlds that is, hermetically sealed entertainment worlds where the everyday remains invisible. Thus Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1996: 64) has argued that performances get routinized and in the process trivialize that which is performed. But in our case, with stages open to all sides and reaching into landscapes as far as the eye can see, the experience of tourists and especially of “independent producers” such as the actors and activists along the Fairy Tale Street differs considerably. While a decade or more of staging a narrative creates a certain level of routine, this does not trivialize experience: rather, there is a deepening of the identification with the narrative material. Many of the activists are very successful in what the recent literature calls “locality production” – enhancing home for themselves.

Most of them are, however, only marginally successful in the eyes of tourism entrepreneurs. The Fairy Tale Street teeters towards its thirty year jubilee amidst considerable economic woes, caused, so say some of its internal critics, by too many different and not sufficiently glossy local contributions – in short, a lack of coherent and convincing design and implementation. Meanwhile, the “Legend Path along the Rhein” is nearing conceptual completion, coordinated by one, firm hand, a tourism promotion agency in Cologne. The official inauguration of this new themed tourism route is to be this fall; 48 towns from Düsseldorf to Mainz will show one legend each, and its internet portal promises “the Legendary, the Historic, the Recommended”²¹. And in the East, the adjoining state of Thuringia in the former GDR is considering a “Legend and Ghost Street” – if it comes to pass, the name of this imaginary is semantically all too fitting for a depopulating landscape filled with splendid castle ruins of distant times and the ruins of socialism. For tourism, much like mining or steel refineries, which have turned into sites of labor tourism, is also accumulating its own histories of labor, leisure and imagination whose young and old ruins become part of the toured landscape.

¹ Source: Information brochure “Einige (nützliche) Informationen zur Deutschen Märchenstrasse”, provided by the business office of the German Fairytale Street or “Deutsche Märchenstrasse” (henceforth DMS).

² Schivelbusch (1989) develops an understanding of travel with increasing speed in his study on railways and how they altered notions of time and space.

³ The membership fluctuates. At present, 65 cities and towns are listed, but members join or drop out, depending on budgets, changing emphases in local marketing strategies and local interest. For a full listing of the members, cf.: <http://www.deutsche-maerchenstrasse.de/seiten/index.html> (date checked: 25.11.04).

⁴ The linkage between narrative, literary imagination, literary biographies and touristic development has been the focus of a considerable amount of research; cf. the introductory summary in Robinson and Anderson, 2002.

⁵ For a treatment of this aspect, see Bendix 1999.

⁶ Visit Fieldnotes, Sababurg, September 2, 2004, overheard in the restrooms of the restaurant: “Ja ja, es ist ja einfach alles märchenhaft hier” (Yes, yes, everything is just like in a fairy tale here) – spoken by an elderly lady to another who seemed to find the soap dispenser rather too modern and the efforts of the hotel with its Sleeping Beauty theme a bit overblown.

⁷ The fieldwork – this much I want to add here – certainly puts in question some of the quite definitive assertions within tourism scholarship regarding the routinization on the part of both visitors and producers.

⁸ According to archival records, the Pied Piper Play started up in 1949, and Mr. Flügge is generally named as the person behind it, but he himself provides 1955 as the time when he began participating in earnest. Interview with Friedrich Flügge, August 27, 2003.

⁹ In recent years, for instance, many of the children participating in the play are Turkish-German, in part for the free ice cream after each performance, in part because unlike their German peers they likely have less opportunity for summer holidays and are thus available.

¹⁰ Interview with Karl-Friedrich Schmidt, August 11, 2004.

¹¹ Interview with Gudrun Grünberg, November 30, 2003.

¹² For a very early rendering of Baron von Münchhausen's "lying stories", see Raspe (ca. 1820).

¹³ Interview with Adolf Hahn, November 11, 2003.

¹⁴ Interviews with Mr. Uffelmann have taken place throughout the duration of this project; he has been accompanied on several of his tours and has been interviewed in his work place and during tourism fairs as well.

¹⁵ He came to the tourist business on a circuitous route, having worked in city administration earlier.

¹⁶ His concept of nature with which he fashions a touristic experience for others, is based on mental engagement and personal experience in many forests: "The primeval forest around Sababurg presents constantly changing pictures for me, each guided tour is totally different... If I tell once that in this group of trees there are giants who have fought, the scene looks different the next time, it is a new image because a couple branches have fallen. Sure, you find this in every forest, mushrooms might sprout or there might be new and strange looking growths. I spend a lot of time in other forests, so I am not blinded by my local work space, there (are plenty of forests) from North to South and East to West <...>, and you find stories (to go with them) everywhere, too" (interview with Dieter Uffelmann, July 9, 2003).

¹⁷ In order not to spoil this effect, Uffelmann parks his car away.

¹⁸ Interview with Dieter Uffelmann, July 9, 2003.

¹⁹ "Deutsche Märchenstrasse" on <http://www.deutschland-tourismus.de/d/2940.html> (September 30, 2004), our translation.

²⁰ Coleman and Crang's (2002: 13–15) point that tourists tend to take in more than they are meant to might require revision for these sites where the separation of front and back stage is not upheld all that firmly by performers themselves and where the "power of framing" is handled quite differently, depending on the age and experience of the performers.

²¹ "Der Rheinische Sagenweg" <http://www.leadingolutions.de/dmswelt/rheinischersagenweg/> (September 30, 2004).

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