

Horror of the Anthropocene:

American Ecohorror since World War II

Emily J. Bourke

A thesis submitted to the School of English at Trinity College Dublin, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

February 2019

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work.

I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement.

Signed

Summary

This thesis explores the evolution of environmental anxiety in American horror fiction and film, arguing that the subgenre most commonly referred to as “ecohorror” merits reassessment in the face of global warming’s changing contexts. Greater awareness of the multifarious threats emerging from our environment means that it no longer suffices to consider plants, animals, and landscapes to be ecohorror’s only subjects. Much as ecocriticism initially limited itself in its focus on “obviously” environmental subjects, so critical approaches to ecohorror have tended to overemphasise the importance of the “revenge of nature” plot, and missed opportunities to explore other terrors bound up in our current age of ecological catastrophe.

Chapter one grounds *Horror of the Anthropocene* in contemporary ecohorror, looking at Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), *Take Shelter* (dir. Jeff Nichols, 2011), and Jeff Vandermeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014). Studies of ecohorror in the post-2000s era, I argue, acknowledge the wide variety of issues encompassed under the umbrella of “the environment”, and this perspective can be brought to bear on texts of the past with fruitful results. It draws primarily on the work of Timothy Morton and Timothy Clark, two ecocritics who see scale as the primary preoccupation of the Anthropocene, using their approaches to contextualise current understandings of ecohorror and to help us to identify what exactly we hope to accomplish when we apply the “ecohorror” label to a text.

Chapter two returns to the 1950s, arguing that a nascent environmental awareness and cultural concern with the new scale of nuclear weaponry links texts of the era with modern ecohorror, and positions them as important influences on the subgenre in decades to follow. It explores how ecocritical readings can supplement dominant socio-political readings of *The Beast*

from *20,000 Fathoms* (dir. Eugène Lourié, 1953) and *Them!* (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1954). It also argues that Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) and *The Shrinking Man* (1956) participate in a similar concern with emergent environmental issues—the former drawing on Dust Bowl imagery to evoke man-made ecological disaster, and the latter challenging human conceptions of scale and dominance over our environment.

Chapter three tackles the most-studied period of ecohorror: the era of “nature bites back” films in the 1960s and 1970s. In line with the previous chapter, it looks at how we might further uncover ecological themes in often-studied ecohorror texts by moving beyond the “revenge of nature” classification that has dominated criticism to date. Looking at *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) and *Jaws* (Peter Benchley, 1974), it argues that bringing up-to-date ecocritical perspectives to bear on both texts yields a more nuanced insight into how they interact with environmental issues of their time. It also looks at how an ecocritical perspective on Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) draws parallels between the novel's treatment of gender and power and humankind's treatment of the environment, once again demonstrating the value of moving beyond accepted definitions of ecohorror.

The final chapter seeks to situate Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), *They Live* (dir. John Carpenter, 1988), *The Toxic Avenger* (dir. Michael Herz and Lloyd Kaufman, 1984), and *Safe* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1995) within the environmental contexts of the 1980s and 1990s. This period is particularly under-theorised when it comes to ecohorror, again resulting from the limitations of “revenge of nature” perspectives. Despite being considered a quiet period for the subgenre, environmental themes are evident in ever-evolving forms during this time, and illustrate an evolution of the subgenre between the end of the 1970s and the age of global warming in which we live now. Although none of the texts feature animals taking revenge, they all evince an awareness of waste, pollution, and unsustainability at the heart of North American society, and

begin to move the scope of the subgenre towards the broad range of environmentally inflected concerns that we see in more contemporary texts.

For Dee and Tom Bourke

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks to Dr Bernice M. Murphy for all of her guidance and patience over the last number of years. I'm very proud to join her group of mutant academic offspring. Next, to my parents, Dee and Tom Bourke, who for some reason have always thought that an English PhD was the most worthwhile thing I could ever do. THANK YOU to Leo Devlin and every individual item of breakfast food that he prepared. This thesis would probably never have been finished without him. And to everyone—dear friends, the SB, the Slackmind, colleagues, and housemates—who read bits of this along the way, listened to me talk about giant ants, or encouraged me to keep going when things were tough.

I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the Irish Research Council. This project was partly funded by a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Research Scholarship.

Contents

Introduction	8
1. “There Appears to Be an Event Happening”: Nebulous Eco-Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century	40
2. “We Are Entering the Age of the Insect”: Ecohorror in the 1950s	91
3. “The People Had Done it Themselves”: The 1960s and 1970s	126
4. “Take a Deep Breath America—While You Still Can”: The 1980s and 1990s	168
Conclusion: New Directions in Ecohorror	206
Bibliography	213
Filmography	227
Discography	229

Introduction

Nobody likes it when you mention the environment these days, ecocritic and philosopher Timothy Morton points out. It brings to the foreground that which we would rather forget.¹ It reminds us that lifestyles in the developed world are unsustainable; that the foundations of our day-to-day reality are eroding beneath our feet. We do not want to acknowledge the many ecological atrocities that facilitate the most unassuming parts of our lives. Our morning coffee order, for example, may dredge up questions about the destruction of rainforests, impact of monocultures on local farming, transport emissions, and single-use plastic waste. Contemporary culture masks this reality, however, and cheap, takeaway coffee continues to be a small, uncomplicated pleasure in many of our lives. As soon as “the environment” is evoked, though, it becomes difficult to justify the systems that enable this state of affairs. We—and our governments—prefer to look the other way.

Speaking at the Dublin Ghost Story Festival in August 2018, American writer Joyce Carol Oates declared environmental horror to be the pressing issue of our time, haunting all contemporary writers whether they know it or not. Oates has written in the past that nature “inspires a painfully limited set of responses in ‘nature writers’—REVERENCE, AWE, PIETY, MYTHICAL ONENESS”.² Increasingly, however, the immensity and proximity of climate change has inflected environmental representation in fiction and film with a new emotion: fear.

One need not look far to see how wrapped up in horror environmental discourse is at present. Within the first weeks of 2019, media outlets reported that oceans are warming at far

¹ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

² Joyce Carol Oates, “Against Nature,” *Antaeus: On Nature* 57 (Autumn 1986): 236.

greater rates than predicted,³ cities are being destroyed by human-induced natural disasters,⁴ and that climate change is linked with elevated rates of depression, anxiety, PTSD-like symptoms, and suicidal ideation among those who dwell on its effects.⁵ Conservation scientists refer to their findings as “nothing short of a horror story”,⁶ parents anguish over the prospect of “dooming” their children “to life on a dystopian planet”,⁷ and—in spite of this—some journalists are keen to remind readers that their fears are “barely scratching the surface of what terrors are possible”.⁸

In 2000, Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and his colleague Eugene F. Stoermer proposed that the impact of human population growth and economic expansion on the planet was such that it merited a geological epoch of its own. They termed this the Anthropocene: the era of the human.⁹ “Considering . . . [the] growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales”, they write, “it seems to us more than appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term ‘anthropocene’ for the current geological epoch”.¹⁰ Although not yet

³ Brittany Shoot, “A New Climate Change Report Says Ocean Warming Is Far Worse Than Expected,” *Fortune*, January 11, 2019, <http://fortune.com/2019/01/10/climate-change-warming-oceans-science-study/>.

⁴ Alissa Walker, “Climate Change Is Taking Our Cities Away,” *Curbed*, January 10, 2019, <https://www.curbed.com/2019/1/10/18113246/climate-change-cities-paradise-wildfire-miami>.

⁵ “With Climate Change Comes Loss and ‘Ecological Grief,’” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), January 11, 2019, <https://thebulletin.org/2019/01/with-climate-change-comes-loss-and-ecological-grief/>.

⁶ “A Wilderness ‘Horror Story’: World’s Wilderness Is Going, Going ... Nearly Gone, New Paper Says,” *ScienceDaily*, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/10/181031141507.htm>.

⁷ Roy Scranton, “Opinion | Raising My Child in a Doomed World,” *The New York Times*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html>.

⁸ David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition,” *Intelligencer*, July 14, 2017, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html>.

⁹ They did not, in fact, coin the term, which has been in existence since at least the 1930s. Crutzen’s use of it in particular is, however, the driving force behind its current popularity.

¹⁰ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) Newsletter*, no. 41 (May 2000): 17.

officially recognised, it has gained popularity in both scientific and lay discourse as shorthand for the contemporary era of human-induced environmental crisis. Of course, without an official definition no precise date yet marks its beginning, but in 2016 the Anthropocene Working Group (made up of members of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, a body responsible for defining the standards for expression of geological periods, epochs, and ages) proposed the dawn of the nuclear age after World War II as a potentially appropriate boundary-marker.¹¹

Horror of the Anthropocene proposes that, along with its impact on our planet, the human activity responsible for the Anthropocene has also made an indelible impact on the horror genre, causing representations of environmental issues to evolve (and, indeed, mutate) along with scientific understanding. This thesis explores the evolution of environmental anxiety in American horror fiction and film, arguing that the subgenre most commonly referred to as “ecohorror” merits reassessment in the face of global warming’s changing contexts. Greater awareness of the multifarious threats emerging from our environment means that it no longer suffices to consider plants, animals, and landscapes to be ecohorror’s only subjects. Much as ecocriticism initially limited itself in its focus on “obviously” environmental subjects, so critical approaches to ecohorror have tended to overemphasise the importance of the “revenge of nature” plot, and missed opportunities to explore other terrors bound up in our current age of ecological catastrophe.

The study takes American horror as its focus for two key reasons: firstly, its status as a global power and influential force in environmentalist politics, and secondly, its history as a leading producer of popular fiction and film. The United States remains the greatest historical emitter of

¹¹ Damian Carrington, “The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-Influenced Age,” *The Guardian*, August 29, 2016, sec. Science, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>.

greenhouse gases worldwide, and ranks second for ongoing emissions, marking its significant role in the current environmental crisis.¹² Using a single nation's historical context as the foundation for textual analysis also allows a clear tracking of the development of modern ecohorror as an increasingly visible genre, and facilitates the reading of popular texts as products of the ever-evolving anxieties and concerns of their particular moments in time.

After outlining each chapter, the bulk of this introduction is dedicated to an exploration of existing literature in the areas of ecocriticism, horror, American studies, and the intersections between the fields. It looks at current understandings of the term “ecohorror”, and proposes that viewing it as a “horror of the Anthropocene” more fully encompasses the possibilities of the subgenre than many other definitions currently in use. Before moving on to the close readings of the following chapters, it also explains the methodologies supporting this research, and lays out the parameters of the study as a whole.

Chapter one grounds *Horror of the Anthropocene* in contemporary ecohorror, looking at Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), *Take Shelter* (dir. Jeff Nichols, 2011), and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014). Studies of ecohorror in the post-2000s era, it argues, acknowledge the wide variety of issues encompassed under the umbrella of “the environment”, and this perspective can be brought to bear on texts of the past with fruitful results. It draws primarily on the work of Timothy Morton and Timothy Clark, two ecocritics who see scale as the primary preoccupation of the Anthropocene, using their approaches to contextualise current understandings of ecohorror and to help us to identify what exactly we hope to accomplish when we apply the “ecohorror” label to a text.

¹² Mengpin Ge, Johannes Friedrich, and Thomas Damassa, “6 Graphs Explain the World's Top 10 Emitters,” World Resources Institute, November 25, 2014, <https://www.wri.org/blog/2014/11/6-graphs-explain-world-s-top-10-emitters>.

Chapter two returns to the 1950s, arguing that a nascent environmental awareness and cultural concern with the new scale of nuclear weaponry links texts of the era with modern ecohorror, and positions them as important influences on the subgenre in decades to follow. It explores how ecocritical readings can supplement dominant socio-political readings of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (dir. Eugène Lourié, 1953) and *Them!* (dir. Gordon Douglas, 1954). It also argues that Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) and *The Shrinking Man* (1956) share a similar concern with emergent environmental issues—the former drawing on Dust Bowl imagery to evoke man-made ecological disaster, and the latter challenging human conceptions of scale and dominance over our environment.

Chapter three tackles the most-studied period of ecohorror: the era of “nature bites back” films in the 1960s and 1970s. In line with the previous chapter, it looks at how we might further uncover ecological themes in often-studied ecohorror texts by moving beyond the “revenge of nature” classification that has dominated criticism to date. Looking at *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) and *Jaws* (Peter Benchley, 1974), it argues that bringing up-to-date ecocritical perspectives to bear on both texts yields a more nuanced insight into how they interact with environmental issues of their time. It also looks at how an ecocritical perspective on Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) draws parallels between the novel's treatment of gender and power and humankind's treatment of the environment, once again demonstrating the value of moving beyond accepted definitions of ecohorror.

The final chapter seeks to situate Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), *They Live* (dir. John Carpenter, 1988), *The Toxic Avenger* (dir. Michael Herz and Lloyd Kaufman, 1984), and *Safe* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1995) within the environmental contexts of the 1980s and 1990s. This period is particularly under-theorised when it comes to ecohorror, again resulting from the limitations of “revenge of nature” perspectives. Despite being considered a quiet period for the subgenre,

environmental themes are evident in ever-evolving forms during this time, and illustrate an evolution of the subgenre between the end of the 1970s and the age of global warming in which we live now. Although none of the texts feature animals taking revenge, they all evince an awareness of waste, pollution, and unsustainability at the heart of North American society, and begin to move the scope of the subgenre towards the broad range of environmentally inflected concerns that we see in more contemporary texts.

Horror of the Anthropocene: Critical contexts

It is almost impossible to begin any discussion of ecohorror without calling upon Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*—and rightly so. Published in 1962, subsequent to being serialised in *The New Yorker*, proponents call Carson's most famous work “perhaps the most influential work of environmental advocacy ever written”¹³ and credit it with “[leading] the way in making concern about environmental crisis a national issue”.¹⁴ With *Silent Spring*, Carson emphatically condemned the widespread, unrestricted pesticide use that became increasingly common in the United States following World War II, and brought the issue to the forefront of the popular imagination. Despite strong push-back from the scientific establishment and chemical industry,¹⁵ her writings took root in the public consciousness and spearheaded the modern environmentalist movement as we know it.¹⁶ No longer was humanity's ability to damage the environment limited to its locality; now people

¹³ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 178.

¹⁴ Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Four Decades of Environmental Crisis in the U.S.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xii.

¹⁵ Anthony S. Travis, “*Silent Spring* at 50: Earth, Water, and Air,” *Ambix* 59, no. 2 (July 2012): 83–84.

¹⁶ Mark Hamilton Lytle, *The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 227–28.

were confronted with the knowledge that the by-products of their lifestyles could damage the environment on a planetary scale.

In recent years, a long line of critics have credited Carson's book with being the origin point for the familiar ecohorror tale. In *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2013), Bernice M. Murphy remarks that "the 'nature strikes back' horror films of the 1970s are obviously linked to the sense of ecological crisis that became part of American life following the publication of *Silent Spring*",¹⁷ while Frederick Buell notes that *Silent Spring* "helped spark a wave of catastrophic rhetoric in environmental science and literature".¹⁸ Killingsworth and Palmer assert that it is partially due to Carson's writing that "our society is haunted by nightmares of an ecological apocalypse",¹⁹ and Gregersdotter, Hållén, and Höglund also argue that ecohorror "can be linked to the environmental movement that gained considerable ground and which became more mainstream in the late 1970s and early 1980s".²⁰

My dissatisfaction with using Carson as *the* urtext of ecohorror arises primarily from the lack of a concrete definition of "ecohorror" as a critical term. Although we have a broad sense of what is meant when it is invoked, a critical consensus does not yet exist as to its precise meaning. In a dedicated ecohorror issue of *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment (ISLE)* in 2014, Stephen A. Rust and Carter Soles observe:

As a literary and cinematic form, ecohorror has thus far been narrowly defined in popular discourse as those instances in a text when nature strikes back against humans as punishment for environmental disruption. Scholarship to this point has demonstrated that

¹⁷ Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 181.

¹⁸ Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, xii.

¹⁹ J. M. Killingsworth and J. S. Palmer, "Millennial Ecology," in *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*, ed. Carl G. Herndl (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 22.

²⁰ Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén, "Introduction," in *Animal Horror Cinema*, ed. Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), x.

ecohorror motifs are most often found in “revenge of nature” narratives like Steven Spielberg’s iconic film *Jaws* (1975).²¹

They also note that the term “has been in use since at least the mid-1990s to describe works of literature and film in which human characters are attacked by natural forces . . . that have been altered or angered by humans in some way”, and that, in popular culture, its use as a descriptor has increased steadily since the early years of the twenty-first century.²² Similarly, Joseph J. Foy writes:

Ecologically based horror films, or “eco-horror”, are fright flicks in which nature turns against humankind due to environmental degradation, pollution, encroachment, nuclear disaster, or a host of other reasons. As a genre, eco-horror attempts to raise mass consciousness about the very real threats that will face humanity if we are not more environmentally cautious.²³

Susan J. Tyburski, in turn, calls ecohorror “the transformation of our natural home into a destructive monster”,²⁴ and concentrates on “monstrous visions that mirror our fears about the fate of our civilization and the planet we call home”.²⁵ All uses of the terms do acknowledge an element of natural retribution as central to audiences’ understanding of ecohorror, but beyond that the specifics are foggy. Some believe that it must be didactic, depicting explicit “punishment” of humanity’s transgressions. For others, a mirroring of anxieties will suffice.

²¹ Stephen A. Rust and Carter Soles, “Ecohorror Special Cluster: ‘Living in Fear, Living in Dread, Pretty Soon We’ll All Be Dead,’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (December 2014): 509–10.

²² *Ibid.*, 510.

²³ Joseph J. Foy, “It Came From Planet Earth: Eco-Horror and the Politics of Postenvironmentalism in *The Happening*,” in *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent Through Popular Culture*, ed. Kate Mulgrew (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 167–190.

²⁴ Susan J. Tyburski, “A Gothic Apocalypse: Encountering the Monstrous in American Cinema,” in *Animal Horror Cinema*, ed. Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 147.

²⁵ Tyburski, 149.

Of course, much of the uncertainty around, and ongoing redefinition of, terms like “ecohorror” is a result of the nascent status of ecocriticism as a field more generally, alongside its relatively recent interaction with horror criticism. *Silent Spring*, naturally, is an integral part of ecocriticism’s genesis, for Carson’s writing gestures confidently towards the power of fiction as a medium for environmentalist communication. The book opens with a piece entitled “A Fable for Tomorrow”, a short narrative depicting the sudden environmental decline of a small American town. “There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings”, writes Carson, immediately invoking the imagery of the traditional fairytale.²⁶ Soon, however, this idyllic place undergoes a radical transformation: “Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change”.²⁷ What follows is the complete devastation of almost every aspect of natural life in the vicinity; animals sicken, birds vanish, vegetation withers, and fish die. However, “No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world”, we learn; “The people had done it themselves”.²⁸

Indeed, much of the criticism that Carson received upon the book’s publication complained that its language was not nearly scientific enough, emphasising its importance as a cultural—not just informative—text. In *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell notes, “It is Carson’s least ‘literary’ book . . . But the creative imagination is central to its effect”.²⁹ He goes on to argue that, “*Silent Spring*’s disenchantment with the pesticide industry’s witchery has a novelistic momentum to it, building from considerations of earth, water, and plants (Chapters 4–

²⁶ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 291.

6) to wildlife (7–11) to people (11–14), culminating in the chapter on cancer. Then comes a counterthrust (two chapters on the resistance pests develop to pesticides), followed by a chapter of possible solutions”.³⁰ Others have noted not just its literary affiliations, but also its Gothic links. “*Silent Spring* . . . consistently draws upon Gothic imagery”, writes Garrard. “[From] the “evil spell” cast by imperceptible pesticides . . . to the “death-dealing materials’ Americans were encouraged to spray into every corner of their homes and bodies”.³¹

Many of Carson’s contemporaries certainly saw it in a similar, yet distinctly less flattering, light. “Miss Carson³² writes with passion and with beauty, but with very little scientific detachment”, writes one detractor.³³ She “has effectively used several literary devices to present her thesis and make it appear to be a widely held scientific one”, adds another.³⁴ Others variously called the book “fancy” and “fantasy, a kind of ‘science fiction’”.³⁵ These days, however, its widely accepted (though still often critiqued³⁶) status as “*the* foundational text” of the environmentalist movement grants legitimacy not just to Carson’s work as a scientist, but to the place of storytelling, fiction, and even the Gothic within the movement.³⁷

³⁰ Ibid., 294.

³¹ Greg Garrard, “Environment,” in *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, 2012, 217.

³² It is worth nothing, although the topic falls somewhat outside the remit of this thesis, the extremely gendered nature of the reaction to Carson’s work. See, for example, Hamilton’s *The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (2007) for further discussion of the subject.

³³ Fredrick J. Stare, “Some Comments on *Silent Spring*,” *Nutrition Reviews* 21, no. 1 (January 1963): 1.

³⁴ Priscilla Coit Murphy, *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 104.

³⁵ Murphy, 105.

³⁶ See Priscilla Coit Murphy’s *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007) for further reading.

³⁷ Anil Narine, ed., *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2014).

It is perhaps surprising, then, that ecocriticism did not become a discrete area of literary criticism until the 1990s, a decade that saw the founding of the Association of the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE); its offshoot journal, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* (ISLE); and the publication of a number of foundational works in the field.³⁸ If, as Greg Garrard observes, “the founding text of modern environmentalism not only begins with a decidedly poetic parable, but also relies on the literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse”,³⁹ then why does it take so long for critics to recognise the significance of this?

The answer perhaps lies in the state of the humanities as a whole during the 1960s and 1970s; it was only in the following decades that countercultures became legitimate subjects of critical investigation. As Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth explain, “Theory, race/gender/class/sexuality, jargon, popular culture... these things were hard to find in humanities departments in the 1970s. They became part of the fabric in our end of campus in the 1980s and 1990s”.⁴⁰ In her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), one of the earliest collections of scholarly thought on the subject, Cheryl Glotfelty suggests that “The absence of any sign of an environmental perspective in contemporary literary studies would seem to suggest that despite its ‘revisionist energies,’ scholarship remains *academic* in the sense of ‘scholarly to the point of being unaware of the outside world’”.⁴¹ Glotfelty expands upon this to describe the disjunction between academic concerns and broader societal concerns at the time:

If your knowledge of the outside world were limited to what you could infer from the major publications of the literary profession, you would quickly discern that race, class, and gender were the hot topics of the late twentieth century, but you would never suspect

³⁸ ASLE was founded in 1992, and ISLE in 1993.

³⁹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2.

⁴⁰ Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 3.

⁴¹ Glotfelty et al., *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xi.

that the earth's life support systems were under stress. Indeed, you might never know that there was an earth at all. In contrast, if you were to scan the newspaper headlines of the same period, you could learn of oil spills, lead and asbestos poisoning, toxic waste contamination, extinction of species at an unprecedented rate, battles over public land use, protests over nuclear waste dumps, a growing hole in the ozone layer, predictions of global warming, acid rain, loss of topsoil, destruction of the tropical rain forest, controversy over the Spotted Owl in the Pacific Northwest, a wildfire in Yellowstone park, medical syringes washing onto the shores of Atlantic beaches, boycotts on tuna, overtapped aquifers in the West, illegal dumping in the East, a nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl, new auto emissions standards, famines, drought, floods, hurricanes, a United Nations special conference on environment and development, a U.S. president declaring the 1990s 'the decade of the environment,' and a world population that topped five billion. Browsing through periodicals, you would discover that in 1989 *Time* magazine's person of the year award went to 'The Endangered Earth.'⁴²

In short, Glotfelty sees the slow emergence of ecocriticism as a failure of the academy to incorporate a significant element of contemporary life into its dialogues in a timely manner.

She also, however, acknowledges that individual critics had been engaging with the subject of environmentalism and literature prior to the 1990s. Indeed, the term "ecocriticism" was coined by William Ruckert in 1978 in an essay entitled "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism", and its popularisation is attributed to Glotfelty's inclusion of it as part of "a vocabulary for a critical approach to studying nature writing" during a 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association.⁴³ That scholarship in the area had been ongoing was clear by the publication dates of the essays included in *The Ecocriticism Reader*; among numerous pieces from the 1990s are others dated between 1972 and 1989. The problem, it seemed, was that these scholars were not aware of each other's work, as few of them even cite one another in related studies, nor were they conscious of being part of something larger; a new, emerging field of study.⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid., xvi.

⁴³ Kenneth B. Kidd and Sideny I. Dobrin, "Introduction: Into the Wild," in *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, ed. Kenneth B. Kidd and Sideny I. Dobrin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 2.

⁴⁴ Glotfelty et al., *The Ecocriticism Reader*, xvii.

While it may have taken several decades for ecocriticism to blossom as a visible force in literary criticism, it would seem that the seeds of the movement had been planted in the early days of modern environmentalism.

During the years since its emergence, ecocriticism has become an essential new component of literary scholarship. From its initial focus on American nature writing, British Romanticism, and environmentalist non-fiction,⁴⁵ the field has broadened in response to both increasing interest and intensified criticism. In 2011, Lawrence Buell—another notable early ecocritic—separated ecocriticism into two waves: the first “especially identified with the project of reorienting literary-critical thinking toward more serious engagement with nonhuman nature”⁴⁶ with a distinctly Anglo-American focus, and the second seeking “to press far beyond the first wave’s characteristic limitations of genre, geography, and historical epoch”.⁴⁷ This second wave took hold in the early years of the twenty-first century, when critics such as Armbruster and Wallace began to warn that, “if ecocriticism limits itself to the study of one genre . . . or to one physical landscape . . . it risks seriously misrepresenting the significance of multiple natural and built environments to writers and other ethnic, national, or racial affiliations. If such limits are accepted, ecocritics risk ghettoizing ecocriticism within literary and cultural studies generally”.⁴⁸ While the primary reaction to this type of criticism has been a necessary growth in intersectionality between ecocritical thought and other approaches to literary and cultural studies (feminism and

⁴⁵ Astrid Bracke and Marguerite Corporaal, “Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction,” *English Studies* 91, no. 7 (November 2010): 709.

⁴⁶ Lawrence Buell, “Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, no. 2 (2011): 89.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁸ Karla M. Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace, “Introduction: Why Go Beyond Nature Writing, and Where To?,” in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla M. Armbruster and Kathleen Wallace R. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), 7.

postcolonialism, most prominently),⁴⁹ other avenues of inquiry also began to open up as ecocriticism expanded its horizons.

One of these avenues—one of particular relevance to any examination of ecohorror—is largely a response to the pioneering works of Simon Estok and Tom J. Hillard on the darker side of nature writing, published in *ISLE* in the spring and autumn (respectively) of 2009. Estok’s article argued for the importance of what he termed “ecophobia” in representations of nature, emphasising the need for ecocriticism to acknowledge the “irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world” present in contemporary society:⁵⁰

If ecocriticism is committed to making connections, then it is committed to recognizing that control of the natural environment, understood as a god-given right in western culture, implies ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism, as rape implies misogyny, as “fag-bashing” implies homophobia, and as animal exploitation implies speciesism. If ecocriticism is committed to making connections, then it is committed to recognizing that these issues (ecophobia, racism, misogyny, homophobia, speciesism) are thoroughly interwoven with each other and must eventually be looked at together.⁵¹

In short, he says, we must address “the question of evil” if we are to look at humankind’s relationship with the natural world.⁵² Hillard responds to Estok’s call “to talk about how contempt for the natural world is a definable and recognizable discourse”,⁵³ but suggests that “fear” rather than “hatred” may be the driving force behind such dialogue, and, as such, that “we need look no

⁴⁹ See Steven Rosendale’s *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2002) as an example of the wide variety of approaches to ecocriticism.

⁵⁰ Simon C. Estok, “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 208.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 207–8.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

further than the rich and varied vein of critical approaches used to investigate fear in literature”.⁵⁴ “[What] happens”, he asks, “when we bring the critical tools associated with Gothic fiction to bear on writing about nature?”⁵⁵

Although this is by no means the place for a complete account of the Gothic and its place within literary criticism, a relatively brief introduction to its broader origins is necessary to contextualise Estok’s suggestion.⁵⁶ Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) generally lays claim to being the first Gothic novel. Packed with familial intrigue, far-flung kingdoms, eerie dungeons, damsels in distress, dastardly villains, gestures towards the supernatural, and (of course) mysterious landscapes, *Otranto* came to be the blueprint for the many Gothic stories that followed it, and these elements were for a long time considered almost as a checklist for defining the Gothic.⁵⁷ As the study of the Gothic grew in scope and complexity, however, existing definitions proved insufficient:

Gothic has since been defined according to its emphasis on the returning past . . . its dual interest in transgression and decay . . . its commitment to exploring the aesthetics of fear . . . and its cross-contamination of reality and fantasy . . . Most critics now acknowledge that Gothic has continued until the present day, albeit in constantly evolving forms, and is flourishing particularly strongly at the current time.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Tom J. Hillard, “‘Deep Into That Darkness Peering’: An Essay on Gothic Nature,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 688.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ For a more in-depth history of Gothic literature, see, for example, David Punter’s *A New Companion to the Gothic* (London: Blackwell, 2015).

⁵⁷ Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, “Introduction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

From this evolving perspective, the Gothic became more a description of certain aspects of a text than a distinct genre into which a text might slot, and the focus has largely shifted to Gothic as a literary *mode* rather than a literary *form*.⁵⁹

As a mode of writing, the Gothic is concerned with excess; it explores the crossing of boundaries—physical, social, psychological, and moral.⁶⁰ Indeed, the concept of boundaries is central to most modern discussions of the Gothic, as it is perhaps the most useful way to “delimit [its] conventionalized themes or obsessions” as they are currently understood.⁶¹ This allows texts which may not share obvious elements to be nonetheless identified as part of the Gothic continuum; texts may explore the boundaries between past and present, the natural and the supernatural, male and female, life and death, yet still remain part of the same broad tradition. “Let us broadly say, then”, writes Kavka, “that the Gothic captures, and to some extent makes available for catharsis, the fear associated with the unstable boundaries of our subjectivity”.

In the context of American literature, this has laid the ground for the investigation of writers from Frederick Douglass to Charles Brockden Brown to Edgar Allan Poe to Shirley Jackson in strictly Gothic terms, although the term “Gothic” must be destabilised even further in order to make provisions for an American context. From the earliest expressions of Gothicism in America, different circumstances have exerted their own unique influences upon the texts.⁶²

Rather than a simple matter of imitation and adaptation, substituting the wilderness and the city for the subterranean rooms and corridors of the monastery, or the remote house for the castle, dark and dangerous woods for the bandit infested mountains of Italy, certain

⁵⁹ Hillard, “Deep Into That Darkness Peering,” 688.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Misha Kavka, “The Gothic on Screen,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 211.

⁶² Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 4.

unique cultural pressures led Americans to the Gothic as an expression of their very different conditions.⁶³

Hillard, as an Americanist himself, notes this in his essay, saying that, “In American literary studies . . . it is no news that in much United States literature there exists an undercurrent of darkness and fear”.⁶⁴ He cites Leslie Fiedler, who famously argued that the history of American literature is a Gothic one: “[From] Charles Brockden Brown to William Faulkner to Eudora Welty, Paul Bowles or John Hawkes, it is, bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation”.⁶⁵ Prior to Fiedler, notes Jerrold Hogle, “the Gothic strain in American writing [was] rarely deemed worthy of attention in the academic study of literature in the United States”.⁶⁶ In *The Rural Gothic*, Murphy similarly argues that “American horror and Gothic narratives frequently return to the forests that confronted European settlers and explorers in the early Colonial period”.⁶⁷ Just as ecocritical thought predated “ecocriticism” as a term, so Gothic influences permeated American literature—and, indeed, American life—long before they were explicitly acknowledged.

Allan Lloyd-Smith observes that there is “terror of the land itself, its emptiness, its implacability” in the American Gothic; “a sense of its vast, lonely and possibly hostile space that informs [it] and, ultimately, resists any rational explanation”.⁶⁸ Although the study of these

⁶³ Lloyd-Smith, 4.

⁶⁴ Hillard, “Deep Into That Darkness Peering,” 691.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Jerrold E. Hogle, “The Progress of Theory and the Study of American Gothic,” in *A Companion to American Gothic*, ed. Charles L. Crow (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 4.

⁶⁷ Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 2.

⁶⁸ Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 93.

impulses in literature is relatively recent, academics have long recognised the threat inherent in, and specific to, the American landscape to European settlers. Roderick Frazier Nash's study of changing attitudes towards wilderness in North America, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), sees that, "[for] the first Americans, as for Medieval Europeans, the forest's darkness hid savage men, wild beasts, and still stranger creatures of the imagination".⁶⁹ Murphy echoes this, reminding us that "if there is one basic tenet of the early European experience of the 'New World', it is this: you may possess the land, but you should never forget that it also possesses *you*".⁷⁰

This intersection between studies of nature and the Gothic has in recent years been more concretely defined as the realm of the "ecogothic". Although initially spurred on by the dialogue between Estok and Hillard in *ISLE* in 2009, Andrew Smith and William Hughes' 2013 collection, *Ecogothic*, is perhaps the first publication explicitly to collect works on the subject into a single volume.⁷¹ In their introduction to the book, the editors explain their belief that the Gothic "seems to be the form which is well placed to capture these [environmental] anxieties and provides a culturally significant point of contact between literary criticism, ecocritical theory and political process".⁷² Turning their attention to texts ranging from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the collection demonstrates the wide-ranging application of the concept and its ubiquity throughout the history of the Gothic. Many others have taken up the term with gusto; Jed Mayer defines it as the "peculiar reimagining of cultural anxieties regarding human environmental abuses in the form of

⁶⁹ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 24.

⁷⁰ Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 19.

⁷¹ The call for papers for the collection went out in September 2009, suggesting the immediacy of its relation to Hillard and Estok's work

⁷² Andrew Smith and William Hughes, eds., "Introduction," in *EcoGothic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 5.

monstrous or horrific future ecologies”,⁷³ Smith and Hughes call it “a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological”,⁷⁴ and Hillard proposes that it is “the legacy of this old idea of a wilderness both real and symbolic”.⁷⁵ Evident from the above, however, is the absence of any clear distinction between “ecogothic” and “ecohorror”—where does one end and the other begin?

Defining ecohorror

Horror as a genre unto itself has long been considered a vehicle through which we express the unthinkable, making it an ideal means of examining environmental anxiety. Robin Wood, for example, argues that horror is “the struggle for recognition of all that our society represses or oppresses”,⁷⁶ and Kim Newman explains that it “actively eliminates and exorcises our fears by allowing them to be relegated to the imaginary realm of fiction”.⁷⁷ Of course, this is merely one approach to a subject that sprawls both temporally and generically, but across horror criticism the question of fear remains a constant. Darryl Jones calls it a “*phobic* cultural form”,⁷⁸ and Xavier Aldana Reyes notes that it can act as “cathartic entertainment”: “it both probes our deepest fears

⁷³ Jed Mayer, “A Darker Shade of Green: William Morris, Richard Jeffries, and Posthumanist Ecologies,” *The Journal of William Morris Studies* 19, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 86.

⁷⁴ Smith and Hughes, “Introduction,” 3.

⁷⁵ Smith and Hughes, 3.

⁷⁶ Robin Wood, “The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s,” in *Horror, the Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2001), 28.

⁷⁷ Kim Newman, *Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen since the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 121.

⁷⁸ Darryl Jones, *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2002), xi.

and allows us to fantasise about their dangers”.⁷⁹ According to the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, approximately two in three Americans believe that climate change is a reality, with about half saying that they are “somewhat” or “very” worried about it.⁸⁰ The enormity of these concerns, however, has not translated into comparable levels of action. Haydn Washington and John Cook write in *Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand* (2011) that, “The key problem with despair is that you don’t in fact take action, you do nothing as you have given up on hope”.⁸¹ Given, then, that public response to environmental threat is strongly linked with repression and denial,⁸² horror and other anxiety-fuelled popular texts can provide new perspectives on ecological concerns, allowing further understanding of the ways in which Americans deal with a key concern of our time.

Until recently, ecohorror has been primarily synonymous with a slew of “nature strikes back” films of the 1960s and 1970s, beginning with Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (1963) and becoming more and more prominent as the environmental movement gained traction in the 1970s. Elizabeth Parker notes that “the term is used . . . usually in relation to a specific cluster of horror films from the 1970s”,⁸³ and these films are almost always identified by their themes of vengeance:

⁷⁹ Xavier Aldana Reyes, ed., *Horror: A Literary History* (London: British Library Publishing, 2016), 10.

⁸⁰ A. Leiserowitz et al., “Climate Change in the American Mind: Americans’ Global Warming Beliefs and Attitudes in September, 2012.” (New Haven: Yale University and George Mason University, 2012), 5, <http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication/article/Climate-Beliefs-September-2012/>.

⁸¹ Haydn Washington and John Cook, *Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand* (London: Routledge, 2011), 95.

⁸² See Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

⁸³ Elizabeth Parker, “Eco-Horror,” in *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears, Vol. I* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 57.

“inexplicable attacks from nature”;⁸⁴ “fright flicks in which nature turns against mankind”;⁸⁵ “man tampers with nature—or worse, ruins nature—and nature kicks man’s ass”.⁸⁶ Parker remarks that “what we find in common in these definitions . . . is a clear and immediate sense of nature’s *revenge*”.⁸⁷ Similarly, Christy Tidwell points out that:

Ecohorror as a genre is often defined in terms of “revenge of nature” narratives in which nature enacts violence on humans in response to the damage caused by human behaviors. In this figuration, nature is out there, separate from humanity. It is something that humans act upon and that also acts upon humans. In ecohorror films . . . —and film is where most scholarship on ecohorror has developed thus far—nature is the enemy of humanity.⁸⁸

Moving beyond this view of nature as the enemy of culture is essential, she argues, “for this definition of ecohorror . . . is fundamentally predicated upon a relationship between humanity and nature that does not allow for their interconnectedness”.⁸⁹ While critics have begun to do just this in recent years, mirroring a similar shift in environmental studies over the last three decades, their attention has been directed mainly towards contemporary ecohorror texts. Rarely, however, has this perspective been turned back on the 1960s and 1970s; rather, “revenge of nature” films from these decades tend to set the scene for later developments in the genre. While they certainly were a prominent part of the genre, an overly rigid focus on “nature strikes back” motifs limits our

⁸⁴ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 62.

⁸⁵ Foy, “It Came from Planet Earth”, 167.

⁸⁶ Brian Merchant, “The Evolution of Eco-Horror, from Godzilla to Global Warming,” *Motherboard* (Vice), November 14, 2012, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/xyy473/the-evolution-of-eco-horror-from-godzilla-to-global-warming.

⁸⁷ Elizabeth Parker, “‘Just a Piece of Wood’: Jan Švankmajer’s *Otesanek* and the EcoGothic,” in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (New York: Springer, 2016), 217.

⁸⁸ Christy Tidwell, “Monstrous Natures Within: Posthuman and New Materialist Ecohorror in Mira Grant’s *Parasite*,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 538.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 539.

understanding of a richer variety of ecological influences emerging from the backdrop of a burgeoning environmentalist counterculture.

Variations on this structure define many of the most commonly discussed ecohorror films. The type of animal and location of the drama may vary, but overall the “humankind crosses nature; nature bites back” formula holds steady. Bernice M. Murphy distills the rough plot of this type of film down to the following points:

- Setting: a small town within a distinctly rural setting. This is already a place in which humans live in close proximity to the natural world.
- Protagonist: almost always an out-of-towner who foolishly seeks peace and quiet in the countryside. They must work with local allies (often a local love interest) in order to defeat or, at least, escape the natural menace.
- Starting point: some kind of violent disruption of the natural world—often the result of foolish human interference in or indifference towards nature (occasionally no definite explanation is given, however).
- Antagonist: usually one specific animal or species.
- Anti-humanism: there is often a distinct sense in these films that, whilst the revenge of nature may be disproportionate and indiscriminate, humanity has nevertheless brought the horror upon itself by disrespecting the environment.
- The role of authority: local authority figures ignore or disastrously downplay the threat, refuse to believe the warnings of the main protagonist and his/her allies, and only act when they really must. Their greed has often contributed to the problem in the first place. Their behaviour strongly resembles that of the corrupt mayor in Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People* (1882).
- The ending: although the protagonist and their allies usually escape the immediate threat, and sometimes defeat it entirely, there is almost always a moment just before the closing credits when it is made clear that the threat has yet to be completely defused—in fact, the true horror may only just be beginning.⁹⁰

This formula encompasses all of the most prominent ecohorror films of the 1960s and 1970s, from *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963) to *Night of the Lepus* (dir. Russell Braddon, 1972) to *Jaws* (dir. Stephen Spielberg, 1975) to *Prophecy* (dir. John Frankenheimer, 1979). As Rust and Soles note, “[scholarship] to this point has demonstrated that ecohorror motifs are most often found in

⁹⁰ Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 183.

‘revenge of nature’ narratives”.⁹¹ Of course, it is unsurprising that this is the case, for these narratives are the most easily identifiable response to the very specific type of environmental concern presented by Carson. “Given the myriad ecological issues facing Americans at the time”, writes Jennifer Schell, “the prevalence of these kinds of movies is perhaps not all that surprising . . . Part and parcel of their historical context, these horror/disaster films reflect the widespread, urgent environmental apprehensions of late twentieth-century Americans”.⁹²

Another factor that likely influenced the prevailing definition of ecohorror was the release of Alfred Hitchcock’s immensely successful film, *The Birds*, in 1963. Arriving hot on the heels of *Silent Spring*—the book being published in September 1962, and the film appearing in cinemas in March of the next year—the film usually accompanies any discussion of the emergence of ecohorror. Telling the story of a series of bird attacks on a small town in Bodega Bay, California, it pioneered the “nature bites back” formula that would define so many ecohorror films that followed. Although it is unlikely that Hitchcock could have read *Silent Spring* before making *The Birds*, the similarities between the two—temporally and thematically—have meant that they have become a natural jumping-off point for discussions of the genre, and critics have tended to look for films that explicitly take influence from both texts in their representations of monstrous nature.

After *The Birds*, accounts of the genre will jump forward to 1972, when *Frogs* (dir. George McCowan) and *Night of the Lepus* (dir. William F. Claxton) hit the big screen. The 1970s were undoubtedly the time during which the “revenge of nature” subgenre burgeoned; the decade saw America besieged on screen by hordes of amphibians, rabbits, dogs, insects, spiders, fish, and bears (among others) in films that frequently took the coincidental pairing of *Silent Spring* and *The*

⁹¹ Rust and Soles, “Ecohorror Special Cluster.”

⁹² Jennifer Schell, “Polluting and Perverting Nature: The Vengeful Animals of Frogs,” in *Animal Horror Cinema*, ed. Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hallén (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 58.

Birds and made their connection explicit, melding the nebulous animal attacks of *The Birds* with Carson's outspoken warnings against polluting the environment. *Frogs*, for example, opens with images of photographer Pickett Smith (Sam Elliott) as he photographs the wildlife in a swamp located on a wealthy family's land. The film's credits are superimposed over alternating shots of the swamp's flora and fauna, along with patches of water polluted by plastic and other rubbish. Later scenes in the film are filled with *Birds*-like animal attacks, but these creatures' motivation is clear—they are taking their revenge for the destruction of their habitat. In a similar vein, *Night of the Lepus* follows the invasion of a small town by giant rabbits that proliferate after their natural predator, the coyote, is wiped out in the area by humans. These films wear their hearts on their sleeves, and audiences are left in no doubt as to the source of the horrors—in the words of Carson, “The people had done it themselves”.⁹³

By the late 1970s we can see that academics had begun to recognise this particular strand of filmmaking, and that the natural revenge film was established as a prominent subgenre of the era. Film critic Maurice Yacowar's 1977 essay “The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre” is a notable early example of how nature had become a popular theme in popular culture, and perhaps the earliest to formally group together a number of significant popular films that express anxiety about the natural world. Yacowar's essay sets out to break down the popular disaster genre into a number of discrete subgenres, aiming to create some structure as a means of situating particular texts within it. The first subcategory that he identifies is “Natural Attack”, which he deems “the most common disaster type”, one which “pits a human community against a destructive form of nature”.⁹⁴ Within this category he also notes three distinct subdivisions: attack

⁹³ Carson, *Silent Spring*, 3.

⁹⁴ Maurice Yacowar, “The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 277.

by an animal force, attack by the elements, and attack by atomic mutation, each of which “dramatizes people’s helplessness against the forces of nature”.⁹⁵ Although a useful starting point for demonstrating that contemporary critics were cognisant of natural concerns as a distinct theme within popular culture, Yacowar was, quite clearly, not focused specifically on horror. Although he includes a number of texts commonly cited when discussing ecohorror—including *Godzilla* (dir. Ishirou Honda, 1954), *The Birds* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1963), and *Frogs* (dir. George McCowan, 1972)—the list also includes texts focused less on anthropogenic catastrophe that fall outside of ecohorror’s remit, such as *Willard* (dir. Daniel Mann, 1970), *The Lost World* (dir. Harry Hoyt, 1924), and *Earthquake* (dir. Mark Robson, 1974).

Commentators who leave this gap between 1963 and 1972, however, create the impression that ecohorror went quiet for almost an entire decade, and illustrates the need to explore ecohorror motifs beyond the “revenge of nature”. A 2014 reading of George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by Carter Soles illustrates the potential that exists for ecocritical readings of horror texts that do not strictly fit the existing ecohorror mold. Writing in *ISLE*, he argues that, “Analyzed together, [*The Birds* and *Night of the Living Dead*] mark a progression of public perception about the causes of environmental apocalypse in the post-*Silent Spring* 1960s”:

While *The Birds* indirectly addresses issues of human-caused environmental disaster—most notably by being partially inspired by real-life bird attacks caused by polluted sooty shearwater habitats—*NLD* tackles human culpability for such disasters head-on, offering an even more nihilistic and ambivalent view of human motivations, chances for survival, and countercultural response than its big-budget predecessor.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid., 278.

⁹⁶ Carter Soles, “‘And No Birds Sing’: Discourses of Environmental Apocalypse in *The Birds* and *Night of the Living Dead*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 527.

He argues that, “In the broadest strokes, one could say that *NLD* is a loose remake of *The Birds*, with irradiated ghouls standing in for the killer bird flocks of the previous film”.⁹⁷ What his reading demonstrates, above all, is that by focusing our attention too narrowly on texts that already fit our ideas about what ecohorror is, we potentially overlook important moments in the development of the genre.

Also worth noting in relation to the 1963–1972 “quiet period” is the presence of environmental themes in the science fiction genre. Any explicit tackling of such ideas in genre texts did not emerge out of nowhere—although the ecohorror subgenre may have been comparatively silent between 1960 and 1972, science fiction also started to take a keen interest in visions of our ecological future. As Buell notes, “Ecodystopianism in fictions about the future dates back earlier than . . . the mid-1970s”.⁹⁸ “This literature quickly became quite various as it ran out different scenarios of imminent ecological meltdown to their extreme limits”.⁹⁹ The year 1966, for example, saw the publication of Harry Harrison’s *Make Room! Make Room!*, a novel in which humankind lives crowded in filthy cities with little available food, where the impoverished masses consider “soylent”—a processed food of soy and lentils—to be a delicacy. It was later adapted into the film *Soylent Green* (dir. Richard Fleischer, 1973), with a twist added to the ending that arguably makes the film as much horror as it is science fiction; Soylent Green—as most of us now know—is made of people!¹⁰⁰ This vision of humankind cannibalising itself due to unsustainable living practices is one of the most enduring environmentalist images to emerge from 1960s genre

⁹⁷ Ibid., 531.

⁹⁸ Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, 227.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 230.

¹⁰⁰ Though “Soylent Green is people” was the original spoiler, “Soylent Green *was not originally people*” now comes as more of a surprise to most.

film (despite the film itself being underwhelming), illustrating the fact that ecological motifs were not at all absent in the space between *The Birds* and *Frogs/Lepus*. The same period also produced Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1964), in which water is a precious resource and plants are grown as status symbols by the wealthy. Indeed, making clear the need to acknowledge the links between environmental representation in science fiction and horror, J. G. Ballard has highlighted the sense of fear that complicated the science fiction genre during the 1960s:

Sadly, at some point in the 1960s our sense of the future seemed to atrophy and die. Overpopulation and the threat of nuclear war, environmentalist concerns for our ravaged planet and unease at an increasingly wayward science together made everyone fearful of the future. Like passengers on a ship blown towards a rocky coast, we retreated to our cabins and drew the curtains over the portals.¹⁰¹

If horror is a vehicle through which repressed fears are expressed, looking to changes in the science fiction genre may help to illustrate why ecohorror found its time to shine in the 1970s; perhaps as science fiction authors “retreated to [their] cabins”, the scene was set for a different kind of environmental representation. Although it is beyond the scope of this research to chart the concurrent rise in science fiction’s environmental representation, the parallels between the two—and the fact that they illustrate pop culture’s ongoing concern with such themes, even when the horror genre goes through a relatively quiet period on the subject—should be kept in mind.

What is also striking from even a brief survey of environmental themes in science fiction is the comparative absence of literature from any accounts of ecohorror. As Parker notes, “the term is used almost exclusively in relation to horror *films*” despite “the fact that eco-horror¹⁰² finds

¹⁰¹ Ballard, J. G. ‘Introduction’, *Myths of the Future* (London: Vintage, 1982), 3.

¹⁰² Questions of definition aside, there also exists little agreement on whether or not to hyphenate the term “ecohorror”/“eco-horror”. A similar confusion exists around “ecogothic”/“eco-gothic”/“ecoGothic”/“eco-Gothic” (with the added question of capitalisation). For the sake of simplicity, this thesis will use “ecohorror” and “ecogothic” throughout.

its origins in horror literature”.¹⁰³ Although both *The Birds* and *Jaws* (among many others) are adaptations of literary works, the genre during this period tends to be analysed from a purely filmic point of view. While it is certainly the case that the most popular texts, and the ones that audiences are more likely to have experienced, are films, there exists a great deal of opportunity to more fully incorporate the original sources as objects of critical inquiry.

The literary history of ecohorror is largely a British one, but its influence on the US market should not be ignored. Although the United States spawned most of the genre’s popular films, the best-remembered writers of pulp ecohorror were English. James Herbert’s *The Rats* arrived in 1974, followed by *The Fog* in 1975. Both tell stories of “nature run amok”; the former dealing with flesh-eating rats in London that the Ministry of Health tries (unsuccessfully, of course) to eradicate with gas, and the latter charts the effects of a deadly cloud of toxic gas:

The Fog . . . [follows] John Holman, who’s investigating a military chemical weapons site for the Department of the Environment when a fissure opens in the earth, sending a toxic gas spraying from its maw. It forms a cloud and drifts across England like a deadly fart, turning cows psychotic, making schoolboys castrate their gym teachers . . . causing pigeons to peck people to death, and making a pilot fly a loaded plane into the GPO tower. In one of the book’s most famous scenes, 148,820 people commit suicide by walking into the sea.

104

As Hendrix notes, with these books “Herbert had revealed a great truth to aspiring horror novelists that would guide British horror books for the next twenty years: human beings are delicious, and England is full of them”.¹⁰⁵ “In the four years after [*The Rats*]”, he writes, “every critter got a turn at the all-you-can-eat human-meat buffet. Authors reveled in an escalating arms race to find new creatures—bees, alligators, fire ants!—that could tear us apart like chicken

¹⁰³ Parker, “Eco-Horror,” 56.

¹⁰⁴ Grady Hendrix, *Paperbacks from Hell: The Twisted History of '70s and '80s Horror Fiction* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2017), 83.

¹⁰⁵ Hendrix, 83.

wings”.¹⁰⁶ The other big-selling British ecohorror author of the period, Guy N. Smith, began his *Crabs* series in 1976 with *Night of the Crabs*; the surprise hit spawned six sequels and a collection of related short stories, published throughout the following decades, right up to 2015. In the books, flesh-eating crabs invade a variety of locations along the British coastline—“From the depths of the sea they come to watch us . . . stalk us . . . devour us!”¹⁰⁷ As a thematic investigation, this study incorporates both film and literature in order to provide a more complete picture of the subgenre’s origin and scope.

American publishers, of course, did not fail to take note of the success of natural horror across the Atlantic; throughout the 1970s, books—many of which were later adapted for the screen—dealing with similar themes graced shelves across the United States, even if the market for ecohorror was not booming the same way it was in Britain. Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* (1974) is, of course, the best-known of these, selling millions of paperback copies in the years after its release. Arthur Herzog’s *The Swarm* (1974) and *Orca* (1977) were both turned into movies after their publication, but rarely are the novels mentioned when the adaptations are discussed. James Dickey’s *Deliverance* (1970), although falling under a different and more literary publishing category, nonetheless intertwines images of environmental disruption with depictions of horrifying events that befall a group of men on a wilderness trip. Yet no sustained study relating *Deliverance* to the ecohorror subgenre currently exists, even though, as Adam O’Brien writes of John Boorman’s 1972 film adaptation, “any film whose opening section begins with images of an artificially flooded valley before dissolving into images of industrial landscaping (and all the while accompanied by a soundtrack in which the main character adopts an explicit ethical position on the flooding) must

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰⁷ Lee Server, *Encyclopedia of Pulp Fiction Writers* (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2014), 239.

surely make an automatic claim on the interest of [ecocritical] study”.¹⁰⁸ The ecological content of the novel has not, of course, gone unrecognised, but rather it has yet to be explored explicitly as a potential link in the ecohorror subgenre, due perhaps to a lack of the expected “nature bites back” structure. This is not to deny that “revenge of nature” films are the most obvious starting point for an exploration of the genre, but rather to illustrate that there exists a wider range of texts at critics’ disposal than the accepted cluster of 1970s films.

When it comes to writing about these texts, an abundance of terms does exist in relation to horror-that-deals-with-nature (which we shall term it at its most general). Each seems to have a slightly different remit, but none quite provides a satisfactory set of boundaries for classifying texts as ecohorror. Among these are “natural attack”, “creature feature”, “animal horror”, “when animals attack”, “revenge of nature”, “nature run amok”, and—of course—“ecohorror”. All have been part of academic parlance since the 1970s, and used to identify connections between a wide variety of texts, but many of these terms are ill-defined and decidedly unclear. Are all animal attack films also nature-run-amok films? Are all animal horror narratives also natural attack narratives? Do these distinctions even provide us with any useful information about these texts? Before moving on to examine how horror responds to environmental concerns, it is first necessary to look at how we are going to decide which texts even fall under the ecohorror umbrella to begin with.

Encouragingly, more and more critics are beginning to interrogate accepted definitions of ecohorror, and to explore different strategies for representation of anthropogenic environmental concerns. Yet, despite this, there has been little attempt to interrogate the boundaries of the subgenre, and to figure out why some texts fall outside of its remit. As Rust and Soles observe,

¹⁰⁸ Adam O’Brien, *Transactions with the World: Ecocriticism and the Environmental Sensibility of New Hollywood* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016), 157.

“A more expansive definition of ecohorror . . . includes analyses of texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world, in which horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crises, or blur human/non-human distinctions more broadly.¹⁰⁹ Although their conclusions focus on expanding *contemporary* understanding of ecohorror, encouraging critics “to note ecohorror narratives that challenge this division of human and nonhuman, internal and external”, they apply equally to earlier ecohorror—for although we may think we know an ecohorror text when we encounter one, some of the genre’s seemingly canonical entries are the subject of much debate.¹¹⁰ If critics cannot agree whether or not some of the most well-known when-animals-attack narrative is ecohorror or not, then it seems prudent—indeed, necessary—to begin by interrogating the basic definition of ecohorror as it applies to these decades.

In doing so, we allow ourselves to consider not only whether a particular text slots into the category of “ecohorror”, but also why that term can be a useful one. For it is important to consider what is it we hope to achieve by fitting a text within a set of boundaries. “Classifying genres”, writes Stephen Keane, “is a deceptively simple process”:

To relate a film to a given typology is to test that film according to certain formulae, in comparison with other films of the same type, and often located within the history of the genre under discussion . . . The more recent turn . . . has been to step back and look at the processes through which genre has come to be understood. Hence, approaching genre is first a matter of asking questions—not asserting that such and such a film is a disaster movie, for example, but rather asking what are the properties that might go towards identifying a film as a disaster movie?¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Rust and Soles, “Ecohorror Special Cluster,” 509–10.

¹¹⁰ See discussion of *Jaws* in the introduction.

¹¹¹ Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Calamity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 2.

In light of this, I argue that ecohorror is most usefully viewed primarily as a *horror of the Anthropocene*; that is, rather than simply being horror that includes representations of plants and animals, it is informed by worries about humankind's wider influence on the planet's ecosystem. This definition resists overdetermination of a text's constituent parts—that is, whether it must feature animals, or they must be seeking revenge, or it must explicitly promote an environmentalist message—and instead allows us to identify texts, sometimes unexpected ones, that respond to and reflect modern environmental anxieties in a wide variety of ways. The choice of texts in the following chapters is intended as a demonstration of the usefulness of this definition in putting the focus on *how* ecohorror reflects environmental concerns instead of *whether* a particular text fits a particular genre definition, and an illustration of how this allows for the many, ever-increasing facets of contemporary environmentalism to find expression throughout the horror genre.

1. “There Appears to Be an Event Happening”: Nebulous Eco-Catastrophe in the Twenty-First Century

Introduction

“12 years to prevent environmental catastrophe, IPCC warns”;¹ “Wake Up, World Leaders. The Alarm is Deafening”;² “Terrifying climate change warning: 12 years until we’re doomed”.³ With news like this, who needs ecohorror? Climate change in the twenty-first century is a sprawling beast of a subject, encompassing almost every aspect of modern North American life, and never straying far from the headlines. Health, consumption habits, weather, travel—all are impacted by, or have an impact on, the changing state of our planet. In the United States, a troubling reality underpins modern life: its structures are inescapable, and yet they threaten its very existence.

The all-encompassing yet simultaneously incomprehensible nature of ecological catastrophe is reflected in contemporary ecohorror fiction and film. Disasters are nebulous, consequences are far-reaching, and the scale of human existence itself is called into question. This chapter will look at how environmentalist meaning is read into three key texts: Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* (2006), Jeff Nichols’s film *Take Shelter* (2011), and Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy, comprising the novels *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* (all 2014). Drawing primarily on the work of Timothy Clark and Timothy Morton, two contemporary ecocritics and

¹ Tim Walker. “Monday US Briefing: 12 Years to Prevent Environmental Catastrophe, IPCC Warns,” *The Guardian*, October 08, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/08/monday-us-briefing-12-years-to-prevent-environmental-catastrophe-ipcc-warns>.

² “Wake Up, World Leaders. The Alarm Is Deafening,” *The New York Times*, October 09, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/opinion/climate-change-ipcc-report.html>.

³ Lia Eustachewich, “Terrifying Climate Change Warning: 12 Years until We’re Doomed,” Fox News, October 8, 2018, <https://www.foxnews.com/science/terrifying-climate-change-warning-12-years-until-were-doomed>.

philosophers concerned with the challenges of representation associated with the Anthropocene, it uses their treatment of scale as a means by which to locate these texts within contemporary environmental discourse. Situating them as part of a context of collapsing ecosystems, anthropogenic natural disasters, and ever-increasing projections for global temperatures, it demonstrates the expansive concerns recognisable within the ecohorror subgenre today, and explores the breadth of subjects that may fall under its remit.

The Road acts as a fitting introduction to contemporary ecohorror as it encapsulates the oblique nature of environmental catastrophe in the twenty-first century. The narrative operates on scales both quotidian and mythic, underscoring the individual impact of environmental catastrophe and the possibility that it may ultimately be of little significance outside the boundaries of human experience. *Take Shelter* uses more direct means of addressing ecological anxiety, featuring oil-slick rain and apocalyptic storms as the subject of its protagonist's potentially prophetic visions. This section reads its representations of mental illness as the dramatisation of cognitive dissonance with regards to climate change; life continues as usual despite near-constant omens and portents, and the repression of this knowledge may lead to its return in horrific forms. Finally, the *Southern Reach* trilogy marries ecohorror and environmental harmony, demonstrating that a human/nature animosity is by no means central to the subgenre. In these books the "human" perspective is fractured through multiple narrators, language reveals itself to fall short of capturing the whole of our situation, and the possibility of co-existence with the unfamiliar is revealed to be the greatest source of understanding.

Twenty-first century contexts: environmentalism and ecocriticism today

The most recent International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, issued in October 2018, to which the headlines that begin this chapter react, includes predictions of temperature

extremes, droughts, heavy precipitation events, damage to or eradication of entire ecosystems, flood hazards, sea-level rise, species extinction, food and water shortages, health risks, and loss of livelihood among its list of the impending results of climate change. “Any increase in global warming”, it warns, “is projected to affect human health, with primarily negative consequences”.⁴ Most distressingly, the report does not foresee a way of *halting* temperature increases, but only an outside chance of limiting them to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, with increases of 2 or 3 degrees this century more likely. The language used throughout the report focuses on mitigating disaster, as averting it entirely has become impossible: we must now, it suggests, begin to put our energy into making sure that global warming does not become global *burning*, having squandered the chance to halt it altogether.

This comes against a political backdrop in the United States—and worldwide, in many cases⁵—that inspires no confidence in any progress on the fight against climate change. Since the election of U.S. president Donald Trump in 2016, the country has sought to increase its use of fossil fuels, seen a former coal-industry lobbyist appointed as acting administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, and withdrawn from the Paris Agreement, a United Nations agreement aimed at limiting global temperature rises. Trump’s administrative policies seek to divest power from the EPA and return it to industry, nominally in the interest of economic prosperity, and climate reporter David Roberts has speculated that “if Trump wins reelection” in 2020,

⁴ Valérie Masson-Delmotte et al., “IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers.” In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty” (Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2018), <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/summary-for-policy-makers/>.

⁵ See the recent election of Bolsonaro as president in Brazil. He has suggested that the country could pull out of the Paris agreement, and many fear for the fate of its rainforests under his governance.

the EPA by 2024 is likely to be a thoroughly degraded agency, its rules and staff stacked in favor of industry and most of its institutional memory and expertise lost. And the US will be out of the global climate effort entirely, a rogue actor lurching in the direction of myopic greed during the years the world most needs solidarity.⁶

A 2017 article in *New York Magazine* highlights the dire repercussions of such changes in even starker terms. “It is, I promise, worse than you think”, reads the author’s opening line:

[No] matter how well-informed you are, you are surely not alarmed enough. Over the past decades, our culture has gone apocalyptic with zombie movies and Mad Max dystopias, perhaps the collective result of displaced climate anxiety, and yet when it comes to contemplating real-world warming dangers, we suffer from an incredible failure of imagination.⁷

Indeed, one of the problems with imagining real-world catastrophe is that the scale of the problem is itself unimaginable. “Environmentalism” has passed the point where it is a coherent movement understandable by any one person—or even by all people. We deal in infinite unknowns when it comes to global warming. Many of the effects of vanishing sea-ice, for example, were not predicted: the increase in temperatures as a result of decreased reflection of heat by the surface of the ice, or the release of methane trapped within it leading to additional warming and a dangerous feedback loop.⁸

Ecocritic and philosopher Timothy Morton offers some explanation for our collective “failure of imagination” around climate change in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (2013), in which he explores the challenges inherent in attempting to confront the unfrontable. Central to his explorations is the concept of the “hyperobject”: a thing—

⁶ David Roberts, “The 6 Things You Most Need to Know about Trump’s New Climate Plan,” Vox, August 24, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/8/24/17772268/trump-climate-power-plants-affordable-clean-energy-clean-power-plan>.

⁷ David Wallace-Wells, “The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition,” *Intelligencer*, July 14, 2017, <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html>.

⁸ “Melting Arctic Sea Ice Accelerates Methane Emissions,” *ScienceDaily*, accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/09/150917091306.htm>.

indisputably a thing, something that *does exist*—that extends beyond the scope of humans’ comprehension capabilities. He defines them as “things that are massively distributed in space and time relative to humans”.⁹ Examples include the following:

A hyperobject could be a black hole. A hyperobject could be the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, or the Florida Everglades. A hyperobject could be the biosphere, or the Solar System. A hyperobject could be the sum total of all the nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium. A hyperobject could be the very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture, such as Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism.¹⁰

In short, they are objects whose existence we can conceive of, but whose totality is beyond the scope of our understanding.

Throughout *Hyperobjects*, the main focus for Morton is on global warming,¹¹ the defining hyperobject of our time. We hear about it daily, feel its effects, are challenged to “do something” about it, and yet we cannot fully comprehend it in its entirety.

I look at a temperature chart. . . It shows me one century of global warming, an upward zigzag. I read that 75 percent of global warming effects will persist until five hundred years from now. I try to imagine what life was like in 1513. Thirty thousand years from now, ocean currents will have absorbed more of the carbon compounds, but 25 percent will still hang around in the atmosphere. The half-life of plutonium-239 is 24,100 years. These periods are as long as all of visible human history thus far. The paintings in the Chauvet Cave in France date back thirty thousand years . . . But 7 percent of global warming effects will still be occurring one hundred thousand years from now as igneous rocks slowly absorb the last of the greenhouse gases. I have decided to call these timescales the *horri-fying*, the *terrifying*, and the *petrifying*.¹²

We can only see the shadows of hyperobjects, never the entire thing itself. Ecohorror is itself a shadow of global warming and environmental degradation, and the multifaceted nature of the

⁹ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A deliberate choice of terminology. He chooses “global warming” over “climate change” in order to remove any potential opportunities for denialism.

¹² Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 58–9.

initial object demonstrates why it is so difficult to pin down the subgenre as a series of formal structures. When we cannot represent “climate change” as a single, recognisable entity, the forms it may take in horror fiction and film are unlikely to cohere.

Similarly, Timothy Clark, another prominent contemporary ecocritic, sees a problem of scale inherent to issues of environmental degradation. In *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (2015), he identifies scale as the primary hurdle for critics when it comes to grappling with the Anthropocene in literature, for it is precisely what prevents us from being able to fully engage with it in day-to-day life. As humans, it is very difficult to truly make the leap from *knowing* to *understanding* that our small actions (the examples he gives include heating one’s home, felling trees, taking flights between countries, and forest management), at a “certain, indeterminate threshold . . . come together to form new, imponderable physical events, altering the basic ecological cycles of the planet”.¹³ The things we must now attempt to imagine as part of “understanding” the Anthropocene—the distance much of our food travels to end up on our plate, for example—goes so far beyond the scale of our everyday lives that any understanding can only be illusory. We must also reconsider how we frame understandings of the world that have seemed self-evident: “For instance, the issue of atmospheric pollution inaugurates the need to think of the open air as a bounded space in which the consequences of actions may accumulate, mutate and re-emerge unexpectedly on the other side of the planet”.¹⁴

In the same vein as Morton’s hyperobjects, Clark identifies three levels, roughly equivalent to Clark’s *horrifying*, *terrifying*, and *petrifying*, on which we might view ecological issues, based on a model proposed by technohumanist thinkers Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz; the smallest

¹³ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

(level I) being the most comprehensible, and the largest (level III) involving systems of such vast complexity that they are beyond the full scope of individual understanding. At the first level are the simple relationships between tool and action—we use a car as a means of transport, for example, to get from point A to point B, a “simple relation of instrumentality”.¹⁵ If we are late because we become enmeshed in a traffic jam, however, we become part of a level II failure, “embedded in higher-level technical networks, systems of social and technical control . . . relations to the law and so on”.¹⁶ At level III, events correspond to Morton’s hyperobjects, as they become enmeshed in systems the complexity of which exceeds our ability to grasp them in their entirety. In the case of the car, for example, this level involves its interactions with—among other things—infrastructural resourcing, with the growth of capitalism, with oil spills, and with individual freedom. “Level III effects”, writes Clark, “represent complex emergent properties that defy our ability to model, predict or even understand them, a problem already all too familiar to scientists attempting to model human influence on the future climate”.¹⁷

No single one of these perspectives, it is important to remember, is the “correct” one; they all exist in unison, and it is precisely this variety of perspectives that Clark identifies as the main challenge to criticism in the age of the Anthropocene. Situating a text within the context of global warming requires an understanding of the various levels at which it may operate, as well as an acknowledgement of the limitations of our human scales of operation. “The Anthropocene entails the realization of how deeply [the day-to-day scale of our ordinary lives] may be misleading,

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6–7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 8.

underlining how (worryingly) our ‘normal’ scales of space and time must be understood as contingent projections of a biology which may be relatively inexorable”.¹⁸

Our default scale, that of “terrestriality”, is therefore complicit in our “failure of imagination” and must often be viewed with suspicion. Such suspicion can “re-inflect” our approaches to “even very familiar texts”,¹⁹ and reading at the third scale necessarily reframes (or de-frames) all human activity in terms of its wider impact. Clark details the act of “reading at scale” in his approaches to Raymond Carver’s short story, “Elephant” (1986), a text that tackles the financial and family concerns of the working-class American man, following the increasingly absurd lengths to which a man’s extended family ask him to go to support them. His unemployed brother continually looks for money; his daughter, her workshy husband, and their two children need assistance; his ageing mother looks for financial help to maintain an independent life; his son wants his emigration paid for; and an ex-wife demands support as well. Debts pile up, possessions are sold or pawned, and bill-collectors come knocking at the door: “The crescendo is intensified by new turns of events . . . the theft of all the furniture from his daughter’s trailer, the son’s discovery of his allergy to cocaine (so ending a possible ‘career’ as a drug dealer). The comedy is in the repetition, the rising tempo, like the moves in a theatrical farce”.²⁰ The ending sees the narrator growing resentful:

He can’t afford to go to the movies much, his shoe has a hole in it, and he can’t get his teeth fixed. After he has a nightmare that he’s started drinking again, he realizes how fortunate he is. Things could be much worse. He relaxes. He starts to walk to work, whistling. His friend George picks him up, and they streak down the road in George’s big, unpaid-for car.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 40.

²⁰ Ibid., 98.

²¹ “Raymond Carver, ‘Elephant,’” June 2, 1986, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1986/06/09/elephant-2>.

He finds freedom of a sort, but the question of finance and debt looms large still.

Clark lays out three different scales at which readers can seek ecocritical meaning from the text, which at first glance seems little-engaged with the subject of the environment. The first, most personal scale, encompasses “the narrator’s immediate circle of family and acquaintances over a time frame of several years”,²² and primarily demonstrates the day-to-day experience of environmental issues for a broad swathe of people: that is, they don’t take them into consideration. They become a “non-issue, almost something to laugh at or to dismiss in anger in the struggle for economic safety”.²³ Despite participation in a lifestyle heavily implicated in environmental destruction—everyone has a car and lives under global capitalist principles—such awareness is trumped by more immediate personal concerns like finances, family, and friendship. This “scalar entrapment” has been a human norm since time immemorial, and, Clark argues, “forecloses the thinkability of other modes of life”:

For instance, if I buy cheap bananas from Jamaica I may feel I am helping to support people in a relatively impoverished part of the world, yet, on a longer scale, I may also be helping to perpetuate environmentally destructive kinds of agriculture, trapping workers there in the trading nets of international capitalism.²⁴

This scale is the most naive, according to Clark, as it applies so broadly and will tend to reveal little specific to any particular texts; if the environment is of little concern to the majority of narratives, then they will tend to yield the same rough reading from this perspective.

The second scale he identifies is that of nation-scale cultural context, focused on situating “Elephant” within specifically American family and gender dynamics, consumer culture, and economic realities of its era. It considers the narrative within a historical time-period rather than

²² Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 99.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 100.

the personal, day-to-day lives of its characters, broadening the scope of its considerations and allowing for a more specific engagement with contemporary environmental concerns. This scale is the primary approach of much literary criticism, and from an ecocritical perspective “enables an interpretation of the final scene of ‘Elephant’ as a temporary moment of escape from the denigrations and frustrations of American consumer capitalism, focused on the private car as an image of individual freedom and mobility”.²⁵

The third scale, finally, expands beyond boundaries of nationhood and even personhood to look at a text within the context of the entire Earth and all of its inhabitants, on, for example, the timescale of a given geological era. Naturally, this is a “difficult” perspective from which to consider any narrative, as it challenges traditional conceptions of context and may seem, at first suggestion, entirely absurd:

An initial impulse about the idea of reading at the third scale expresses a sense of disproportion, that trying to read ‘Elephant’ at this scale simply does not ‘make sense’. Yet once again this does not adequately respond to our new knowledge that *not* to read at this scale is now become an evasion.²⁶

Perhaps the primary challenge of reading at this scale is its tendency to “flatten” rather than necessarily deepen usual engagements with a text’s treatment of race, gender, class, et cetera. People cease to exist as individuals, and start to function as just another moving part in a broader system. “[A] person registers [at the third scale] less in terms of familiar social co-ordinates (race, class, gender and so on)”, says Clark, “than as a physical entity, representing so much consumption of resources and expenditure of waste (not the personality or the attitude, but the ‘footprint’)”.²⁷

The material infrastructure that surrounds and largely dictates the lives of the people, the houses, the cars, the roads, may partially displace more familiar issues of identity and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 100–01.

²⁷ Ibid., 103.

cultural representation as a focus of significance. Technology and infrastructures emerge not only as inherently political but as doubly and unpredictably politicized in scale effects that deride the intentions of their users or builders. ‘Elephant’ could be described in terms of what William Ophuls calls ‘energy slavery’, the oppressive, all-pervading and destructive effects of being born into a fossil-fuel-based infrastructure as aggressive as an occupying army.²⁸

The tone of Clark’s writing, at least, suggests the third scale as the most important. But, from the perspective of literary criticism, the “flattening” may produce little that is interesting from an academic perspective. Certainly it is in the interest of ecocriticism to seek out texts that challenge our human-scale perspectives on environmentalism and ecology, yet smaller-scale readings may also yield new perspectives on texts rarely approached from an ecocritical angle.

A major obstacle to reading at different scales is what Clark terms “Anthropocene disorder”—a feeling likely familiar to many of us, comprising the multiplicity of mindsets that come into play as we navigate the world under the shadow of global warming. Clark proposes that the generalised condition has emerged in response to the complete loss of proportion associated with contemporary ecological uncertainty. “What seems as commonsensical as the immediate life-world of our ordinary experience, our given sense of familiarity and even of responsibility, may now be implicated in destructive scenarios we can neither see nor barely calculate”.²⁹ It is, in essence, the derangement produced by the disjunction between the scale of environmental problems and the discourse around them: “a new kind of psychic disorder, inherent in the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects”.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 104.

²⁹ Ibid., 40.

³⁰ Ibid., 140.

This has implications for the study of ecohorror, as implicit in Anthropocene disorder is an ongoing denialism—a psychological state that horror has long been considered well-positioned to confront. Denial is built into the way we live in the Western world. It is part of the way our cities are constructed (to encourage the use of cars), our concepts of leisure are formed (shopping, travel), and how many of us earn a living (developing and marketing all of the previous things, for example). “Environmental criticism in the Anthropocene is likely to be more and more about unacknowledged denial”,³¹ writes Clark. The phrase “save the planet” is now so empty and used to refer to so many actions that he considers it “effectively a mode of denial”.³² Horror, in particular, has a history of allowing society to confront the unfrontable, and its language lends itself quite naturally to attempts to confront climate change. As Gry Ulstein notes, “the horror-evocative language employed by many scholars when discussing Anthropocene issues contributes to an academic climate in which the figure of the monster and the genre of the weird³³ are naturally at home, and are therefore explicitly or implicitly, consciously or unconsciously conjured”.³⁴

Ecohorror as a critical field has, however, so far tended to focus on what we might call level I texts; those dealing with discrete events of an evidently “environmentalist” concern—the “revenge of nature”, pollution of the wilderness, or mutation of wildlife. As explored in the introduction, this is particularly true of studies which look at pre-2000s-era ecohorror. These tend to employ a historicist mode of criticism, one focused on locating a narrative within the discourse of its time. While this is not *in itself* a failing—indeed, this thesis will engage in readings that do

³¹ Ibid., 159.

³² Ibid., 37.

³³ A specific horror subgenre which will be explored later in this chapter.

³⁴ Gry Ulstein, “Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach*,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2017): 93.

just that—it neglects the potential that horror has to speak indirectly to our current moment of crisis, and misses opportunities to engage with texts that are less overt in their environmental engagement.

One of the limitations of ecohorror discourse thus far has been a lack of scrutiny of the means by which we identify relevant texts. Of course, this is a limitation that must be considered by scholars dealing with all subgenres. As Andrew Tudor notes:

Almost all writers using the term genre . . . are caught in a dilemma. They are *defining* a ‘Western’ [for example] on the basis of analysing a body of films which cannot possibly be said to be ‘Westerns’ until after the analysis . . . [Therefore] we are caught in a circle which first requires that the films are isolated, for which purposes a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from empirically established common characteristics of the films. (1976)

It is crucial that we, as critics of ecohorror, remain alert to ever-evolving perspectives on fear and our environment, and that we do not fall into the trap of looking for environmental themes only in texts *already considered to be ecohorror*. We may take into account, for example, texts that meet Clark’s updated definition of ecophobia as “an antipathy, dismissive stance or sheer indifference towards the natural environment, including attitudes which, however understandable in the past, tend now in the emergent contexts of the Anthropocene to become directly or indirectly destructive, even in ways that may not have been the case before”.³⁵ In this instance, we must seek not just stories of “scary nature”, but stories that speak to emergent anxieties of the Anthropocene on a wider scale. “Denialism”, Clark writes, “needs to become an object of specific studies in environmental education and thought more generally . . . After all, contrary to received ideas, people can often be fairly well informed about environmental issues on the big scale but live with the usual disregard for it in their day-to-day contexts”.³⁶ We must look to texts that do not enact

³⁵ Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 112.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

“save the planet” as an empty phrase, but more effectively engage with, among other things, the scale of the process and the accompanying potential for denial.

When it comes to twenty-first-century ecohorror, critics have indeed begun to move in this direction. Nebulous uncertainty is seen as a defining characteristic of contemporary ecologically minded horror, as we shall see in the remainder of this chapter. After exploring some of the ways in which this has been done, this thesis will use these approaches to speak to ecohorror from previous eras, and to uncover two key things: firstly, less-obvious environmental anxieties appearing in often-studied ecohorror; and secondly, characteristics of the Anthropocene that appear in horror not previously examined in such a light. In doing so, it aims not to catalogue every text that could possibly reward such an approach, but rather to point to the breadth of perspectives available to ecocritics when ecohorror is understood as more than just the “revenge of nature”.

After and Before: *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) is a hugely popular genre-straddling text that illuminates the particularities and peculiarities of horror in the Anthropocene, specifically the sense of ongoing catastrophe and the unknowable scale on which our world is changing. On publication the novel, which has since been adapted into a successful film (dir. John Hillcoat, 2009), attained the status of both literary and popular sensation,³⁷ and as a text it is open to interpretation from any number of anxious cultural perspectives. One *Guardian* critic writes that, “This text, in its

³⁷ McCarthy won the Pulitzer Prize for the novel in 2007, which also appeared as a surprising selection for the Oprah Winfrey Book Club in the same year. It sold almost 60,000 copies in the first week following the feature. (Gabe Habash, “Just How Much Does a Pulitzer Prize Help a Book’s Sales?”, *Publishers Weekly*, 19 April, 2012, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/awards-and-prizes/article/51573-just-how-much-does-a-pulitzer-prize-help-a-book-s-sales.html>.)

fragility, exists uneasily within such ill times”.³⁸ It charts the journey of an unnamed father and son across the bleak American landscape in the wake of some unspecified disaster that has caused complete environmental degradation. Alone and unable to trust anyone else, they gather meagre supplies, evade capture and death at the hands of other survivors, and travel south towards the coast in the hope of surviving the winter and finding warmer, more hospitable climates.

Questions of agency and action are central to *The Road*, although the narrative is marked primarily by an *absence* of such. In these bleak landscapes and desperate times, any sense of agency that we have is, in fact, almost entirely illusory:

Modernity is often said to be preoccupied by a sense of crisis, viewing as imminent, perhaps even longing for, some conclusive catastrophe. This sense of crisis has not disappeared, but in the late twentieth century it exists together with another sense, that the conclusive catastrophe has already occurred, the crisis is over (perhaps we were not aware of exactly when it transpired), and the ceaseless activity of our time—the news with its procession of almost indistinguishable disasters—is only a complex form of stasis.³⁹

If contemporary culture is confronted with seemingly endless instances of “The End”—beginning with atomic weaponry and concentration camps and moving on to 9/11 and global warming, among others—*The Road* proposes that we actually have little say in our own destruction, and hints, as Berger does, that it may in fact already have happened.

A vagueness and uncertainty about the disaster that precipitates events in *The Road* is central to this suggestion. Dana Phillips describes the world of the novel as “shaped by causes the advent of which is pure chance, while the effects of these causes seem more or less deterministic”.⁴⁰ Analysis of *The Road*, she goes on to explain, “has been skewed by an impression

³⁸ Alan Warner, “Review: *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy,” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview4>.

³⁹ John Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xiii.

⁴⁰ Dana Phillips, “‘He Ought Not Have Done It’: McCarthy and Apocalypse,” in *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, ed. Sara Spurgeon (London: A&C Black, 2011), 173.

. . . that in it the end of the world is brought on, and not merely exacerbated, by human agency: specifically, by all-out nuclear warfare”.⁴¹ Although nuclear war is certainly a possible explanation for what happened, McCarthy is deliberately elusive about the causes of society’s destruction:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions . . . What is it? she said. He didnt answer⁴² . . . A dull rose glow in the window-glass . . . What is it? she said. What is happening?
I don’t know.⁴³

The lack of a clear description of this apocalyptic event ensures that *The Road* does not adopt a didactic position on disaster. The “shear of light” could be the flash of a bomb, or it could be a meteor crashing down from the sky, or it could be something else entirely. Here, McCarthy refuses to give meaning to the end of the world, and actively removes any concrete sense of human agency from it entirely.

Similarly important in the novel’s engagement with agency is the blurring of past and present that occurs throughout the text—even among critics the relationship between the two eras is contested. Ashley Kunsu, for example, argues that the novel’s nameless places demand engagement with what might be rather than what was, “[forcing] the reader to imagine new possibilities, to think not solely in terms of the world that was, but also the world that will be”.⁴⁴ Philips, on the other hand, claims, “While in *The Road* the world may have come to an end, the world is also the same as it ever was”.⁴⁵ Indeed, McCarthy repeatedly insinuates that the most

⁴¹ Philips, 176.

⁴² McCarthy frequently dispenses with punctuation and other linguistic formalities in *The Road* as part of the novel’s bleak, sparse prose style. Any such aberrations in sections quoted from the novel should be considered intentional, as for the sake of clarity and readability I will not be indicating each individual instance.

⁴³ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 54.

⁴⁴ Ashley Kunsu, “Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (2009): 62.

⁴⁵ Philips, “‘He Ought Not Have Done It’: McCarthy and Apocalypse,” 173.

recent disaster changed very little, even though this is ostensibly the apocalypse and a break with what has come before. The man—who, along with his son, is never named—describes how everything is “as it once had been save faded and weathered”,⁴⁶ and says of his surroundings, “There is no prophet in the earth’s long chronicle who’s not honoured here today”.⁴⁷ As Frank Kermode puts it, after World War II “apocalypse ceased to be imminent and became *immanent*, or ongoing and universal, which radically redefined the historical condition itself as sheer presence—and thus drained the very notion of the apocalyptic of most of its meaning”.⁴⁸ The reader is not offered any obvious hope of a new order, but rather an observation that these concerns are ongoing seemingly regardless of circumstance.

A third reading denies the importance of either approach, foregrounding instead the insignificance of “before” or “after” from a wider perspective—what Clark would term a “level III” reading. Any conceptualisation of past and present, of course, comes from a very human perspective, and both concepts blur into one another on a larger scale. Eleanor Smith, reading *The Road* in the context of the Anthropocene, argues that McCarthy tackles questions of scale through his depictions of limited perspective, annihilation of global networks of people and goods, and use of language to expose shortcomings of comprehension. In the first instance, limited vision—a literal constraint on perspective—is a constant threat to the father and son, whose “survival lies in their ability to see through the ‘murk’”.⁴⁹ Secondly, the “imagery of defunct human-made

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 295.

⁴⁸ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

⁴⁹ Eleanor Smith, “The Poetics of Size: Rendering Apocalyptic Scale in Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique*, no. 35/36 (December 13, 2018): 87.

transportation” acts as another reminder of how tied they are to their immediate surroundings.⁵⁰ Finally, Smith sees the spartan language of *The Road* as a means through which “McCarthy emphasises the shortcomings of our linguistic repertoire in conveying the horror and immensity of an apocalyptic scenario”.⁵¹ In this way, the two characters are trapped within their own, level I/ *terrifying* perspective, bound by the limitations of their humanity.

The text also operates on a *petrifying* perspective, however, and reading at this level reminds us that on a larger scale “before” and “after” mean very little at all. *The Road* opens with the father waking from a dream in which “he has wandered in a cave where the child led him by the hand . . . Like pilgrims in a fable swallowed up and lost among the inward parts of some granite beast”.⁵² Religious allegories, wherein the pair are linked with the story of Jonah,⁵³ may position them as mythical figures who will endure through legend and scripture. A secular reading also emerges, however, wherein the “granite beast” functions as the earth itself, and human stories are swallowed by its immensity: “Deep stone flues where the water dripped and sang. Tolling in the silence the minutes of the earth and the hours and the days of it and the years without cease”.⁵⁴ The vision may be either prophetic or retrospective, but it is of little significance to the landscape itself. Bolstering the secular perspective, within this cave the father and son encounter a creature with “eyes dead white and sightless as the eggs of spiders”: “Crouching there pale and naked and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁵¹ Ibid., 93.

⁵² McCarthy, *The Road*, 1.

⁵³ Jonah was swallowed by a whale after attempting to avoid a mission from God to warn a city of its sins and ask them to repent.

⁵⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 1.

translucent, its alabaster bones cast up in [the shadow of their torch] on the rocks behind it”.⁵⁵ Whether this is a creature of the primordial past or distant future, it suggests a process of evolution and mutation far outside of Biblical description.

The description of this creature also evokes Plato’s *Republic*, which is evoked in turn by Morton’s hyperobjects and once again highlights the limitations of the human perspective. Plato uses the cave as allegory for human learning and education, writing of people chained up within the cave such that they may never see anything but the shadows of objects cast upon the wall by firelight (recalled by McCarthy’s creature and its own shadows). Imprisoned as such they will never be able to see the whole scene, and their knowledge and wisdom will always be limited by their narrow point of view.⁵⁶ As such, McCarthy uses the opening of *The Road* as a reminder that its small, fragile protagonists exist within the context of something much larger and beyond their comprehension.

Additionally, the opening of the novel interacts with its final passage to bracket events in a manner that further emphasises the scale within which they take place and destabilise any division between past and present. Stepping into a different register from the bleak, curt language that has characterised the narrative to this point, the ending speaks of natural beauty and vibrant life:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were . . . maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁶ Plato, *The Republic*, VII, 514 a, 2–517 a, 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 306–07.

Again, McCarthy compresses a great deal into a short paragraph. The style of language—“Once there were...”—evokes fables and fairytales, harking back to the opening and creating space for a hopeful reading in which humankind still has the need for parable and story. Alternatively, it may describe a time before humans, a prehistoric “world in its becoming”. It is through this final passage, Smith argues, that something on a much grander scale emerges; juxtaposing images of the “very small” and the “very large” reminds us of the fundamental mystery of the world around us.⁵⁸ Crucially, in conjunction with the opening paragraph it situates the events of the story between two unimaginable timescales, and reminds the reader that no matter how devastating the events in between may be, their place in the universe—even in the world—is a small one.

Of course, *The Road* is at the same time deeply concerned with experience at the human scale, and from this perspective also contains many twisted parodies of pre-apocalyptic, consumer-driven ways of life, which serve both to further the sense that there is really little difference between “before” and “after” the catastrophe, and act as a warning about contemporary American lifestyles. Although Phillips believes it counter to McCarthy’s intent that it should be seen as an explicit critique of contemporary culture, positioning the text’s apocalypse instead as one in which “*the end of the world is simply the end of the world*”,⁵⁹ to deny that it offers a certain degree of commentary on twenty-first-century ways of life would be to neglect many facets of the characters’ journey through the ruins of capitalist society.

Father and son seem locked into consumerist symbols as a means of both survival and of giving meaning to survival. Most prominently, they spend much of the narrative pushing a shopping-trolley down the seemingly endless road. One of the text’s earliest images is of the father

⁵⁸ Smith, “The Poetics of Size,” 94.

⁵⁹ Phillips, “‘He Ought Not Have Done It’: McCarthy and Apocalypse,” 188.

packing supplies into and retrieving food from the cart, each of which is an activity that plays a huge part in their quest for survival: “He pulled the blue plastic tarp off of [the boy] and carried it out to the grocery cart and packed it and came back with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup”.⁶⁰ Indeed, throughout the text, survival is predicated on uncovering the remains of a world now lost, the resources of which are conspicuously finite. The father has memories of the years after the disastrous event, after supplies have begun to become scarce, in which “cores of blackened looters . . . tunnelled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like shoppers in the commissaries of hell”.⁶¹

Aside from mere survival, what few moments of pleasure exist in the text are also linked to objects from the world that has now vanished. At one point they stumble across the husk of an old supermarket, and “walk the littered aisles” to see what they can uncover.⁶² They find little of use, but come across “two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor”, from one of which the father pulls a can of Coca-Cola—that most quintessentially American of consumer brands—and gifts it to his son almost reverently: “It’s a treat. For you”.⁶³ The incongruity of the brand-name in the middle of this bleak, ashen world is—perhaps slightly heavy-handedly—underscored by its proximity to now-useless money scattered around the defunct machine: “Coins everywhere in the ash”.⁶⁴ At one point during their journey, they also stumble across a previously undiscovered bunker full of food and supplies, where, “wearing new sweaters and socks and

⁶⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

swaddled in . . . new blankets . . . they drank Coca-Cola out of plastic mugs”.⁶⁵ This is the closest thing to pre-apocalyptic life that they find—linked once again to consumer goods by the explicit mention of Coca Cola—and the boy in particular expresses a deep longing for it to continue: “I wish we could live here”.⁶⁶

While there is life to be found in these possessions for the man and the boy, they are also, paradoxically, always burdened by them. Even as they enjoy their new-found, if brief, cornucopia, their respite is always overshadowed by the knowledge that death could be following them down the road at any moment:

How long can we stay here Papa?
Not long.
How long is that?
I dont know. Maybe one more day. Two.⁶⁷

Even after they leave, the things they take with them leave them in a very vulnerable position: “The cart was too heavy to push into the wet woods and they nooned in the middle of the road”.⁶⁸ Goods and possessions cannot save them from the darker side of human nature—and if these characters’ world is, indeed, just a “faded and weathered” version of what came before, then it applies to our own as well.

The Road’s sense of loss and desire to return to the way things were is similarly evident through its struggles with the evolution of gender roles, and the characters cling quite firmly to traditional notions of family and parental functions throughout the novel. The man’s wife, who we see only in flashbacks, is strongly associated with images of abundance, life, and motherhood.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 157.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 165.

She is his “pale bride” who comes to him in his dreams “out of a green and leafy canopy”,⁶⁹ and even in the depiction of the apocalyptic event she is described as “standing in the doorway in her nightwear . . . cradling her belly in one hand”.⁷⁰ When she does assert her own agency in response to the new conditions of the world, it is to abandon her role as mother and wife and to take her own life; an act which she describes in overtly gendered terms:

They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don't dream at all . . . My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now . . . The one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself . . . As for me my only hope is eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.⁷¹

In rejecting her role as caregiver, she leaves the man and the boy to navigate the world without the comfort of traditional social structures: something the man finds it incredibly difficult to transcend.

Indeed, a rigid notion of the traditional family is arguably what gives purpose to his journey outside of mere survival, and is what depictions of the “bad” in the novel tend to be juxtaposed against. He refers to the boy as essential to his being: “He held the boy close to him . . . My heart, he said. My heart”.⁷² Every other living creature that they encounter on the road—be it dying old men,⁷³ starving dogs,⁷⁴ or armed, threatening groups⁷⁵—occupies the same space in the man's mind: a threat to that paternal bond. Arielle Zibrak argues that we can even see the same

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 54.

⁷¹ Ibid., 59.

⁷² Ibid., 29.

⁷³ Ibid., 51.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 91.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 62.

associations of violence and sex resulting from the death of his wife and unwillingness to engage with the new world's alternative sexualities: "Just as the presence of others threatens to expose the narrowness of the man's ideology, sexual intimations are always accompanied by violence because the man's sexuality has become repressed with the death of the boy's mother".⁷⁶

The Road exudes a fear of change, and an unwillingness to transcend the known human scale, through its uncompromisingly bleak portrayal of sexual identities outside of the heteronormative, family-centered ideal; the new sexualities that emerge in *The Road* are unwaveringly negative. There are pregnant women transported like animals alongside weapons and slaves; two men with a pregnant woman, soon followed by the discovery of a charred infant on a spit;⁷⁷ and even a vague threat—never quite defined as being sexual, cannibalistic, or perhaps even both—to the boy from an encounter with a man in the woods:

He looked at the boy.
...
Why are you looking at him?
I can look where I want to.
No you can't. You look at him again I'll shoot you.⁷⁸

In this landscape, where we see the "frailty of everything revealed at last",⁷⁹ no structure but the family structure—or what little of it is left to cling on to—appears to bring anything approaching positivity to relationships.

The closest thing to hope and redemption that the novel has to offer brings with it the reassuring image of conventional family life. Shortly after the man has died, the boy encounters a

⁷⁶ Arielle Zibrak, "Intolerance, A Survival Guide: Heteronormative Culture Formation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 68, no. 3 (October 3, 2012): 116.

⁷⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 207–12.

⁷⁸ Philips, "He Ought Not Have Done It": 66–67.

⁷⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 28.

fully formed family: a man, a woman, a young boy, and a young girl.⁸⁰ Their presence, Zibrak argues, “reestablishes the proper heteronormative order ruptured when the boy’s mother died”.⁸¹ She adds, “The boy’s new family is deemed to be good because their relations to one another are legible within the terms the man has set”.⁸² It is, of course, difficult to identify their appearance as a conclusive endorsement of the man’s view; the novel’s final paragraph does go on to describe “thing[s] which could not be put back” and not “be made right again”.⁸³ Any hope placed in the family may be futile, and McCarthy deliberately avoids providing a clear resolution.

The lack of clarity and interplay of different scales makes *The Road* an apt illustration of the forms that contemporary ecohorror may take—there are no mutants, no rampaging animals. The most intense moment of horror in the novel comes from literal human consumption, when the man and boy discover a basement in which people are being kept alive for meat: “a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt”.⁸⁴ In terms of immediate threat, humans are the greatest danger, not the natural world itself. At the same time, however, the novel brackets these concerns with the reminder of the story’s existence within a much wider context, and a much greater scale than we are able to fully comprehend.

“Is Anybody Seeing This?": *Take Shelter* and Environmental Knowledge

Jeff Nichols’s film, *Take Shelter* (2011), offers another example of the nebulous nature of post-2000s ecohorror, and the malleability of the subgenre as a whole. Like *The Road*, a non-

⁸⁰ Ibid., 304–06.

⁸¹ Zibrak, “Intolerance, A Survival Guide,” 123.

⁸² Ibid., 123.

⁸³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 307.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 116.

specific ecological catastrophe lies at the heart of the narrative, and it centres on the plight of an all-American family and the challenges of its patriarchal figure. Like the *Southern Reach*, as we shall soon see, it toys with questions of perception and reality. Yet, although it emerges from a similar set of anxieties as its companion texts, its generic constituent parts are quite different.

Take Shelter charts the slow mental disintegration of family-man Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon). He works in construction to support his young family, consisting of his wife, Samantha (Jessica Chastain), and their hearing-impaired daughter, Hannah (Tova Stewart). Their life appears comfortable, if not particularly affluent, with Samantha saving the profits from her side-business in crafting towards a modest beachside holiday. Hannah, meanwhile, is on track to receive a cochlear implant thanks to the health insurance facilitated by Curtis's job. The film's engagement with the horror genre is a low-key one, grounded as it is in a series of visions that begin to intrude on Curtis's domestic life. Reviewers have responded to it as "a quasi-horror movie firmly rooted in slice-of-life reality",⁸⁵ "[part] CGI-enhanced horror pic, part American art-movie",⁸⁶ and "part apocalyptic and part sci-fi horror".⁸⁷

Curtis's day-to-day existence is disturbed by the onset of troubling, hallucinatory dreams, in which the everyday becomes sinister and potentially dangerous: viscous rain that resembles motor-oil falls from the sky, the family dog turns on him, strangers attack his house and family. These apocalyptic visions cohere around the belief that a huge, diluvial storm is approaching, and Curtis becomes fixated upon renovating the storm shelter in his backyard. Simultaneously,

⁸⁵ David Rooney, "Take Shelter: Film Review," The Hollywood Reporter, accessed December 17, 2018, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/take-shelter-film-review-75360>.

⁸⁶ Tim Robey, "Take Shelter, Review," Telegraph.co.uk, November 24, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8913914/Take-Shelter-review.html>.

⁸⁷ Jihyun Ro, "'Take Shelter' Is an Engrossing Thriller," The Harvard Crimson, November 25, 2011, <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/10/25/take-shelter-review1/>.

however, he recognises these visions as potential symptoms of a mental-health crisis, something he is intimately familiar with due to his mother's struggles with schizophrenia during his childhood (she now lives, we learn, in a residential care facility). The tension builds as Curtis concurrently attempts to learn more about his struggles—checking books on mental health out of the library, visiting a doctor and counsellor, and consulting his mother about the onset of her own symptoms—and allows the shelter to consume his life. He takes out a risky loan to fund its expansion, spends hundreds of dollars on gas masks, and loses his job after “borrowing” machinery at the weekend to excavate the site, all to provide shelter from the oncoming storm that is ever-present in his visions. Of course, the loss of his job also puts the family's health coverage at risk, and with it their daughter's cochlear implant.

Both the director and critics have read the storm and its attendant horrors as a polysemous anxiety, symptomatic of the American condition in the early twenty-first century. Agnes Wooley reads Curtis's dreams as “a flexible metaphor, suggesting variously a generalised climate of fear relating to the threat of terrorism, the precarious economic climate, and the twenty-first-century souring of the American dream”,⁸⁸ while Briohny Doyle sees the film as a response to “the sense of being at breaking point experienced by many living in rural North American in the mid 2000s”.⁸⁹ One reviewer likens it to Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) in its “unnerving ability to construct a correlative for all sorts of angst gnawing away at the American character”.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Agnes Woolley, “‘There's a Storm Coming!': Reading the Threat of Climate Change in Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 1 (June 2014): 177.

⁸⁹ Briohny Doyle, “Prognosis End-Time: Madness and Prophecy in *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter*,” *Other Modernity*, 9 (2013): 23.

⁹⁰ Robert Koehler, “*Take Shelter*: Jeff Nichols' Age of Anxiety,” accessed December 15, 2018, <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/interviews-take-shelter-jeff-nichols-age-of-anxiety/>.

In a series of interviews, Nichols charts the cultural landscape that facilitated the writing of the script in 2008. Speaking to media outlet *IFC*, he explains that:

When I was writing this in the summer of 2008, it felt like everything was going wrong: our government was going to collapse, the dollar was going to go in the toilet, Iceland was bankrupt, not to mention constant reminders of polar bears leaping off icebergs that are melting. It just felt like there was this dull, gnawing dread, that I thought was palpable. I felt like it was something the rest of the world could identify with.⁹¹

To *Complex*, similarly, he says, “I just felt all of this stress out in this world, and all of this fear about economic disasters and the environment”.⁹² *IndieWire*, in turn, he tells that “shit was going crazy”:

Bush was in the White House, the economy was collapsing, there were wars everywhere, towns were getting destroyed by storms. It was just like, what’s going on? It felt like the world at large was losing its grasp of keeping everything together. That was just in the air. It still is.⁹³

The initial seed of the film began as an image of a man standing at the door to a storm shelter, according to Nichols, an image he situates within the suburban Gothic mode: “the shelter itself as a door in the perfect green of his lawn”⁹⁴—something sinister lurking beneath the most ordinary of American lives.

It would seem, therefore, that a reading of *Take Shelter* would reward less a teasing-out of what the storm *means*, and more an interrogation of the ways in which it might invite readings from a multiplicity of angles: fears about marriage, economy, fatherhood, mental health, as well as

⁹¹ Matt Singer, “‘Take Shelter’ Director Jeff Nichols Clears the Air,” *IFC*, September 29, 2011, <https://www.ifc.com/2011/09/jeff-nichols-take-shelter-interview>.

⁹² Matt Barone, “Interview: ‘Take Shelter’ Writer-Director Jeff Nichols Talks Michael Shannon’s Softer Side And Nature’s Wrath,” *Complex*, September 30, 2011, <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2011/09/interview-take-shelter-writer-director-jeff-nichols>.

⁹³ Nigel M. Smith and Nigel M. Smith, “‘Take Shelter’ Director Jeff Nichols on How to Make an Indie Epic,” *IndieWire* (blog), September 28, 2011, <https://www.indiewire.com/2011/09/interview-take-shelter-director-jeff-nichols-on-how-to-make-an-indie-epic-51933/>.

⁹⁴ Doyle, “Prognosis End-Time,” 26.

climate change. “I’m into the idea”, says Nichols, “of how [the film] can operate on several different levels and can be interpreted by many different audiences”.⁹⁵ For in its broad-reaching engagement with cultural anxieties it “strategically denies viewers the security of a firm interpretation”.⁹⁶

A reading at scale, however, gives primacy to the storm as a literal rather than symbolic catastrophe, reminding viewers that our changing planet looms large over all other concerns that may trouble us. Others have noted that Curtis’s symptoms resemble that of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but might be better described as a kind of “Pre-TSD” or “future-tense trauma”:⁹⁷ *the return of trauma not yet experienced*. The majority of his fears are, in truth, concrete events: he really is struggling with his mental health, his marriage is facing some stress, he is under financial strain, his daughter does depend on his (now-lost) job’s health insurance. The storm, however, looms large over all these concerns, and while it may be taken as a concatenation of other issues, it may also be taken quite literally. “The environmental stuff is so scary”, says Nichols, “but I don’t let myself get into it too much. It terrifies me so I can’t dwell on it”.⁹⁸ Of what significance *is* anything else when environmental destruction looms large?

Take Shelter is a particularly interesting text in light of Clark’s discussion of scale, as it does not just reward engagement with a variety of scalar approaches, but dramatises the conflicts that result from their intersection. Wooley argues that, “Unlike the empirical, evidence-based rhetoric

⁹⁵ Koehler, “*Take Shelter*.”

⁹⁶ Woolley, “There’s a Storm Coming!,” 186.

⁹⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, “Trauma Studies Moving Forward: Interdisciplinary Perspectives,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 53.

⁹⁸ Scott Macaulay, “The Storm Within: Jeff Nichols’ *Take Shelter*,” *Filmmaker Magazine* (blog), accessed December 15, 2018, <https://filmmakermagazine.com/35072-the-storm-within-jeff-nichols-take-shelter/>.

in which climate change is most often couched, *Take Shelter* explores the significance of alternative forms of knowledge arising from intuition and insight, presented here as quasi-prophetic”.⁹⁹ From the perspective of ecohorror, however, the significance may be less of *alternative* forms of knowledge, and more of the return of *repressed* forms of knowledge.

Curtis is trying to live his life on the first scale, as most of us do, managing the individualist concerns of family, finance, and mental health. As in Clark’s reading of “Elephant”, a reading at this level may prioritise his visions as metaphor for his state of mind. Even the ending, in which his long-prophesied storm arrives during a beach holiday with his wife, and she is forced to acknowledge its existence, can be reduced to a case of landscape-as-human-metaphor. The director himself says that:

What is happening, what is going to happen, all that is just fun to talk about. But what’s important to me is that these two people are on the same page and are seeing the same thing. There’s several interpretations of where they’re at. And that’s great. But as long as they’re seeing the same thing I think there is a resolution and the possibility of hope in the film.¹⁰⁰

Whether or not it is the world-ending storm that Curtis believes it to be, a reading at the individual level can see it first and foremost as a turning point for the couple’s relationship—even as a *hopeful* event.

At the second scale Curtis’s visions may come to represent the “perfect storm” of cultural anxieties, with the environment comprising just one facet of a crumbling system: the meshing of a global recession with anxious masculinity, unaffordable healthcare, and attendant marital pressures. In 2011, 8.9 percent of the U.S. labour force was unemployed (compared to 3.9 in

⁹⁹ Woolley, “There’s a Storm Coming!,” 177.

¹⁰⁰ Matt Singer, “‘Take Shelter’ Director Jeff Nichols Clears the Air.”

2018)¹⁰¹, and over 15 percent of the population was without health insurance (compared to 8.7 percent in 2017).¹⁰² Although the film was written and filmed against a backdrop of environmental disaster—Nichols refers, for example, to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which took place during the first week of filming¹⁰³—the U.S. was grappling with numerous other social and political issues at the same time, and *Take Shelter* gathers a significant portion of these together into a portrait of a nation's troubles at a particular moment in time.

The third scale, finally, once again renders all but environmental change insignificant. In this instance, however, unlike in “Elephant”, *Take Shelter* can be read as an artefact of humankind's repressed knowledge of this wider scale, rather than existing unawares within such a context. Of Carver's minimalist style, Clark says that it “projects a realm of disjunctive surfaces and personal isolation in which the lack of a completely reliable sense of relation between cause and effect, intention and result, effort and reward, is accompanied by a pervading sense of insecurity and redundancy”.¹⁰⁴ Content follows form in *Take Shelter*, as the blurring of lines between dreams and reality troubles the distinctions between rationality and mental illness and questions the solutions championed by a fundamentally unsustainable society.

To begin with, in terms of direct representation of “nature”, the film resists the tendency to imbue the planet with a human-like agency, rendering it instead as a force far outside of our

¹⁰¹ “Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population 16 Years and over, Prior Years to Date,” Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey (U.S. Department of Labor), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea01.htm>.

¹⁰² “Health Insurance Historical Tables” (U.S. Census Bureau), accessed February 10, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/health-insurance/historical-series/hic.html>.

¹⁰³ Matt Singer, “‘Take Shelter’ Director Jeff Nichols Clears the Air.”

¹⁰⁴ Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 106.

control. “Nature”, says Nichols, “is the best kind of villain since it has no malice, it simply is”.¹⁰⁵ To another interviewer he elaborates: “Nature seemed like an appropriate antagonist, because you can’t blame it, you know? In the grand scheme of things, these aren’t storms that are coming after Curtis . . . these are storms that are just happening”.¹⁰⁶ The lesson is not that nature is taking its revenge, but rather that nature is not even aware that we are at the mercy of its destructive forces.

Crucial to their horror affect is also the refusal of the storms to remain as background knowledge. Their insistence on rising to prominence denies Curtis—as a stand-in for the average American citizen—the excuse of ignorance in the face of rising danger. “Occupying the shifting terrain between metaphor and materiality”, writes Wooley, “the storm in *Take Shelter* produces an unsettling state of epistemological uncertainty, which reflects the provisionality . . . of our knowledge about, and relationship to, the environment”.¹⁰⁷ We may try to live our lives on the first scale, attending to our individual needs, but in the twenty-first century we can no longer enjoy the luxury of pushing climate change aside. Even at the second scale, national anxieties about the economic and sociopolitical context of people’s lives become secondary to the single concern that overshadows all others. That, as I previously quoted Clark as saying, “*not* to read at this scale is now become an evasion”. In its function as a piece of horror, *Take Shelter* ensures that that which we attempt to evade makes its presence known.

The reception of Curtis’s increasingly nonconformist behaviour also exposes the issue with attempting to confront environmental realities at a scale beyond the individual: it is not compatible with life under late capitalism. “*Take Shelter*”, writes Wooley, “explores how rationality

¹⁰⁵ Koehler, “*Take Shelter*.”

¹⁰⁶ Barone, “Interview.”

¹⁰⁷ Woolley, “There’s a Storm Coming!,” 182.

itself can come to justify irrational behavior, such as the failure to take action in the face of rapidly increasing environmental degradation. How logical is it, the film seems to ask, to do nothing in the face of imminent disaster?”¹⁰⁸ In this light, it captures a feeling familiar to any member of the news-reading public in the twenty-first century: the paralysing gap between knowledge and action regarding global warming. We know that our “fossil-fuel-based infrastructure” cannot sustain itself, and few of us have the means to extract ourselves from its influence. Aside from those rare individuals who go “off the grid” to live a self-sustaining lifestyle, most of us must drive to work, where we may market goods to other consumers in order to make a living, in order to buy more goods. All the while knowing that the centre cannot hold.

On that scale, Curtis’s situation is no different. He attempts to go through the proper steps in order to get help for his escalating condition—visiting a doctor, a counsellor, and eventually a psychiatrist—but all of these involve denying something that he truly believes to be a reality. They attempt to fit him back within structures that, from the perspective of the Anthropocene, we know to be broken. In one scene he stops at the side of the road, witness to a dramatic lightning-storm while his family sleeps in the car. “Is anybody seeing this?” he utters, disbelieving. As Doyle argues, “In *Take Shelter* . . . mental illness becomes a metaphor for the unsustainable continuity of everyday life in late capitalism and the cognitive dissonance caused by the necessity of ignoring the ‘signs’ that the future is catastrophic”.¹⁰⁹

Like *The Road*, then, *Take Shelter* can remind us that there is something much larger at work than we may be able to perceive in our day-to-day lives. Curtis’s struggles with work and health may feel like the end of the world to him, but, stepping back, there is a *literal* apocalypse threatening

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 183.

¹⁰⁹ Doyle, “Prognosis End-Time,” 33.

North American ways of life as a whole. Again, nature is not a vengeful force for the human protagonist to defeat, but something that, when disturbed, has the potential to overwhelm without malice. To reiterate, as Nichols says, “it just is”.

Global Weirding: The *Southern Reach* trilogy

Jeff VanderMeer’s 2014 *Southern Reach* trilogy offers a compelling vision of how an author might deliberately confront the Anthropocene in their writing, and stands as an extremely strong example of how horror can be employed to that end. In the novels, a mysterious force has occupied a site in Florida known as “Area X”. Within its boundaries the laws of nature bend and warp, and even sustained study of the space by the specially formed Southern Reach organisation cannot make sense of its reality. *Annihilation* introduces the reader to this world through the eyes of the Biologist, an unnamed member of the twelfth expedition sent into area X by the Southern Reach. She and the other members of her team—an anthropologist, surveyor, and psychologist (later revealed to be the Director of the Southern Reach undercover)—trace the footsteps of the expedition before them, attempting to recover any information that may lead to further understanding of the “Event” that spawned Area X. The more they experience, however, the more baffled and terrified they become; underground towers contain monstrous, incomprehensible “crawlers”, dolphins have uncannily human eyes, and a lighthouse on the shore is filled with the rotting remains of previous expedition-members’ journals (which also reveal that there have been far more groups sent in to Area X than they have been led to believe).

Back at the Southern Reach facility, nothing is any clearer. *Authority*, the second book in the trilogy, shifts perspective to John Rodriguez, also known as Control, the man brought in to replace the old Director after she disappeared on the twelfth expedition. Here we see a different set of attempts to catalogue the area, as Control tries to piece together the years of strange evidence

collected by previous expeditions, overseen by a mysterious figure that he knows only as The Voice. He interviews the Biologist (actually Ghost Bird, a doppelganger created by Area X and returned in the Biologist's place), the only surviving member to return from the "twelfth" expedition, and gradually develops a bond of sorts, before the Southern Reach moves her to another holding facility, believing that she is compromising his investigations. As Area X begins to expand, taking over the Southern Reach premises, he flees, finds Ghost Bird, and together they return to Area X.

Acceptance charts their second journey through the space, interspersed with past narratives from the psychologist/Director and the old lighthouse keeper. The reader can slowly begin to piece together something of Area X's history through their fragmented narratives, and learns that it most likely has extraterrestrial origins. The narrative returns towards the border in the end, to find the Southern Reach facility abandoned, and it finishes with uncertainty as to whether Area X has disappeared or merely expanded its boundaries.

VanderMeer does not write strict horror—*The Southern Reach* is often classified as more "weird" than it is "horror", and the weird is a category that he knowingly participates in and plays with. Mark Fisher identifies the weird as existing "at the edges of genres such as horror and science fiction", and having a "preoccupation with the strange":

The strange—not the horrific. The allure that the weird . . . possess[es] is not captured by the idea that we "enjoy what scares us". It has, rather, to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread—but it would be wrong to say that the weird . . . [is] necessarily terrifying.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2017), 8.

The weird, he goes on to posit, “brings to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it” and comprises “the conjoining of *two or more things which do not belong together*”.¹¹¹ When confronting the unexpected and unpredictable relationships between actions and/or objects in the Anthropocene, it is easy to see how weird fiction might be one useful means through which to approach the subject.

The Southern Reach, it should be noted, has not merely had the label of weird attached to it after its critical reception; VanderMeer is a prominent voice in the study of the subgenre. He edited a collection, *The Weird* (2011), with Ann VanderMeer, and has stated that “I’m firmly convinced that editing *The Weird* was a huge influence on *Annihilation*, because we’d just wrapped that up six months before *Annihilation* hit as an inspiration”.¹¹² In the introduction to the collection, the VanderMeers describe contemporary weird fiction as a process of “the refinement (and destabilization) of supernatural fiction within an established framework but also of the welcome contamination of that fiction by the influence of other traditions”.¹¹³ Note the use of “contamination” as intrinsic to the modern weird; it lends itself to explorations of unintended interconnection.

The trilogy has not been received as ecohorror unintentionally, either. VanderMeer has spoken at length about his concerns over global warming and a percentage of the profits from the trilogy go towards wildlife preservation efforts in Florida. Yet, he states that his aim with the books was never to preach: “I . . . don’t think it’s very effective in convincing what I would consider

¹¹¹ Ibid., 30.

¹¹² Finola Prendergast, “‘Some Things Come Unbidden’: An Interview with Jeff VanderMeer,” Post45, accessed July 21, 2018, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2018/07/some-things-come-unbidden-an-interview-with-jeff-vandermeer/>.

¹¹³ Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer, “Introduction,” in *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, ed. Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer (New York: Tor Books, 2012), xvi.

people on the brink or the edge, people who think climate change isn't going to affect anything for fifty years, or don't see that the environment around us is changing pretty radically at the moment".¹¹⁴ Rather, he believes that a "non-didactic approach" can "make someone feel something in the body, so to speak—make them feel it in a sense that is not just an intellectual exercise":

To do that, you have to draw them in, in such a way that they don't really know that they're getting a message till it's too late, if that makes any sense. It's not that you consciously plan this, but if you're writing non-didactic works in the first place you can, at a tactical level, in scenes or whatnot, set traps, so to speak. You can do things that are intentional once you've read through your own rough draft, to bring things out that emphasize that message.¹¹⁵

He echoes these sentiments in another interview with *Wired*:

There are still people who, even though they say they believe in global warming, haven't really internalized the idea, because they've been protected from its effects. If you live in the U.S. and you're middle class or higher, you've been largely protected from global warming. I didn't want to have a strong environmental message in the sense of it being didactic. That's totally pointless; you don't change anybody's mind that way. But by getting really close in an interior, you might make people think about certain issues a little differently.¹¹⁶

Although the novels may not contain explicit calls to environmentalist action, they still self-consciously engage with the subject, attempting to use a more oblique strategy to connect readers with contemporary ecological issues.

Reading VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy in light of the Anthropocene, Gry Ulstein highlights Morton's use of Cthulhu, H.P. Lovecraft's monstrous deity, to illustrate the nature of

¹¹⁴ Prendergast, "Some Things Come Unbidden."

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Jason Kehe, "The WIRED Book Club Talks With Sci-Fi Writer Jeff VanderMeer," *Wired*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/wired-book-club-jeff-vandermeer-interview/>.

hyperobjects, how their “vast proportions and inconceivable existence make humans feel powerless and insignificant in comparison”:¹¹⁷

By understanding hyperobjects, human thinking has summoned Cthulhu-like entities into social, psychic, and philosophical space. The contemporary philosophical obsession with the monstrous provides a refreshing exit from human-scale thoughts. It is extremely healthy to know not only that there are monstrous beings, but that there are beings that are not purely thinkable, whose being is not directly correlated with whatever thinking is.¹¹⁸

As well as using the monstrous to this end, VanderMeer engages a variety of other techniques to confront the many “pieces to the puzzle” that make up both Area X and our own changing world. “I think that’s very true to the underlying themes”, he says: “[Finding] a kind of surrogate for the complexity of global warming, which is everywhere and nowhere and which creeps up on us in ways that we don’t quite grasp.”¹¹⁹ The nature of monstrosity is, of course, central to this engagement with climate change, and is aided by multiple narrative perspectives, an extensive consideration of the futility of language, and the mirroring of processes—not just monstrous ones—at numerous scales.

Clark repeatedly emphasises the importance of competing perspectives to Anthropocene literature. If a concept is beyond the comprehension of a single person, then it is naturally going to mean different things to different people depending on their own experience of the world, depth of understanding, and particular personal motivations. *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* accordingly present Area X from five different viewpoints over the course of the trilogy, offering views of the so-called “Event” reflecting a variety of biases, desires, and experiences. In addition to this, there are four different expedition members that make up the “twelfth” team: a biologist,

¹¹⁷ Ulstein, “Brave New Weird,” 74.

¹¹⁸ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 64.

¹¹⁹ Kehe, “The WIRED Book Club Talks With Sci-Fi Writer Jeff VanderMeer.”

anthropologist, psychologist, and surveyor. Each brings a different perspective and specialisation to Area X, and the diversity of the team represents another attempt to use different points of view to create some cohesive, comprehensible picture. Two perspectives are privileged as narrators of an entire novel—the unnamed biologist in *Annihilation*, and Control, the new Director of Area X, in *Authority*. Although they both work for the Southern Reach, their roles within the organisation mean that they perceive their mission and its impact in very different ways.

Of all the narrators, the biologist is most primed to allow for the non-specificity of Area X. “I specialized in transitional environments”,¹²⁰ she says by way of explaining how she ended up on the expedition, suggesting that she may be best primed to recognise the unquantifiable nature of Area X. Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle can, to some extent, be used by way of illustration: you can measure the speed of a particle, or its position, but you can’t measure both.¹²¹ If an environment is ever-changing, then even a perfectly accurate snapshot can only represent its reality at one specific moment in time. We might understand how it *briefly* exists, or in what way and to what extent it is changing, but never both.

As a character, the biologist is always slightly separate from humanity—her namelessness only serves to heighten this. She prefers to spend her time observing a flourishing ecosystem develop in an abandoned lot than spend time with her husband, and seems more comfortable among wild creatures and landscapes than with other people. She sees beyond what we might call the typical human perspective: “The empty lot appealed to me because it wasn’t truly empty”.¹²² As such, her perspective on Area X frequently frames it as a positive place, rather than a threat:

¹²⁰ Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (New York: FSG Originals, 2014), 11.

¹²¹ David Lindley, *Uncertainty* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008), 4.

¹²² VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 156.

“The air was so clean, so fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself. Back there, I had always felt as if my work amounted to a futile attempt to save us from who we are”.¹²³

Control, on the other hand, sees the space from a different point of view in *Authority*. As newly appointed Director of the Southern Reach facility, he is constantly frustrated by the inadequacies of the data that he has on Area X. His description of the place differs in focus from the biologist’s, focusing more on its physical limits than its atmosphere: “It had discrete boundaries, including to about one mile out to sea . . . The border extended about seventy miles inland from the lighthouse, and approximately forty miles east and forty miles west along the coast. It ended just below the stratosphere and, underground, just above the asthenosphere”.¹²⁴ *Acceptance*, in turn, shifts between four different narrators—Ghost Bird (the biologist’s Area X doppelganger), Saul the lighthouse keeper, Control, and the Director/psychologist —across different time-frames to offer perhaps the most comprehensive view of events in Area X. As the final novel in the trilogy, it answers (or at least points readers in the direction of answers to) the question of what has actually happened most fully.

A final noteworthy perspective, although not a narrator in his own right, is Whitby, another Southern Reach staff-member. In *Acceptance* we learn that he was part of an unauthorised expedition to Area X, along with the former Director/psychologist, and that he comes back contaminated. From his “brightness”-tinted viewpoint—“brightness” being how those impacted describe their contamination by Area X—he sees the concept of *terroir* as one means of trying to comprehend the space: “Terroir’s direct translation is ‘a sense of place,’ and what it means is the

¹²³ Ibid., 30.

¹²⁴ Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (New York: FSG Originals, 2014), 78.

sum of the effects of a localized environment, inasmuch as they impact the qualities of a particular product”¹²⁵.

The point of *terroir* is that no two areas are the same. That no two wines can be exactly the same because no combination of elements can be exactly the same . . . [It] requires a deep understanding of a region to reach conclusions . . . I feel there is an over-emphasis on the lighthouse, the tower, base camp—those discrete elements that could be said to jut out of the landscape—while the landscape itself is largely ignored.¹²⁶

Whitby’s focus on *terroir* is his particular way of trying to synthesise the many strands of research and accounts of experience. If, as the novels suggest, those characters contaminated by Area X begin to move towards a greater understanding of it, then Whitby’s point of view may be particularly enlightening. As with the Anthropocene, no single element will provide a complete picture of events, just as no single narrator can capture the whole of what is happening.

Concurrent with these shifting perspectives, VanderMeer problematises the very means through which we communicate our understanding of spaces and environments. Alongside the various narratives, the reader is constantly presented with reminders that language itself is ultimately inadequate when it comes to capturing the entirety of Area X. Tools of measurement and description are ultimately, the novels suggest, rarely fit to do the job for which they are designed. The “twelfth” expedition, for example, is sent to Area X equipped with mysterious devices—instruments for taking unspecified measurements, they are told. Later, however, the biologist discovers that the little black boxes are, in fact, functionless. They are nothing more than “a psychological ploy to keep the expedition calm”.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 132.

¹²⁷ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 128.

Measurement, as we saw earlier in Control's delineation of Area X's boundaries, becomes a tool of reassurance for many of the *Southern Reach* characters. Above all else, they believe that if they can capture the correct data and take the appropriate measurements, they will be able to create a complete picture of events. When the biologist is confronted with a mystifying series of seemingly living words on the wall of the "tunnel", she is hypnotised by "the compulsion to keep reading, to descend into the greater darkness and keep descending".¹²⁸ Only a question from one of her teammates, "*What are they made of?*" can bring her back to her usual modes of human thought: "I hadn't even thought of [what the words were made of], though I should have; I was still trying to parse the lingual meaning, had not transitioned to the idea of taking a physical sample. But what relief at the question!"¹²⁹ She struggles even with this, though, eventually telling the surveyor that it is "[s]ome sort of fungi" in an attempt to create something like order in her mind: "Who knew if it were actually true? It was just the closest thing to an answer".¹³⁰

The tower itself—along with the lighthouse to which it seems to have a mysterious connection¹³¹—is the locus of uncertainty in *Annihilation*, and affords contemplation of what Clark identifies as the challenges of literature in the Anthropocene. The object itself is, to begin with, not even simple to identify. Although the biologist immediately thinks of it as a tower, it is more literally described by the rest of the expedition as a tunnel: "I don't know why the word *tower* came to me, given that it tunnelled into the ground";¹³² "That night we talked about the tower, although

¹²⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 25.

¹³¹ Vandermeer has repeatedly insisted in interviews, however, that this connection is *not* a Freudian one. Sometimes a tower and a tunnel are just a tower and a tunnel.

¹³² VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 7.

the other three insisted on calling it a tunnel”.¹³³ The tower is at once both a structure and a living, breathing organism. It makes no sense to the biologist’s human senses, although when the “brightness” begins to take over she can at least perceive her inability to comprehend its totality. This is in contrast to her first encounters with it, during which the team reaches for illusory comfort in cataloguing and describing: “We could not intuit its full outline. We had no sense of its purpose . . . The psychologist might recite the measurement of the ‘top’ of the tower, but those numbers mean nothing, had no wider context. Without context, clinging to those numbers was a form of madness”.¹³⁴

Donna Haraway, in “The Promises of Monsters”, explores the many ways in which nature is conceived of by humankind—the “mindscapes and landscapes of what may count as nature in certain local/global struggles”.¹³⁵ The *Southern Reach*, in its exploration of the limitations of words, reflects her evocation of the difficulties involved in containing nature’s multiplicities through language:

Articulation is not a simple matter. Language is the effect of articulation, and so are bodies . . . Nature may be speechless, without language, in the human sense; but nature is highly articulate. Discourse is only one process of articulation. An articulated world has an undecidable number of modes and sites where connections can be made . . . Unlike things can be joined-and like things can be broken apart-and vice versa.¹³⁶

Language is, in itself, human and representative of all-*too*-human ways of looking at the world, and thus inherently insufficient when it comes to fully conveying the intricacies of the natural world.

¹³³ Ibid., 12.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 21–22.

¹³⁵ Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (London: Psychology Press, 2004), 64.

¹³⁶ Donna Haraway, “The Promises of Monsters,” in Lawrence Grossberg et al., eds, *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 324.

The Crawler, the incomprehensible creature that the expedition encounters in the tower, is a particular focal point for the ways in which language fails the biologist. Indeed, it is not just language that fails her, but all of her senses: “What can you do when your five senses are not enough?”¹³⁷ To her mind, limited by the scope of human-scale understanding, it is fragmented, flickering, and “tremble[s] into being . . . [before] wink[ing] out again” due, seemingly, to her mind’s inability to process the creature in front of it:¹³⁸ “*No words can . . . No photographs could*”.¹³⁹ [Emphasis original.]

This comes in contrast to her doppelganger, Ghost Bird’s, later encounter with the Crawler, where we see a lesser gap in understanding—though still far from a complete comprehension—on the part of the duplicate created by Area X. Although she shares the biologist’s memories and physical shape, her encounter is revelatory rather than incomprehensible:

She saw, or *felt deep within*, the cataclysm like a rain of comets that had annihilated an entire biosphere remote from Earth . . . She saw the membranes of Area X, this machine, this creature . . . All of this in fragments through taste or smell *or senses she didn’t entirely understand*.¹⁴⁰ [Emphasis added.]

The closer she gets to Area X, it seems, the more she has access to experiences beyond the human and the ability to comprehend on a level outside of language that which is happening.

The journal motif that runs throughout the first book is similarly evocative of these limitations to language. At the end of *Annihilation*, the biologist discovers a pile of journals belonging to members of past expeditions, dumped in “a mouldering pile about twelve feet high

¹³⁷ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 178.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁴⁰ Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance* (New York: FSG Originals, 2014), 286.

and sixteen feet wide that in places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper rotting away”:¹⁴¹

The individual details chronicled by the journals might tell stories of heroism or cowardice, of good decisions and bad decisions, but ultimately they spoke to a kind of *inevitability*. No one had as yet plumbed the depths of *intent* or *purpose* in a way that had obstructed that intent or purpose. Everyone had died or been killed, returned changed or returned unchanged, but Area X had continued on as it always had... while our superiors seemed to fear any radical reimagining of this situation so much that they had continued to send in knowledge-strapped expeditions as if this was the only option. *Feed Area X but do not antagonize it, and perhaps someone will, through luck or mere repetition, hit upon some explanation, some solution, before the world becomes Area X.*¹⁴² [Emphasis original.]

The journals that she finds give her a focus for her dissatisfaction with records as a means of understanding, while also offering a meta-analysis of the boundaries of human psychology when it comes to tackling subjects of enormity. The Southern Reach equates explanations with solutions, thinking that if they can only understand Area X enough then they will automatically know what to do about it. Through the writing of previous expedition members we see the limitations of this type of understanding. The journals rotting at the bottom of the heap signal the primacy of extant reality over its record: “Slowly the history of exploring Area X could be said to be turning into Area X”.¹⁴³

More importantly, perhaps, at times VanderMeer also points to the importance of “reading around the edges” as a means of moving towards a greater understanding of the whole, accepting that we cannot necessarily confront all that we would need to in our attempts to record particular things. Perhaps enabled by the “brightness” inside her, the biologist’s mind is made to “itch” by

¹⁴¹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 111.

¹⁴² Ibid. 158–9.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 112.

“some omissions” in certain journals. One in particular focuses intensely on the minute details of certain plants and creatures:

In no instance did the observer stray more than a foot or two from a particular plant, and at no point, either, did the observer pull back to provide a glimpse of base camp or their own life. After a while, a kind of unease came over me as I began to perceive a terrible presence hovering in the background of these entries . . . the single focus of the journal keeper a way of coping with that horror. An absence is not a presence, but . . . a shiver worked deeper and deeper into my spine.¹⁴⁴

Here the text gestures towards the functions of horror more broadly, and towards Clark’s approach to reading Anthropocene fiction not just as representations of the natural world, but as a reading-between-the-lines. The biologist describes what the journal’s author is doing as “writing around the edges of things”,¹⁴⁵ even if it is not conscious. VanderMeer himself self-consciously participates in this mode of writing with the *Southern Reach* trilogy. All the while acknowledging the inability of language to capture the entirety of hyperobjects/level III events like Area X (or Area-X-as-global-warming-metaphor), he knowingly presents the story as a series of snippets, of surreal encounters, of events not fully comprehended by those who inhabit the world. We, as readers, are always left to read between the lines and to fill in the blanks.

Before leaving the subject of language, it is important to note that although it has limitations, the *Southern Reach* does not entirely dismiss language as a tool of comprehension—it just emphasises that it is not the be-all-and-end-all. Language is still a tool that can move characters towards a greater understanding, even if it cannot encompass the whole. As the biologist becomes more and more infused with the essence of Area X, she calls the result a “*truthful seeing*”,¹⁴⁶ the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 114.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 114.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 90.

effects of which allow her to perceive the “subtleties” of Area X with “new eyes”.¹⁴⁷ This new perception of subtleties is accompanied by increasingly vivid descriptions of the environment. In *Authority*, when Ghost Bird returns to the world outside of Area X and is interrogated by the Southern Reach institution, her difference and closeness to the strangeness of the place is signalled through description:

And there were the odd specifics that others lacked. Whereas the anthropologist might say “The wilderness was empty and pristine,” the biologist said, “There were bright pink thistles everywhere, even when the fresh water shifted to saline . . . The light at dusk was a low blaze, a brightness.”¹⁴⁸

Where others revert to “pristine” as a broad description of the freshness of life in Area X, Ghost Bird’s assimilation into its being means that she can appreciate the nuances.

Most pertinent to Clark’s interrogation of scale, the *Southern Reach* draws constant connections between life at different scales, upending any notions of humankind’s scale as the default and bringing attention to the limitations of our comprehensions of the variety of experience that may be possible in the universe. “Sometimes”, it reminds us, “you get a sense of when the truth of things will not be revealed by microscopes”.¹⁴⁹

In his article “Angry Eden”, Matthew Masucci argues that Area X’s expansion represents a process of colonisation by the environment:

The titles of the *Southern Reach* novels echo the process of colonization of an occupied space, which often involves a use of force. First, the local culture is annihilated, then a new dominance or authority is established. Finally, there is assimilation and acceptance. Thus, in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, the environment is a colonizing force, an imperial culture and language that replaces and erases the evidence of human existence.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 89.

¹⁴⁸ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 18.

¹⁴⁹ VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 50.

¹⁵⁰ Matthew Masucci, “Angry Eden: Hyperobjects, Plant Entelechy, and the Horror of Eco-Colonization in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*,” in Richard J. Schneider, ed., *Dark Nature: Anti-Pastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture* (Minneapolis: Lexington Books, 2016), 177.

“Through eco-colonization,” he argues, “Area X revitalizes the environment; of course, from a human perspective, this is a source of horror, as it involves human diaspora and genocide”.¹⁵¹ A reading at scale, however, complicates this interpretation, problematising the fundamental concept of colonisation. Although from a human perspective this process may, of course, be read as colonisation, this doesn’t take into account humankind’s initial colonisation of the landscape. It also reinforces the human/nature dichotomy, positioning them as two forces, “us” and “them”, that can be pitted against one another.

Rather, the *Southern Reach* blurs the lines between coloniser and colonised by replicating this “colonisation” process at multiple scales, all the while disputing the idea that there are two sides in the first place. At one scale, the biologist describes a pool she was particularly fond of as a child:

Soon after we moved in, the grass around its edges grew long. Sedge weeds and other towering plants became prevalent. The short bushes lining the fence around the pool lunged up to obscure the chain link. Moss grew in the cracks in the tile path that circled it. The water level slowly rose, fed by the rain, and the surface became more and more brackish with algae. Dragonflies continually scouted the area. Bullfrogs moved in, the wriggling malformed dots of their tadpoles always present. Water gliders and aquatic beetles began to make the place their own. Rather than get rid of my . . . aquarium, as my parents wanted, I dumped the fish into the pool, and some survived the shock of that . . . [S]mall turtles began to live in the pool, although I had no idea how they had gotten there . . . Within months of our arrival, the pool had become a functioning ecosystem.¹⁵²

The threads linking this pool with Area X are clear: an emergent ecosystem, allowing life to flourish where previously it had been hampered by its overseers (the previous occupants of the house, who had maintained the cleanliness of the pool rather than allowing it to overgrow). Organisms from

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 172.

¹⁵² Ibid. 44.

other ecosystems—the fish from the tank—assimilate into it, even if there is damage to some individuals in the process.

Another scale is drawn out by Alison Sperling, who views themes of climate change in the novel through the lens of “ecosickness”, envisioning a parallel ecosystem in peril at the level of bodily rather than planetary systems. “An alternate framing of the unhealthy bodyrr she writes, “what is referred to by all infected as ‘the brightness’ positions environmental sickness not merely in opposition to health, but as a ‘co-constitution’ that reformulates the body in relation to a changing world”.¹⁵³ Just as Area X’s so-called colonisation questions the notion of human sovereignty over the planet, so the biologist’s “sickness” replicates this process at a bodily scale. Although she is “infected”, the doppelganger that results from this infection is arguably better-off than the original body: “If anything, Ghost Bird was healthier now than before she’d left; the toxins present in most people today existed in her and the others at much lower levels than normal”.¹⁵⁴

Sperling looks to skin as a recurring motif and site of “weird ecological embodiment” in the trilogy.¹⁵⁵ The skin, on some level, is an ecosystem of its own, and contamination and change occurs at this level as well. Not only this, but viewing the ecological at the level of the skin “suggests that the body is not contained, that it need not be imagined as ending at the porous boundaries of the skin”.¹⁵⁶ She quotes Elizabeth Grosz, philosopher and feminist theorist, who

¹⁵³ Alison Sperling, “Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer’s The Southern Reach Trilogy,” *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 28 (January 2016), 238.

¹⁵⁴ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 23.

¹⁵⁵ Sperling, “Second Skins,” 243.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

positions the body not as a fixed entity, but as porous and dynamic, “incorporating and expelling outside and inside in an ongoing exchange”.¹⁵⁷

VanderMeer . . . posits a provocative, if not slightly contentious, model of ecosickness. The novels do not simply condemn the environmental traumas of the Anthropocene by warning of widespread impending ecosickness as the result. Instead, the trilogy develops a much more complex bodily response to ecological conditions . . . The weird ecology eschews standardised valuations of wellness by refuting normative assessments of health and by challenging simplistic formulations of health as desirable and sickness undesirable . . . suggest[ing] a more nuanced approach to the global contamination of bodies in the Anthropocene.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, in conjunction with its broader treatment of “porous boundaries” at numerous levels, it also offers a more nuanced approach to the “infection” of Earth by Area X than the term “colonisation” would imply. Rather than *replacing* the local culture and erasing all traces of it, it meshes with existing structures to form a new type of coexistence.

At the final scale lies the most obvious manifestation of the trilogy’s challenge to human modes of experience: the “monsters” of Area X. These forms not only upend common understanding of consciousness and being, but also demonstrate possibilities for communication and coexistence among life-forms on different scales. Encounters with the monstrous make continual reference to its scale and the fear manifested by its presence. Watching a video of the first expeditions—the only footage to exist from inside Area X—Control encounters a scene in which the expedition members appear filled with terror by something off-camera. Although he cannot see the source of their frightened gazes, he notes that it was “as if something had interceded on the landscape, something so incredibly large that its edges were well beyond the camera’s

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 246–7.

lens”.¹⁵⁹ The horror lies not just in the appearance of something monstrous, but in the sheer scale and unknowability of its being.

Such incomprehensibility links VanderMeer’s monsters with the Lovecraftian tradition of viewing humankind as insignificant in the grand scheme of the cosmos. Where Lovecraft deals in an uncaring universe, however, VanderMeer posits an alternative: that we might approach unknowability with curiosity and open-mindedness rather than fear, and that it might respond in kind. Ghost Bird and Control return to Area X in *Acceptance*, and Ghost Bird has an encounter with what remains of the Biologist, transformed into an almost unrecognisable entity by her time in the strange space:

The great slope of its wideness was spread out before Ghost Bird, the edges wavering, blurred, sliding off into some *other* place. The suggestion of a flat, broad head plunging directly into torso. The suggestion, far to the east, already overshooting the lighthouse, of a vast curve and curl of the mouth . . . and the overwhelming ocean smell that came with it.¹⁶⁰

Her companions scream at her to run, to get away from the strange “leviathan” manifesting in front of them, but Ghost Bird, more than human herself, takes a different approach, approaching the monstrous biologist and laying her hands on the “slick, thick skin”.¹⁶¹ This simple act of recognition allows “something wordless but deep” to pass between the two,¹⁶² and for Ghost Bird to realise that there is nothing “monstrous” about the creature: “only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning”.¹⁶³ Rather than vanquishing monstrous nature, this scene suggests the possibility of co-existence with forces beyond our comprehension, and rejects the

¹⁵⁹ VanderMeer, *Authority*, 191.

¹⁶⁰ VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 195.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 195.

¹⁶² Ibid. 196.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 196.

human/nature animosity so frequently considered a central characteristic of the ecohorror subgenre.

Conclusion

Inherent in contemporary ecohorror, then, is a recognition that concern about the environment no longer signifies just the “natural”—ecological issues encompass everything from the way we live to the clothes we buy to our dietary choices to our perception of all kinds of non-human life. Environmentalism has, in the twenty-first century, blossomed into a movement concerned with far more than wilderness; climate refugees, global justice, sea-level rise, and water scarcity exist alongside more familiar issues of species extinction, habitat destruction, and population growth.

Studies of ecohorror have correspondingly begun to broaden their horizons. We recognise the multifaceted nature of environmental issues, and seek them out in sometimes unexpected texts. *The Road*, *Take Shelter*, and the *Southern Reach* all engage with the unsustainability of modern North American lifestyles, yet none fit the “revenge of nature” mould so often used to encapsulate ecohorror as a subgenre. Just as ecocriticism has had to expand its boundaries beyond nature writing, so critics of ecohorror must reach beyond simple representations of nature in examining horror’s intersection with environmentalism. So pervasive has the horror and catastrophe associated with climate change become that it complicates the generic structure of ecohorror itself. The following chapters will use these contemporary understandings of ecohorror to look back at the subgenre in previous decades, tracing the origins of familiar themes and looking for emergent concerns of the Anthropocene in underacknowledged corners of the subgenre.

2. “We Are Entering the Age of the Insect”: Ecohorror in the 1950s

Introduction

Turning our attention back to the years after World War II, then, we can see a nascent awareness of the types of concerns that have come to characterise ecohorror in the twenty-first century. What now manifests as the nebulous anxieties of *The Road*, *Take Shelter*, and the *Southern Reach* trilogy shares a number of characteristics with representations of the environment in horror of the 1950s. With the advent of the atomic bomb came fears about the unintended environmental consequences of human activities, as well as a new sense of scale regarding the impact of our actions. Read retrospectively, certain horror texts of the period evince an increasing consciousness regarding the interconnectedness of the world around us, and offer insight into humankind’s relationship with the environment in the early years of the Anthropocene.

This chapter explores and expands upon existing observation and analysis of four popular horror texts of the 1950s—Eugène Lourié’s *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), Gordon Douglas’s *Them!* (1954), and Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954) and *The Shrinking Man* (1956). *The Beast* and *Them!* are both familiar examples of the postwar “creature feature”, focused on stories of monstrous beasts created or awoken by the atomic bomb. Read ecocritically, they demonstrate that depictions of such creatures are often linked with the landscape itself, and can intersect with other environmental concerns emerging from their cultural contexts. Richard Matheson’s two novels, in turn, presage fears about pesticide use, and *I Am Legend* employs imagery of anthropogenic environmental destruction throughout its depictions of a crumbling human society. Read together, these texts demonstrate the links between postwar themes of ecological destruction and ecohorror as we recognise it today.

Horror and Environmentalism after World War II

Within fifteen years of World War II ending, American society had undergone economic expansion on an unprecedented scale, and it seemed as though a comfortable, suburban lifestyle was accessible to almost anyone.¹ Yet, all the while, the Cold War and its accompanying nuclear arms race was engendering fear of an abrupt and unpleasant end to that prosperity; the prospect of nuclear annihilation became a part of daily life for most. As a result, the horror genre as a whole began to turn its gaze upon the everyday.² For just as images from the war brought the apocalyptic that much closer to reality in the public consciousness, so they blurred distinctions between horror and the real world as well. “If America in 1950 was filled with the smell of new cars, it was still permeated by the stench of mass death, and the threat of more to come”, writes David J. Skal,³ and Morris Dickstein concurs:

In a strange way, no quarter of the century has had to grapple with extremity, or its terrible aftermath, more than the seemingly tranquil decades after the Second World War . . . Besides coming to terms with general carnage on an unheard of scale . . . the postwar world had to assimilate the most shocking news of the war, perhaps of the century as a whole: the details of the holocaust and the effects of the nuclear bomb.⁴

As the American people came to terms with these real atrocities, a distinct trend in their horror preferences also emerged; Gothic castles in far-flung lands gave way to more modern city- and

¹ William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 106.

² Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 2.

³ David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2001), 229.

⁴ Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 142.

countryscapes, while flamboyant villains exchanged their elaborate disguises for the less conspicuous masks of everyday Americans. “Again and again”, says Jancovich, “the threats which distinguish 1950s horror . . . are associated with the processes of social development and modernisation”.⁵

The deployment and sudden bursting into cultural awareness of the atomic bomb is perhaps the most obvious influence on postwar horror, and it brought with it serious environmental concerns about humankind’s ability to inflict destruction upon the world—and upon itself—on a hitherto unimaginable scale. Growing awareness of the effects of nuclear fallout made American citizens “receptive to the idea that the world around them was full of barely perceptible threats that could suddenly become devastating”,⁶ and for some this “represented their first step toward environmentalism”.⁷ “In their view, humanity had become a destructive force by transforming the natural environment and setting off chains of unanticipated consequences. The natural world would support only a population that treated it with respect, they argued, and would avenge itself against a species that abused it”.⁸ While these concerns do evolve and take on different forms in the decades after World War II, a common thread of self-reflexivity and anxiety about human agency marks all the texts that will be discussed in this chapter as particular to the postwar era. In his foreword to Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* (1959), an exploration of the effects of nuclear war on a small town in Florida, David Brin notes the shift in focus that occurs between pre-war and postwar apocalyptic narratives:

Earlier [apocalyptic] tales followed intrepid characters through scenarios of ‘after the fall.’ But before the 1950s, most of these stories portrayed latter-day Noahs struggling against

⁵ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 2.

⁶ Patrick Allitt, *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 26–7.

natural or supernatural disasters. Few ever focused on the range of possible catastrophes that Technological Man might wreak upon the world with tools of his own making.⁹

Postwar horror is, as a result of staggering shifts in humankind's ability to effect catastrophe, deeply invested in questions surrounding our influence, or lack thereof, upon the world around us.

Although *Silent Spring* has thus far tended to be used as a marker of the influence of this strain of ecological thought on popular culture, texts from the earlier post-World War II period reflect the move towards a new type of ecological consciousness; ecohorror may have emerged as a self-aware subgenre in the 1960s and '70s,¹⁰ but early environmentalist glimmerings proliferate in the years after 1945. David J. Skal writes, "A decade before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) alerted the world to the poisonous shadow of pesticides, one can detect a nascent environmentalism in pop culture's fixation on polluted worlds that strike back at their polluters".¹¹ Although not all of these texts necessarily foreground environmentalist themes, they certainly move into an ecohorror *mode* frequently—as with the Gothic more broadly, the influence of ecohorror can be seen more frequently when it is considered to participate in environmental anxieties rather than to be strictly defined by structural elements. As Catherine Spooner writes:

Invariably, the form [of the Gothic] has changed over the course of the last 200 years . . . [It] has interacted with literary movements, social pressures and historical conditions to become a more diverse, loosely defined set of narrative conventions and literary tropes . . . A text may be Gothic and simultaneously many other things . . . It is worth raising Jacques Derrida's question whether texts ever 'belong' to any one genre: rather, he argues, they 'participate' in genres. To participate does not entail complete identification; it merely suggests a relationship with that genre.¹²

⁹ David Brin, "Introduction to *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank," in *Alas, Babylon*, 2005, x.

¹⁰ More on this in chapter three.

¹¹ David J. Skal, "A-Bombs, B-Pictures, and C-Cups," in *It Came from the 1950s!: Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*, ed. Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy, and Bernice M. Murphy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 30.

¹² Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 26.

In a similar manner, many texts that predate *Silent Spring* weave emerging perspectives on the natural world through their narratives without explicitly making them their focus. They gesture towards ecohorror as a subgenre, although its conventions have yet to solidify, and reward an ecocritical approach that acknowledges the fluidity of genre.

Although there is a tendency to associate ecohorror with later decades, the emergence of ecohorror prior to *Silent Spring* has been noted, even in popular media. Erik Piepenburg for *The New York Times* notes, “What makes eco-horror films—from the 1954 sci-fi classic ‘Them!’ to Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 thriller ‘Contagion’—so terrifying is that the enemy is Mother Nature herself, and she is invariably merciless”.¹³ Brian Merchant similarly explains in a piece for *Vice*’s *Motherboard*:

[The] premise propelling the genre couldn’t be simpler or more primal: man tampers with nature—or worse, ruins nature—and nature kicks man’s ass. Films adhering to that golden formula first started cropping up in the 50s, when nuclear anxieties were reaching a fever pitch. As such, eco-horror was born as a slew of “nuclear monster” movies—we got *Them!*, we got *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms*, and, yeah, we got *Godzilla*.¹⁴

In the popular mindset, then, ecohorror does get associated with the decades after World War II, and coincides with a shift in both fiction and environmentalism can be traced to the cultural upheaval in the United States that followed the war.

Few sustained academic examinations of this kind currently exist, however. Certainly, the theme of “nature run amok” or the “revolt of nature” gleans regular mentions from critics,¹⁵ but its importance in the emergence of ecohorror has yet to be cemented. A small number of studies

¹³ Erik Piepenburg, “With ‘The Bay,’ Barry Levinson Makes Eco-Horror,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/movies/with-the-bay-barry-levinson-makes-eco-horror.html>.

¹⁴ Brian Merchant, “The Evolution of Eco-Horror, from Godzilla to Global Warming,” *Motherboard* (Vice), accessed February 7, 2016, <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/the-evolution-of-eco-horror-from-godzilla-to-global-warming>.

¹⁵ See Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2000), 21; and Rick Worland, *Horror Film: An Introduction* (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), 77.

do examine the significance of environmental anxiety to pre-Carson, post-World War II horror and science fiction cinema specifically, and among these the consensus is clear: Joshua Bellin sees that many of these films exhibit a “conflicted attitude . . . toward scientific assaults on the natural world that matured in the decade before *Silent Spring*”; Tsutsi argues that “big bug” cinema of the 1950s “reflected a widespread unease about insect infestation and humankind’s ability to control it during . . . that pre-*Silent Spring* heyday of DDT and sweeping government pest control offensives”; and Christopher Justice similarly sees films of this era as evidence of a shift in environmental awareness:

Throughout these films nascent ecological sensitivities suggest an environmental occurrence in one location will impact another continents away. That complex systems are interdependent is an emerging, yet subordinate theme. So is that notion that cause-effect relationships between seemingly disconnected systems are fundamental to scientifically understanding ecological problems.¹⁶

Looking at these texts, then, can offer new insight into the genesis of ecohorror’s preoccupations and generic format, and place Carson’s influence on the subgenre within a broader context.

“The Beginning of What May Be the End of Us”: *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!*

Two primary concerns tend to dominate discussions of post-World War II horror: mass destruction and hostile invasion of Earth, and *The Beast* and *Them!* are no exception to this rule.¹⁷ “[If] there is a common feature to the majority of horror texts within the 1950s”, writes Jancovich, “it is . . . a shift in emphasis away from a reliance on Gothic horror and towards a preoccupation with the modern world”¹⁸—and in terms of modern preoccupations, the twin threats of nuclear

¹⁶ Christopher Justice, “Cooling the Geopolitical to Warm the Ecological: How Human-Induced Warming Phenomena Transformed Modern Horror,” in *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, ed. Anil Narine (New York: Routledge, 2014), 215.

¹⁷ Worland, *Horror Film*, xii.

¹⁸ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 2.

holocaust and Communist subversion were at the forefront of the American mind at the time. Apocalyptic visions sold handsomely during the years after World War II, and the most widespread critical approach to such representations of cultural anxiety is through the lens of pressing geopolitical issues. This is not to say that the environmental context of the films has been *entirely* overlooked, but rather that it is largely drowned out by other concerns.

The Beast is most commonly read as an example of that class of film concerned with “the spectacle of mass destruction” and “the potential eclipsing of the human species brought about by the atomic bomb”,¹⁹ often alongside other atomic-age films such as *Godzilla* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), and *The Blob* (1958). In the film, atomic testing in the Arctic wakes a (fictional) prehistoric creature known as *Rhedosaurus*. Physicist Thomas Nesbitt (Paul Hubschmid) is the only witness to the creature’s emergence, and his colleagues dismiss his story as delusion. He manages, however, to gain the attention of a paleontologist, Thurgood Elson (Cecil Kellaway), and his assistant, Lee Hunter (Paula Raymond), who help him to track the beast. It makes its way south, down the east coast of the United States, until it reaches New York where, naturally, it wreaks havoc on the city and its inhabitants. After Elson is killed during an underwater exploration of the Hudson River—where *Rhedosaurus* fossils were previously found, and where they believe the Beast to be returning—the creature comes ashore in Manhattan, causing mass death and destruction. Initial attempts to repel it merely injure it, and its wounds drip blood all over the streets of New York, releasing a prehistoric virus that infects the population and results in even more deaths.²⁰ Eventually, Nesbitt helps the army to destroy it by means of a radioactive

¹⁹ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 52; Cynthia Hendershot, *Paranoia, The Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999), 75.

²⁰ A plot recognisable to anyone familiar with Matt Reeves’s *Cloverfield* (2008).

isotope fired into its chest; nuclear testing may have awoken it in the first place, but only nuclear weaponry can destroy it in the end.

Pre-dating perhaps the most iconic nuclear-monster feature, *Godzilla*, by a year, *The Beast* is based loosely on Ray Bradbury's 1951 short story, "The Fog Horn", although it is a riff on the material rather than a direct adaptation. Where Bradbury's story is a meditation on the nature of loneliness and companionship, *The Beast* frames itself as a cautionary tale above all else. "The Fog Horn" centres around two lighthouse-keepers and their encounter with the monster from beneath the sea, who approaches the lighthouse once a year, on the same night, attracted by the sound of its foghorn. As explained by one of the men, it seems to be on the hunt not for humankind, but for a kindred spirit:

All year long, Johnny, that poor monster there lying far out, a thousand miles at sea, and twenty miles deep maybe, biding its time, perhaps a million years old, this one creature . . .

Maybe it's the last of its kind. I sort of think that's true. Anyway, here come men on land and build this lighthouse, five years ago. And set up their Fog Horn and sound it and sound it out towards the place where you bury yourself in sleep and sea memories of a world where there were thousands like yourself, but now you're alone, all alone in a world that's not made for you, a world where you have to hide . . .

But that Fog Horn comes through a thousand miles of water, faint and familiar, and the furnace in your belly stokes up, and you begin to rise, slow, slow . . .

And there you are, out there, in the night, Johnny, the biggest damned monster in creation. And here's the lighthouse calling to you, with a long neck like your neck sticking way up out of the water, and a body like your body, and most important of all, a voice like your voice.²¹

Looking to Clark's call for retrospective readings of environmentally inflected texts, there is the potential to place Bradbury's story alongside accounts of human activities—shipping in particular—disrupting animals' communication. See, for example, a 2016 study which

²¹ Ray Bradbury, "The Fog Horn," in *Golden Apples of the Sun*, 1993, 1–6.

demonstrates that ships' sonar causes major problems for killer whales: "Since many marine mammals rely on sound to find prey, moderate social interactions, and facilitate mating . . . noise from anthropogenic sound sources like ships can interfere with these functions".²² An Anthropocenic re-reading of the story, therefore, may see the monster's loneliness as part of a wider system of as-yet-unrecognised ecological disruption.

As a film, however, *The Beast* reconfigures Bradbury's imagery to tap into anxieties more specific to the period of its production. Cynthia Hendershot notes that it "immediately raises the question on many people's minds in the early fifties: will A-bomb tests bring about peace and progress or war and destruction?"²³ Robert Jacobs describes it as "a contradiction between scientific knowledge and the unknown power of nuclear weapons", and C. W. Podeschi argues that it "raise[s] and then strongly undermine[s] concerns about the effects of nuclear technology".²⁴ Critical analysis of the film has focused largely on its engagement with nuclear experimentation, and its ambivalent attitude towards the pursuit of scientific "progress".

Them!, Warner Brothers's highest-grossing film of 1954,²⁵ also tells the story of invasion by creatures of atomic origin, opening with the discovery of a little girl, wandering mute through the New Mexico desert. Her family are missing from the trailer where they were staying, and the only evidence found at the scene is a single, large, unidentifiable animal-track. An identical print marks the scene of another crime, in which a shop-owner is found dead alongside a smashed barrel

²² Scott Veirs, Val Veirs, and Jason D. Wood, "Ship Noise Extends to Frequencies Used for Echolocation by Endangered Killer Whales," *PeerJ* 4 (February 2, 2016): e1657.

²³ Hendershot, *Paranoia, The Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films*, 77.

²⁴ Christopher W. Podeschi, "The Nature of Future Myths: Environmental Discourse in Science Fiction Film, 1950-1999," *Sociological Spectrum* 22, no. 3 (July 2002): 277.

²⁵ William M. Tsutsui, "Looking Straight at Them! Understanding the Big Bug Movies of the 1950s," *Environmental History* 12, no. 2 (April 2007): 237.

of sugar, with “enough formic acid in his body to kill twenty men”. The FBI sends one of its agents, Robert Graham (James Arness), to investigate the possibility of a multiple homicide, along with Doctors Harold and Pat Medford (Edmund Gwenn and Joan Weldon)—a father-daughter team of myrmecologists from the Department of Agriculture—to identify the animal footprint. Their tentative suspicions are confirmed when they encounter an eight-foot ant on a later examination of the original crime-scene, and Harold reveals his belief that a colony of mutated ants are responsible for the killings, the result of the first nuclear tests which took place in nearby Alamogordo. They discover the location of the ants’ nest and attempt to eradicate them through the use of cyanide bombs, but evidence suggests that two queen ants had already escaped to establish new colonies. The government, in an attempt to avert widespread panic, decides to keep the discovery a secret, but numerous public reports of bizarre aerial activity confirm that one colony has headed to Los Angeles, where they are discovered to be holding two young children captive in the storm drains beneath the city. The military infiltrates the drains to destroy the ants and save the children, but the end of the film leaves a question dangling—what about the other colony?

Like *The Beast*, *Them!* invites geopolitical interpretation above all else, with a focus on Cold War invasion anxiety and—again—nuclear concerns. Michael Rogin argues that the ants represent a wider American fear of communism, as “an aggressive collectivist society” that the government must destroy;²⁶ Bruce Kavin sees them as “a threat to the norm and our role in it”;²⁷ and Peter Biskind also asserts that the film aligns the ants with American perceptions of communists:

If the ants are like humans, which humans are they like? In 1954, when *Them!* was made, those humans that Americans regarded as antlike, which is to say, behaved like a mass,

²⁶ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 263–64.

²⁷ Bruce F. Kavin, *Horror and the Horror Film* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), 67.

loved war, and made slaves, where, of course, Communists, but the Yellow Hordes that had just swamped GIs with their human waves in Korea, and the Soviets, with their notorious slave-labour camps.²⁸

Tsutsui notes that 1950s “giant insect” films also invite Freudian and feminist readings, but concurs that the “oldest and most esteemed critical approach to movies like *Them!* is that they are all about nuclear fear, the widespread anxiety about the threat of atomic annihilation that . . . gnawed at the middle-class psyche through the glory days of the Pax Americana.”²⁹

In both *Them!* and *The Beast*, however, the natural world plays a significant role, and approaching them from this less-examined angle reveals their engagement with environmental as well as political fears. Both films align their “monsters” with inhospitable landscapes before moving them towards the city, where a clash between the (un)natural and urban environments ensues. The types of creature that feature in each film also highlight contemporary concerns about the natural world—in the case of *The Beast*, the prehistoric *Rhedosaurus* acts as a reminder that nature long existed without humanity, and is threatening to do so again; and in the case of *Them!*, the ants mirror very real contemporary fears about literal ant invasions. In both instances, they anticipate to a large extent the anxieties that *Silent Spring* would later bring to the forefront of the public imagination: the unintended consequences of tampering with nature, and the new scale of these consequences. As Andrew J. Huebner observes: “Filmmakers duly infused their pictures with . . . Cold War themes. Yet they also articulated a postwar shift in popular attitudes toward nature, [and] the growth of a nascent environmental movement”.³⁰

²⁸ Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing*, 132.

²⁹ Tsutsui, “Looking Straight at *Them!*,” 240.

³⁰ Andrew J. Huebner, “Lost in Space: Technology and Turbulence in Futuristic Cinema of the 1950s,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 40, no. 2 (2010): 6–26.

The Beast's opening focuses on the nuclear tests that awaken the *Rhedosaurus* in the Arctic, and shots of glaciers collapsing dramatically into the icy waters feature prominently. Not only does the footage resemble nothing so much as modern-day documentaries about global warming like James Balog's *Chasing Ice* (2012) or Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), but it identifies the uninhabited land as threatening and inhospitable. Shots of gleaming white, pristine snowscapes contrast starkly with the tiny, dark human figures that trek across the landscape, and set the two in glaring contrast to one another. The *Rhedosaurus* itself is strongly aligned with the landscape and forces of nature from the beginning; at first, the beast melds seamlessly with the landscape, invisible to the people nearby. Its cries mingle with the wind, and its form is almost entirely obscured by a blizzard. Around it, avalanches begin to thunder down slopes and glaciers crumble, killing Riche and almost killing Nesbitt himself. The natural world asserts itself as a powerful force from the very beginning of the film, and its prominence in the opening scenes asserts its centrality to the remainder of the text.

Them! opens in a similarly unwelcoming but otherwise quite different landscape—the New Mexico desert, a site of extreme heat rather than extreme cold—and repeatedly underscores the hostile nature of the place. Not only does the orphaned girl's presence act as a reminder of humanity's vulnerability in the setting, but other characters make a point of highlighting their discomfort: "It's pretty freakish in these parts", observes one police officer. As the search for the girl's parents begins, the vastness of the desert presents a significant obstacle to rescue-efforts: "If our two planes aren't enough to cover areas that the cars can't reach..." As with the *Rhedosaurus* in *The Beast*, the giant ants in *Them!* are aligned with the hostile landscape from the moment they appear. They take cover in sandstorms, much as the monster hides in Arctic blizzards, and their calls echo out of the noise of the storm. The desert's expansive nature is precisely how the ants

managed to escape detection up until this point, and the film makes it clear that this is not a place where people do—or should—feel at ease.

Both texts subsequently see the natural menace move from remote landscapes to threaten urban centres—New York in *The Beast*, and Los Angeles in *Them!*. These threats, too, come laden with natural imagery, and represent the infringement of urban spaces by a hostile environmental reaction to atomic testing. After leaving the Arctic, the *Rhedosaurus* travels south to New York in a way that ties the monster even further to nature; more specifically, to the potential for widespread disaster when nature is tampered with. “That complex systems are interdependent is an emerging, yet subordinate theme” in 1950s media, writes Christopher Justice,³¹ and it is through this type of ecocritical lens that *The Beast* rewards fresh examination. The route it takes is no accident, for it is carried down the American coastline by the Arctic current, mirroring the manner in which radioactive fallout travels via natural routes.³² Justice argues that *The Beast*, along with a number of other 1950s films, suggests that “an environmental occurrence in one location will impact another continents away”,³³ an image central to paranoia surrounding nuclear fallout, and evidence of an emerging of scale as an environmental concern within cinema of the period.

Aside from the monsters’ identification with the natural world, the specific *type* of creature featured in each film also gestures towards certain environmental anxieties of the 1950s; in the first case, the *Rhedosaurus* about triggering a return to a world without humans, represented by the aggressive landscape from which the titular beast emerges. Hendershot writes, “In popular publications of the late 1940s, the use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

³¹ Justice, “Cooling the Geopolitical,” 215.

³² Richard L. Miller, *The U.S. Atlas of Nuclear Fallout Vol. I: Total Fallout* (Texas: Two Sixty Press, 2001), 29.

³³ Justice, “Cooling the Geopolitical,” 215.

immediately raised questions regarding a future which could take two paths: a path to primeval devolution or a path to positivist evolution”.³⁴ *Godzilla* (1954) is obviously the most famous pop-culture representation of these concerns, but *The Beast* predates it by a year. Hendershot sees *The Beast* as the literalisation of the language of evolution used by scientists and journalists alike to describe the bomb’s effects; “For the first time in man’s long journey out of the dark cave in which he started, the bright sun awaits him. It will not take much now to send him scurrying back to the cave”, wrote Aaron Levenstein in 1946.³⁵ *The Beast*, Hendershot argues, “immediately raises the question on many people’s minds in the early fifties: will A-bomb tests bring about peace and progress or war and destruction?”³⁶ Rashna Richards concurs, observing:

In the postwar era, conflation of past and future anxieties was not uncommon. William L. Laurence’s account of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for instance, combines such anxieties by referring to the mushroom cloud as “a monstrous prehistoric creature”. This is because, while nuclear knowledge held out the potential for technological evolution, it also gave rise to fears of devolution through complete annihilation, something that sci-fi films portray time and time again.³⁷

Carson herself draws upon these fears in *Silent Spring*, warning that “genetic deterioration through man-made agents is the menace of our time, ‘the last and greatest danger to our civilization.’”³⁸ We see Cormac McCarthy engage deeply with these anxieties about past and present in *The Road*, and a similar fear is present in *The Beast*, reflected in the way in which the *Rhedosaurus* becomes not just a monster, but a reminder of the pre-human world that threatens to reassert itself in response to the damage wrought by the atomic bomb.

³⁴ Hendershot, *Paranoia, The Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films*, 75.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 77.

³⁷ Rashna Wadia Richards, *Cinematic Flashes: Cinephilia and Classical Hollywood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 186.

³⁸ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 208.

In the Arctic scenes at the beginning of the film, conversations carried on by the team of scientists cement the idea that this is a place pre-dating human influence: “The world’s been here for millions of years. Man’s been walking upright for a comparatively short time. Mentally, we’re still crawling”. Prior to the tests taking place, Nesbitt and his colleague Richie hint at the possibility that the quest for progress may result in the opposite: “You know, every time one of these things goes off I feel as if we were helping to write the first chapter of a new Genesis”, Richie remarks. “Let’s hope we don’t find ourselves writing the last chapter of the old one”, replies Nesbitt. These exchanges, we must not forget, take place in the hostile landscape discussed previously; this is not a place where humankind holds dominion, but someplace much older and more dangerous. The prehistoric origins of the titular beast come to stand not as evidence of its isolation, but rather as a reminder of its identification with a different kind of environment on Earth—one which time has not entirely subsumed. “We can, if we wish”, Carson would later warn, “reduce this threat to our genetic heritage, a possession that has come down to us through some two billion years of evolution and selection . . . a possession that is ours for the moment only, until we must pass it on to generations to come”.³⁹

The arthropod villains of *Them!* similarly reflect cultural anxieties of the time—though arguably even less obliquely. As already mentioned, critical attention has focused largely on its representation of Cold War concerns, reading the ants in light of both nuclear tensions and the perceived communist threat to the United States. Critics in general (and ecocritics in particular), however, have paid very little attention to the significance of using ants as the film’s antagonists. For ants were not just the villains of “big bug” films at the time; they were the villains of everyday

³⁹ Ibid., 216.

life—“the subject of the largest, longest, most costly eradication program in American history”.⁴⁰ Arriving in the US after World War I,⁴¹ the creature gained notoriety as a destroyer of crops and all-round pest, and considerable effort was devoted to combating it. “Probably no other agricultural program has been carried out on so large a scale as the dusting and spraying of millions of acres of land in southern United States to control the fire ant”, writes Carson in *Silent Spring*.⁴²

The choice of ants, as opposed to any other kind of creature, as the film’s antagonists should not be overlooked, for the so-called “Fire Ant Wars” were the subject of much public debate at the time of *Them!*’s release. The best-known type of fire ant (*Solenosis invicta*), a species hailing from South America, arrived in the United States through the port city of Mobile, Alabama between the two World Wars.⁴³ Mere decades afterwards, it had “become a serious pest” and was “spreading rapidly and causing great damage, inconvenience and alarm among the people”, according to one Federal Extension Service entomologist in 1952.⁴⁴ The postwar building boom likely facilitated their spread across the country; lots of new houses meant lots of new gardens, and the nurseries that supplied the stock for these did a brisk country-wide trade at the time, bringing a few new inhabitants along with them.⁴⁵ As Joshua Blu Bluhls describes, the species “brought a great deal of attention to itself” as it continued to flourish in the United States: “It ruined crops and its mounds appeared seemingly out of nowhere, rendering the use of tractors

⁴⁰ Joshua Blu Buhs, *The Fire Ant Wars: Nature, Science and Public Policy in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 40.

⁴¹ Walter R. Tschinkel, *The Fire Ants* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013), 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁴ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 79.

⁴⁵ Tschinkel, *The Fire Ants*, 42.

impossible. It crawled across schoolyards, across military bases, and across parks, stinging people and scarring farm hands. It worried livestock”.⁴⁶ This, however, was not particularly remarkable in itself, for agricultural pests were nothing new to farmers, and the campaign to eradicate the fire ant has retrospectively come to be seen as an overblown and ill-informed reaction from the U.S. government:

Most rural southerners agreed that fire ants had vicious stings and built bothersome mounds. Until the mid-fifties, however, fire ants were just another pest. [Their] transformation from being a minor pest to being a major predator epitomized agricultural institutions’ ability to create projects to suit their ambitions . . . The invention of the imported fire ant as a major threat to southern agriculture marshalled the efforts of local, state, and national farm organisations; county agricultural agents; state Extension Services; county agricultural committees; ARS bureaucrats; state and national politicians; chemical companies; and land-grant university scientists.

The precise reason for the scale of the reaction against the fire ants is debatable. “Some have argued”, writes Blu Bluhs, “that the chemical industry convinced the USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] that it needed to eradicate the pest, not out of a sense of service to the public, but because it stood to make a handsome profit”, although he himself favours the view that structural changes within the Department of Agriculture were the real cause.⁴⁷ Carson believed, as did many others, “that the [USDA] had fabricated these claims in order to justify a huge programme to eradicate the insects and increase its bureaucratic strength”.⁴⁸

Whatever the precise reason, however, popular media dedicated significant space to dramatic accounts of the insects’ spread. The campaign against the fire ants lent itself to the

⁴⁶ Buhs, *The Fire Ant Wars*, 2007, 46.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁸ Joshua Blu Buhs, “The Fire Ant Wars: Nature and Science in the Pesticide Controversies of the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Science and the American Century: Readings from “Isis,”* ed. Sally Gregory Kohlstedt and David Kaiser, 2013, 61.

discourse of the Cold War,⁴⁹ and newspapers and magazines played a large role in convincing the public of the need to dispose of this new menace to America.⁵⁰

A July 1957 article claimed that fire ants not only ate cabbage, eggplant, potatoes, okra, and ungerminated corn but also attacked newborn pigs, calves, muskrats, young birds and people. “The farmer with fire ants swarming over his property,” the *Shreveport Times* warned, “can tell hair-raising tales of fields sucked dry of life and newborn stock eaten alive”. Fire ants made “quick work of the succulent membranes,” the article continued, and the ant “gobbles at the tender stems beneath the surface and sucks the plant juice”. Children could not play outside, and housewives “cannot hang out the laundry without fear of the painful sting.”⁵¹

The USDA was similarly complicit in spreading these messages. As Carson describes, “The Agriculture Department sponsored a propaganda movie . . . in which horror scenes were built around the fire ant’s sting”.⁵² The film was *Fire Ant on Trial*, a half-hour information video, which the USDA Motion Picture Service describes as such: “Dramatic photomicrography and animation combine to tell the serious story of the imported fire ant. In their constant search for food and shelter, fire ants are shown as they interfere with farm machinery operations and construction crews, and menace workers in the fields and children at play”.⁵³ These ants did not just loom large on screen; they loomed large in the minds of the public as well.

A small number of critics have focused on the significance of the Fire Ant Wars to *Them!* and other “big bug” cinema of the 1950s, highlighting the centrality of ecological fears to horror of the era. William M. Tsutsui takes the most direct approach, arguing forcefully that “the giant

⁴⁹ Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 80.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 81.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Carson, *Silent Spring*, 164.

⁵³ United States Department of Agriculture, “Recent Motion Pictures of the U.S. Department of Agriculture,” *Agriculture Handbook*, no. 14 (Washington: USDA, 1961), 20, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011392512>.

insect films of the 1950s were, in fact, about... giant insects”.⁵⁴ He cites *The Saturday Review*’s appraisal of the film, which calls it “as persuasively realistic a horror story as one could possibly imagine”, a sentiment echoed by other publications like *The New York Times*, which called it “tense, absorbing and, surprisingly enough, somewhat convincing”. *Newsweek*, in turn, commented: “For many . . . devotees of science fiction, the great thing is not to make the fantastic seem superfantastic but to give it the strong illusion of reality. Judged by that standard, this is a right little fright of a picture”.⁵⁵ The status of mutated insects as wider cultural symbols, Tsutsui puts forward, is an overcomplicated reading of the situation; rather, they are simply the exaggerated forms of fears that existed quite explicitly in American society. He doesn’t go so far as to reject other cultural interpretations, but suggests that “concern with real-life insects on the loose was refracted, in Hollywood’s hands, through a cultural lens colored by the Cold War, nuclear proliferation, and ambivalent attitudes toward the promise of science and the trustworthiness of elite expertise”.⁵⁶ In other words, he sees these issues as—in the case of mutant insect films, at least—secondary to the more obvious worry about humankind’s ability to control the insect population.

Them! certainly invites comparison to the USDA’s campaign and its detractors; on the one hand, the heroes of the film are none other than the scientists and the military who wage war on the ants, but on the other it also raises significant doubt about the effectiveness of their actions. As already mentioned, the opening of the film very clearly pits humanity against nature as the police attempt to discover the truth behind the murders against the hostile backdrop of the desert,

⁵⁴ Tsutsui, “Looking Straight at Them!,” 246.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

suggesting “a need for human mastery over an inhospitable natural world”.⁵⁷ During one of the investigations, notes Joshua David Bellin, a radio broadcast subtly reinforces this message:

In Gramps Johnson’s gutted store, a radio broadcast, barely audible at first, fades in just in time to catch the following announcement: “Elsewhere, from Geneva, Switzerland, come heartening news of new strides in the field of medicine. Doctor Adolf Rensselaer, addressing members of the World Health Organization now convening in that city, reports that such diseases as malaria, cholera, and sleeping sickness have been entirely wiped out from many areas that formerly were in a state approximating permanent plague conditions”.⁵⁸

This message acts as a reminder of “humanity’s progress against vector-borne diseases—victories achieved, as ‘50s audiences were repeatedly assured, through the use of chemical agents”, and “subtly implies that violent natural forces massed against the American icons of family, home, and industry must—and can—by eradicated through the miracles of modern chemistry”.⁵⁹ Similarly, Dr Medford’s apocalyptic pronouncements would not have sounded out of place in real media at the time. “We may be witnesses to a biblical prophecy come true”, he announces. ““And there shall be destruction and darkness come over creation, and the beasts shall reign over the earth.””⁶⁰ In comparison with the following piece from *Today’s Health*, his declaration sounds almost restrained:

People are much concerned these days with the threat of nuclear warfare . . . yet there is another threat to survival that is almost as dreadful and much closer. The danger does not await the poised finger of an irresponsible dictator; it is not held in abeyance by diplomats around a conference table, nor by threat of retaliation . . . The enemy is already here—in the skies, in the fields, and waterways. It is dug into every square foot of our earth; it has invaded homes, schoolhouses, public buildings; it has poisoned food and water; it brings sickness and death by germ warfare to countless millions of people every year. . . . The enemy within—these walking, crawling, jumping, flying pests—destroy more crops than drought and floods. They destroy more buildings than fire. They are responsible for many

⁵⁷ Joshua David Bellin, “Us or Them!: *Silent Spring* and The ‘Big Bug’ Films of the 1950s,” *Extrapolation* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 145–68. 150.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 150-51.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Gordon Douglas, *Them!* (Warner Home Video, 2013).

of the most dreaded diseases of man and his domestic animals . . . Some of them eat or attack everything man owns or produces—including man himself.⁶¹

Although the protagonists of *Them!* may be battling giant ants, the language of their own war is not far removed from the language of real life. Nor is it too far-removed from the language of Gothic invasion and destruction used by Carson in *Silent Spring*; her “totalizing images of a world without refuge from toxic penetration”.⁶²

Although ‘50s horror has been widely held up as the genre’s “conservative” period,⁶³ a critique of—or, at the very least, an uncertainty about—the government-mandated response to the insect threat is evident in *Them!*. Critics such as Andrew Tudor have suggested that horror of the period, preoccupied as it is with invasion and destruction, promotes compliance with the state and its associates:

In this xenophobic universe we can do nothing but rely on the state, in the form of military, scientific and governmental elites. Only they have the recourse to the technical knowledge and coercive resources necessary for our defense. In this respect, then, fifties SF/horror movies teach us not so much “to stop worrying and love the bomb” as “to keep worrying and love the state”, an admonition which accords perfectly with the nuclear conscious cold war culture of the period.⁶⁴

Jancovich, however, reads a different position into *Them!*. Rather than seeing the film as endorsing conformism and the blind following of orders, he views it as taking “a very complex position in relation to human authority”: “It presents American society as a social order made up of a variety of different types of experts, all of whom have specialist knowledge in their own area and must

⁶¹ Quoted in Tsutsui, “Looking Straight at ‘Them!’,” 247.

⁶² Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Four Decades of Environmental Crisis in the U.S.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 42.

⁶³ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 59.

⁶⁴ Andrew Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991), 220.

learn to work with one another in order to achieve success”.⁶⁵ Bellin similarly warns against an overly simplistic reading of the film, arguing that despite the military and scientific establishments’ roles in combatting the threat to society, the audience is repeatedly reminded that their quest for mastery over the earth is what brought the mutations about in the first place.⁶⁶ It is atomic testing that created the creatures. It is the chemical bombing of their nests that drives the survivors to the drains of Los Angeles. And even the final military intervention does not guarantee safety for humankind; two queens escaped from the first nest, but only one new colony has been destroyed. To read the film as straightforward, pro-establishment propaganda is to ignore multiple facets of its plot. “In such moments”, notes Bellin, “the film flirts with the possibility of turning, self-reflexively, to examine the monsters of its own creation”.⁶⁷ This evidence of the emerging voice of a new kind of environmental concern demonstrates that *Them!*, like *The Beast*, rewards ecocritical investigation, and suggests that a strong ecohorror narrative exists in texts not usually considered as part of the subgenre.

“We Are Entering the Age of the Insect”: Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* and *The Shrinking Man*

Both *The Beast* and *Them!* have arguably had their ecological facets simplified by critics, but others—especially those of a fictional rather than filmic nature—see theirs entirely overlooked, despite their entanglement with the “nascent environmentalism” that Skal identifies in the period. This is certainly the case for Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954), and to a slightly lesser extent his *The Shrinking Man* (1956), a work perhaps better known as its 1957 film adaptation, *The Incredible*

⁶⁵ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 59.

⁶⁶ Bellin, “Us or Them!: *Silent Spring* and The ‘Big Bug’ Films of the 1950s,” 154.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

Shrinking Man. Both texts weave mid-century environmental concerns through their plots; *I Am Legend* in its setting, and *The Shrinking Man* through its plot devices. The last section of this chapter will examine these texts in this light, arguing that they demonstrate a clear alignment with emerging environmentalist sensibilities, and reward Clark's retrospective approach to fiction of the Anthropocene.

Many credit Matheson with "[bringing] together the elements which would distinguish modern horror literature and differentiate it from the horror writing of earlier periods".⁶⁸ "What do I remember about [Matheson's stories]?" asks Stephen King:

I remember that Matheson would never give ground. When you thought it *had* to be over, that your nerves couldn't stand any more, *that* was when Matheson turned on the afterburners and went into overdrive . . . The baroque intonations of Lovecraft, the perfervid prose of the pulps, the sexual innuendoes were all absent. You were faced with so much pure drive that only re-readings showed Matheson's wit, cleverness, and control.⁶⁹

His work followed in the footsteps of figures like Ray Bradbury, who helped to bring horror into the modern era with a focus on everyday life. Matheson's protagonists tend to be quintessential "everymen", products of "suburban domesticity and corporate employment",⁷⁰ and their stories generally lay bare the kinds of anxieties associated with that type of lifestyle. Matheson himself identified the "leitmotif" of all his work as "[the] individual isolated in a threatening world, attempting to survive",⁷¹ and of his early work says, "During this period, my stories were deeply imbued with a sense of anxiety, of fear of the unknown, of a world too complicated which

⁶⁸ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 130.

⁶⁹ King, "Afterword," in Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 2010, 161.

⁷⁰ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 130.

⁷¹ Richard Matheson, *Richard Matheson: Collected Stories: Vol. 1* (Colorado Springs: Gauntlet Press, 2003), 7.

expected too much of individual males . . . ‘We are beset by a host of dangers’ says my male protagonist in ‘The Wedding’. I believe it”.⁷²

While environmental anxieties were not the *primary* concern of Matheson’s work during the postwar years, there are significant ecological facets contained within the “host of dangers” experienced by his protagonists, and at least some of his writing—*I Am Legend* and *The Shrinking Man* in particular—merits examination in such a light. Both novels engage with the same environmentalist undercurrents evident in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!*, and arguably do so in a manner far more nuanced than either film, yet are rarely, if ever, considered in such a context.

I Am Legend is particularly overlooked as an example of early ecohorror, despite its engagement with themes found throughout early examples of the subgenre. It was first published in 1954, and follows the day-to-day activities of Robert Neville, a generic American suburb-dweller, as he fights to survive in a world where humanity has been wiped out by a disease—and not just any disease; one which turns people into blood-sucking vampires.⁷³ He spends his days collecting supplies and staking the vampires while they sleep, and his nights shut up in his house drinking, lamenting his enforced celibacy, and attempting to ignore the seductive vampire women who try to lure him outside.

The text is usually viewed, and rightly so, as a work of intense white, male, suburban anxiety. Neville is a man bound by his lifestyle and routine—and even in a post-apocalyptic world can’t escape household chores, trips to department stores, and family concerns. It just happens that in his case, the chores are boarding up the doors and windows, the trips to the shops are to

⁷² Ibid., 9.

⁷³ What he considers to be vampires, at least. They resemble the modern zombie as much as the traditional vampire in many respects, especially with regard to the manner in which their ‘disease’ spreads.

hunt for wooden stakes and garlic, and he worries about his family because they are all dead. Sticking to a schedule and performing acts such as making to-do lists, shopping for essentials at Sears, filling his car with gasoline, and repairing his house is the only way to keep himself going and to give his life something resembling a purpose—“his obsessive adherence to routine is”, according to Murphy, “a means of ensuring survival, both mental and physical”.⁷⁴ “Neville”, asserts Jancovich, “is a man of preconditioned habit who unquestioningly accepts received, commonsense notions of normality, and cannot accept or even imagine alternatives”.⁷⁵

His life is a “horrific parody” of what it used to be, defined by the endless repetition of mundane routines,⁷⁶ and much has been made of the gender anxiety inherent to the novel. Murphy describes it as “as much a tale of 1950s suburban masculinity in crisis as it is the sum of its genre parts”;⁷⁷ Khader acknowledges, though in the context of a more specific reading of queer masculinity in the text, that Neville is undergoing a “masculinity crisis”;⁷⁸ and Jancovich points out that his “task of making stakes to kill vampires is reminiscent of the workshop carpentry which became a popular pastime for 1950s middle-class males who were concerned to prove the masculine skills absent from their office jobs”.⁷⁹ Neville himself is a generic example of American manhood, “a tall man, thirty-six, born of English-German stock, his features undistinguished”,⁸⁰ and descriptions of the women in his family help to cement their previous life as a perfect example

⁷⁴ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 31.

⁷⁵ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 149.

⁷⁶ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁸ Jamil Khader, “Will the Real Robert Neville Please, Come Out? Vampirism, the Ethics of Queer Monstrosity, and Capitalism in Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend*,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 4 (2013): 534.

⁷⁹ Jancovich, *Rational Fears*, 139.

⁸⁰ Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (London: Gollancz, 2010), 2.

of 1950s heteronormativity. In one flashback, we learn that something is definitely wrong with his wife, Virginia, when he walks into the kitchen to find her sitting at the table: “Usually she was at the stove turning eggs or French toast or pancakes, making coffee . . . On the stove coffee was percolating, but nothing else was cooking”⁸¹. His daughter, Kathy, also fits into the perfect, all-American image with her “small blonde head” and pink cheeks.⁸² This suburban background and its accompanying concerns about masculinity feature prominently in *I Am Legend*, and dominate current critical reception of the text. There are other facets to the novel, however, that mark it as a more environmentally clued-in work than has previously been recognised.

To begin with, the setting has all the hallmarks of what we would now recognise as a typical eco-nightmare. Matheson reveals almost all of the background to this in a flashback to a conversation between Neville and his wife, who has since succumbed to the disease:

“What is it?”

. . .

“A mosquito,” she said with a grimace. He moved over and, after a moment, crushed it between his two palms.

“Mosquitoes,” she said. “Flies, sand fleas”.

“We are entering the age of the insect,” he said.

“It’s not good,” she said. “They carry diseases. We ought to put a net around Kathy’s bed too . . . I don’t think that spray works, either”

. . .

“My God, and it’s supposed to be one of the best ones on the market”.

. . .

“I hope to hell we’re not breeding a race of superbugs,” he said. “You remember that strain of giant grasshoppers they found in Colorado?”

“Yes”.

“Maybe the insects are . . . What’s the word? Mutating”.

⁸¹ Ibid., 41.

⁸² Ibid.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, it means they’re ... changing. Suddenly. Jumping over dozens of small evolutionary steps, maybe developing along lines they might not have followed at all if it weren’t for ...

“Silence.

“The bombings?” she said.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Well, they’re causing the dust storms. They’re probably causing a lot of things”. She sighed wearily and shook her head.

“And they say we won the war,” she said.

“Nobody won it”

“The mosquitoes won it”.

He smiled a little. “I guess they did,” he said.⁸³

This conversation situates Neville’s current situation within a wider frame of anxieties, one which extends beyond the personal paranoia that critics usually focus on. They mention three key environmental threats in the conversation: insects, bombings, and dust storms, each of which this section will touch on as a factor linking *I Am Legend* to the neglected lineage of ecohorror.

Like *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* and *Them!*, *I Am Legend* draws clear influence from the cultural impact of the atomic bomb; Matheson’s obsession with anxiety could hardly ignore the major fear of his time. Unlike the two films, however, his engagement with the problem steps beyond the 1950s discourse of science as saviour, and seems almost to pre-empt later attitudes to interfering with nature. Neville and his wife’s explicit reference to “the bombings” as a likely cause of the disease outbreak situates the novel squarely within the realm of post-nuclear fiction, alongside the likes of Pat Frank’s *Alas, Babylon* (1959). And in that context, much as Carson does the following decade, Matheson casts doubt on our ability to contain the results of our experimentation; in *I Am Legend* we can see him already questioning the idea that humanity is in control of nature, and suggesting that that kind of view is arrogant and egotistic.

At the highest level, the novel casts the unconstrained pursuit of science for the sake of “progress” into severe doubt. Indeed, all three film adaptations of *I Am Legend*—*The Last Man on*

⁸³ Ibid., 43–4.

Earth (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007)—re-cast Neville as a scientist or researcher by trade. In the original text, however, Neville must master the basics without professional expertise. He cannot at first begin to understand how the vampirism disease propagates—he does not know if it is a virus or a bacteria, or, indeed, something else entirely. That which he does know is based only on guesswork, lore, and on observations of the vampires’ behaviour. Although he knows that garlic repels them, that they don’t like mirrors, that they can’t spend time in the sunlight, and that a stake through the heart will kill them, he is unable to compile an adequate explanation for *why* that is so. Alone, confused, and depressed, he eventually finds purpose for himself in researching the germ using abandoned libraries and scientific equipment for information, believing that understanding it is key to fixing his situation and potentially restoring order to the world.

This “research”, although it provides him with meaning and drive in an otherwise bleak existence, is cast by Matheson in a morally dubious light. In the pursuit of knowledge, Neville must set aside any conscientious scruples if he hopes to find a solution.⁸⁴ One particularly violent investigation sees him throw a vampire woman out into the sunlight to observe her reaction:

Usually he felt a twinge when he realised that, but for some affliction he didn’t understand, these people were the same as he. But now an experimental fervor had seized him and he could think of nothing else . . . His throat moved. It wouldn’t last, the feeling of callous brutality. He bit his lips as he watched her. All right, she’s suffering, he argued with himself, but she’s one of them and she’d kill me gladly if she got the chance. You’ve got to look at it that way, it’s the only way.⁸⁵

Neville convinces himself of the validity of his experiments by othering the vampires, and distancing them from himself and his own humanity. His attitude calls to mind an oft-quoted

⁸⁴ It is also, as many others have explored, an opportunity for him to set his latent misogyny and repressed sexuality free. See the sections on Matheson in Murphy’s *Suburban Gothic* or Jancovich’s *Rational Fears* for further exploration of this topic.

⁸⁵ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 28.

(though likely apocryphal) remark from Enrico Fermi, physicist and one of the “fathers” of the atomic bomb: “Don’t bother me with your conscientious scruples. After all, the thing’s superb physics”.⁸⁶ It is only towards the end of the novel that Neville begins to look upon his work in terms of ethical or moral implications. After encountering an apparently unafflicted woman named Ruth, he explains the results of his experimentation to her and, much to his surprise, she recoils:

“It’s horrible,” she said.

He looked at her in surprise. Horrible? Wasn’t that odd? He hadn’t thought that for years. For him the word “horror” had become obsolete. A surfeiting of terror soon made terror a cliché.

To Robert Neville the situation merely existed as natural fact. It had no adjectives . . . It was strange, he thought, to find himself vaguely on the defensive for what yesterday was accepted necessity. In the years that had passed he had never once considered the possibility that he was wrong.⁸⁷

The novel ends, however, as lots of Matheson’s work tends to, with a twist; it turns out that some of the infected have managed to find a way to live with their disease, and are beginning to build up a society of their own. From their perspective, Neville is the monster—the one who comes and murders them in their sleep and performs awful experiments on members of their race—and they capture and condemn him to death:

Abruptly that realization joined with what he saw on their faces—awe, fear, shrinking horror—and he knew that they were afraid of him. To them he was some terrible scourge they have never seen, a scourge even worse than the disease they had come to live with. He was an invisible specter who had left for evidence of his existence the bloodless bodies of their loved ones.⁸⁸

Contained within the ending there is a deep skepticism of science for science’s sake. This is the fallout from Neville’s own experiments, the unexpected side-effect of the pursuit of knowledge

⁸⁶ Gerard DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 69.

⁸⁷ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 134.

⁸⁸ Matheson, 159.

without moral appraisal. He thought he was on the road to “real accomplishment”,⁸⁹ pioneering a “new approach” to vampirism,⁹⁰ and attempting to find “a rational answer to the problem”,⁹¹ but has instead becomes a “scourge” upon the world.

This ending is usually read in terms of the upending of social norms and the huge transformation that occurred in American society after the war—and again, rightly so. The vampires are a break with suburban conformity, and suggest the rise of a nascent counterculture. They have women among their leaders, and generally represent a shift that Neville, “the last of the old race”, completely stuck in the old ways, cannot cope with. His “race”, that of the conventional, middle-class white man, has become obsolete. Considered in light of earlier references to the bombings, however, it also reads as a warning against attempting to solve scientific disasters with further scientific intervention, and an assertion that humankind’s perception of its ability to exert control is much greater than the reality. Matheson seems to pre-empt Carson’s call for a shift in how we relate to the world around us, and emphasises the need to take a symbiotic rather than controlling approach to the world. This is not only a consistent trope of ecohorror more generally, but also what Greg Garrard identifies as a “more sophisticated [instance] of the Gothic”, which “[questions] our vaunted ‘humanity’ as well as the ‘nature’ to which it is conventionally opposed”.⁹² The vampires inherit the earth because they learn to live within its system, while Neville perishes in his attempt to conquer it and return it to a more ‘natural’ state.

⁸⁹ Matheson, 48.

⁹⁰ Matheson, 104.

⁹¹ Matheson, 67.

⁹² Greg Garrard, “Environment,” in William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, eds., *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 218.

A reframing of our sense of control is not the only link that Matheson has to later environmentalist attitudes—Neville’s reference to ineffectual bug-spray and the potential “race of superbugs” that they might be breeding also hints at an awareness of impending ecological crises. Although pesticides appear as merely a passing mention in *I Am Legend*, they play a much larger role in another of Matheson’s books from the same era: *The Shrinking Man* (1956). Published in 1956, it follows Scott Carey, another ‘50s American everyman, as he shrinks in stature by one-seventh of an inch each day. The novel opens with Carey being exposed to a cloud of radioactive spray while out at sea:

First he thought it was a tidal wave. Then he saw that the sky and ocean were visible through it and it was a curtain of spray rushing at the boat.

He’d been sunbathing on top of the cabin. It was just coincidence that he pushed up on his elbow and saw it coming.

...

The spray didn’t look menacing, but for some reason he wanted to avoid it. He ran around the cabin, wincing at the hot planks underfoot. It would be a race.

Which he lost. One moment he was in sunlight. The next he was being soaked by the warm, glittering spray.

Then it was past. He stood there watching it sweep across the water, sun-glowing drops of it covering him. Suddenly he twitched and looked down. There was a curious tingling on his skin. He grabbed for a towel and dried himself. It was not so much pain as a pleasant stinging.⁹³

The scene explicitly recalls a similar one that took place off Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1954, when a crew of Japanese fishermen accidentally sailed through a cloud of radiation from nuclear testing, and many of them subsequently fell sick or died. The incident was a widely publicised one, which caused public anxiety about atomic testing to grow. “Attitudes began changing after BRAVO, an American fusion test on March 1, 1954”, writes Spencer R. Weart.

⁹³ Richard Matheson, *The Shrinking Man* (London: Gollancz, 2002), 1.

“The explosion was more than twice as powerful as expected, and the fallout went far beyond what had been predicted. Gray dust drifted downwind onto a Japanese fishing vessel, the *Lucky Dragon*, coating the crew. When they got back to Japan two weeks later they were showing the classic signs of radiation sickness”.⁹⁴

In *The Shrinking Man*, though, it is not just the radiation that affects Carey; it turns out that its interaction with pesticides that he has accidentally ingested is to blame for his condition:

Tell us something, [the doctors] said. Were you ever exposed to any kind of germ spray? . . . Have you, for instance, ever been accidentally sprayed with a great deal of insecticide? No remembrance at first; just a fluttering amorphous terror. Then a sudden recollection . . . He had come out of the house, heading for the store . . . A city truck had turned in suddenly, spraying the trees. The spray misted over him, burning on his skin, stinging his eyes, blinding him momentarily. He yelled at the driver.

Could this possibly be the cause of all this?

No not that . . . Until, in a second, it came. He remembered the afternoon on the boat, the mist washing over him, the acid sting on his body.

A spray impregnated with radiation.⁹⁵

The radiation alone is not the problem, nor is the pesticide. Instead, it is the unexpected combination of the two in just the right doses that results in Scott’s bizarre condition. This once again ties in with what Carson advocates a few years down the line, and Clark decades after; an understanding of the environment as a system in delicate balance, and an acknowledgement that our tampering with it can have repercussions on an unknowable scale.

I Am Legend relies on a similar interaction between disparate environmental factors, reinforcing the idea that, even if Matheson was not consciously promoting an ecologically motivated message, anxieties about nature thrown out of balance by human interference are an

⁹⁴ Spencer R. Weart, *The Rise of Nuclear Fear* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 98.

⁹⁵ Matheson, *The Shrinking Man*, 108.

ongoing concern in his novels of the time. For Scott, radiation and pesticides turn out to be the cause of his disease, but the vampirism that Neville must deal with has a different origin. In *I Am Legend*, the bombings result in frequent dust storms, which allow the spores of the disease-causing bacillus to spread rapidly across the globe and infect innumerable people.⁹⁶ “The freed spores would be blown about by the storms”, realises Neville during his studies. “They could lodge in minute skin abrasions caused by the scaling dust”.⁹⁷

These storms are another facet of the novel that rewards an ecocritical approach, for they resemble nothing so much as the storms that ravaged the U.S. prairies during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s; “one of the greatest, and entirely preventable, disasters of the twentieth century”.⁹⁸ The “Dust Bowl” is in itself an enigmatic term, for it “refers to a phenomenon that can be considered discretely as an event, era, or region”,⁹⁹ but the term refers broadly to the consequences of the intermittent droughts that occurred in an area spanning western Kansas to eastern Nevada from 1930 until 1939.¹⁰⁰ “During the worst year, 1934”, explains Richardson, “drought afflicted about 75 percent of the country, and 27 states were severely affected. Many farmers and their families were forced to flee west, a migration memorably recounted in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*”.¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ Infectious spores like these are also famously found in Jack Finney's 1956 novel, *The Bodysnatchers*.

⁹⁷ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 77.

⁹⁸ Stephen C. Behrendt, “One Man's Dust Bowl: Recounting 1936 with Don Hartwell of Inavale, Nebraska,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2015): 229.

⁹⁹ Jessica Porter, “What Was the Dust Bowl? Assessing Contemporary Popular Knowledge,” *Population & Environment* 35, no. 4 (June 2014): 392.

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Richardson, “The Land Blew Away,” *American History* 50, no. 4 (October 2015): 60.

¹⁰¹ Richardson, 60.

Although the storms are linked to explosions and war in the text, the descriptions of sustained, recurrent, disease-spreading clouds match descriptions from the Dust Bowl era very closely. During this time, over-farming of the land, coupled with a period of extreme drought, led to severe wind-erosion of topsoil—which caused the famous storms, and led to the failure of crops and the deaths of livestock. As Donald Worster explains, it was human interference with the land that was to blame:

[The] “dirty thirties,” as they were called, were primarily the work of man, not nature. Admittedly, nature had something to do with this disaster too. Without winds the soil would have stayed put, no matter how bare it was. Without drought, farmers would have had strong, healthy crops capable of checking the wind. But natural factors did not make the storms—they merely made them possible. The storms were mainly the result of stripping the landscape of its natural vegetation to such an extent that there was no defense against the dry winds, no sod to hold the sandy or powdery dirt.¹⁰²

Just as in *I Am Legend*, the Dust Bowl storms also lead to widespread disease due to the inhalation of large quantities of fine dust over a long period of time. “These respiratory problems “plagued young and old throughout the region, so much so that a condition called ‘dust pneumonia’ entered the Great Plains medical lexicon”.¹⁰³ One woman described her experience of the storms as follows:

All we could do about it was just sit in our dusty chairs, gaze at each other through the fog that filled the room and watch that fog settle . . . covering everything—including ourselves—in a thick, brownish gray blanket . . . The door and windows were all shut tightly, yet those tiny particles seemed to seep through the very walls. It got into cupboards and clothes closets . . . our hair was gray and stiff and we ground dirt between our teeth.¹⁰⁴

Another man, Donald Hartwell, chronicled his own life during the Dust Bowl, writing of the constant infiltration of his home by the dirt:

¹⁰² Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁰³ Behrendt, “One Man’s Dust Bowl,” 237.

¹⁰⁴ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 17.

What a mess! The same old business of scrubbing floors in all nine rooms, washing all the woodwork and windows, washing the bedding, curtains, and towels, taking all the rugs and sofa pillows out to beat the dust out of them, cleaning closets and cupboards, dusting all the books and furniture, washing the mirrors and every dish and cooking utensil. (August 1, 1936)¹⁰⁵

Similar dust-storms are a key feature in Matheson's vision of the end of humankind, and he describes them in detail during the novel:

There had been another dust storm during the night. High, spinning winds had scoured the house with grit, driven it through the cracks, sifted it through plaster pores, and left a hair-thin layer of dust across all the furniture surfaces. Over their bed the dust filtered like fine powder, settling in their hair and on their eyelids and under their nails, clogging their pores.

...

He went back in the bathroom shaking his head . . . The whole top of the washbasin was grimy with dust. The damn stuff was everywhere. He'd finally been compelled to erect a tent over Kathy's bed to keep the dust from her face. He'd nailed one edge of a shelter half to the wall next to her bed and let it slope over the bed, the other edge held up by two poles lashed to the side of the bed. He didn't get a good shave because there was grit in the shaving soap and he didn't have time for a second lathering.¹⁰⁶

The Dust Bowl, at the time Matheson was writing, was the greatest man-made ecological disaster to have struck the country during its history, and it came about for reasons very similar to those that Carson would soon warn against. Worster describes it very succinctly: "The Dust Bowl . . . was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth".¹⁰⁷ Coupled with its questioning of scientific progress as an end in itself, and self-conscious references to the ineffectiveness of pesticides, the Dust Bowl-like setting takes on a significant role in the text.¹⁰⁸ In its quite

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Behrendt, "One Man's Dust Bowl," 236.

¹⁰⁶ Matheson, *I Am Legend*, 41.

¹⁰⁷ Worster, *Dust Bowl*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Dust Bowl-like settings have remained a popular background for ecologically aware cinema to this day, as in films such as Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014). See the conclusion of this thesis for more detail.

conspicuous links to this disaster, Matheson again situates the background of *I Am Legend* within an environmental context, and provides yet another reason to link it with the emergence of ecohorror motifs in popular culture. Although it pre-dates *Silent Spring* by almost a decade, it tackles a number of anxieties that would fuel Carson's work and the environmentalist movement that rose out of it.

Conclusion

Although the texts discussed in this chapter are not necessarily promoting an environmental agenda consciously, as later, post-Carson texts frequently do, they do merit greater acknowledgement within the lineage of modern ecohorror—especially, in the case of *I Am Legend*, as a very early example of these themes being brought into play in quite a mature way. If ecohorror is to be considered as a horror of the Anthropocene, then the alignment of 1950s horror's turn towards the mundane with its turn towards themes of planetary influence creates a useful and significant point from which to trace its emergence. *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *Them!*, *I Am Legend*, and *The Shrinking Man* all stand as noteworthy works of modern horror, and a common concern with humankind's hubris in the face of environmental retaliation links them all. Despite this, they feature rarely—if at all—in the current critical discourse on ecohorror, which tends to limit itself to texts produced in the wake of *Silent Spring*. The next chapter will examine the narratives of the 1960s and '70s that would come to define ecohorror in the public consciousness, and how *Silent Spring* undeniably had a large part to play in this. It is worth remembering, however, that Carson was not writing into a void, and that postwar culture had provided her with an

audience already receptive to her message and concerned about the fate of the world in which they lived.¹⁰⁹

3. “The People Had Done it Themselves”: The 1960s and 1970s

Introduction: Septic Society

The history of septic tanks in the United States acts, in many ways, as a microcosm of the country’s wider environmental crisis, mirroring on a smaller scale the way in which ecological anxieties reached a fever-pitch in the 1970s. As environmental historian Adam Rome has detailed in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside* (2001), the spread of suburban living post-World War II brought with it a host of new environmental issues—of which the septic tank provides perhaps the most viscerally evocative example. In the fifteen years after 1945, septic tank usage increased by over three hundred percent, from 4.5 million homes in 1945 to nearly 14 million in 1960.¹ Naturally, this brought with it a new series of challenges; the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) soon

¹⁰⁹ Allitt, *A Climate of Crisis*, 29.

¹ Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 88.

discovered that up to a third of suburban septic systems installed after the war would fail within three years. Suddenly homeowners were faced with an unexpected but impossible-to-ignore problem, one that the public at large did not expect to have to confront. “Highly educated, sophisticated people have confessed that they did not know their home had a septic tank until it overflowed”, one public-health official wrote.² In the 1950s, this was seen as a personal issue for homeowners and property developers—the failure of the tanks largely threatened the value of their homes and investments. In the 1960s, however, scientists began to realise that the scale of the effluent waste escaping meant that groundwater in many places was becoming polluted, and that the problem was more than a property issue. Rather, it threatened the health of the American people at large. Then, by the mid-1970s, the full scale of the damage became apparent:

In addition to threats to human well-being, investigators reported disruptive effects on the nonhuman world. Salamanders and frogs seemed to be especially vulnerable . . . [A] handful of studies pointed to septic-tank effluent as a cause of declines in suburban reptile and amphibian populations. The effluent from backyard waste-disposal systems also affected fish. In some places, septic-tank failures cause eutrophication of nearby ponds and lakes. Fed by the nutrients in urine and excrement, blue-green algae soon covered the water, and the algal bloom choked off aquatic life below. The septic tank truly was an environmental problem.³

Humankind’s waste, it transpired, was not just affecting the wellbeing of its own species, but of the ecosystem as a whole.

A similar narrative applies to the rise of environmental issues more generally. What began as a campaign to preserve areas of wilderness for recreational enjoyment soon became something much larger as the planet’s metaphorical septic tank overflowed. The publication of Rachel Carson’s popular science account of the effects of pollution and pesticide use, *Silent Spring*, in 1962 pushed environmental concerns to the forefront of popular consciousness. The visions of human-

² Ibid., 93.

³ Ibid., 114.

induced natural destruction detailed within its pages struck a chord with the reading public, testament to Carson's ability to translate scientific research into readable, digestible prose for non-expert consumption, and despite the pesticide industry launching a vehement PR campaign in response to the book, its message got through clearly to its intended audience. After its release in September, the book sold over 600,000 copies in the autumn of 1962, and so great was its influence that "many environmental laws and regulations enacted in the decade after . . . were aimed at addressing problems discussed in the book".⁴ More than any other popular text, *Silent Spring* brought the "balance of nature" and warnings about the consequences of tampering with it into the spotlight. Its influence on the horror genre in subsequent decades is undeniable, as many of the popular (and less popular) genre entries prey on precisely the anxieties that *Silent Spring* conjures: the effects of pesticides and other pollutants, industry indifference to environmental consequence, and the inevitable destruction caused by humankind's hubris.

The book's arrival could not have been timelier, as environmental disasters proliferated across the United States in the years following its publication, bolstering Carson's assertions and providing ample inspiration for the ecohorror narratives that would follow it. Americans in the 1960s and 1970s saw rivers in Cleveland so polluted that they caught fire, fish deaths in Lake Erie, smog engulfing Los Angeles, nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island, and an oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel that rendered many California beaches catastrophically polluted.⁵ These facts—the publication of *Silent Spring* and the series of ecological disasters that followed—provide the main context for discussion of depictions of environmental anxieties during these decades.

⁴ J. Michael Martinez, *American Environmentalism: Philosophy, History, and Public Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 181.

⁵ Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 137; Will Kaufman, *American Culture in the 1970s*, ed. Martin Halliwell (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 176.

By the end of the 1960s, radiation was no longer the top scientific concern, at least according to the movies. Sparked by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), films of the 1970s show an overriding concern for ecological disaster. There were a multitude of environment-based science fiction, eco-horror, and revenge-of-nature films in the early 1970s including *Frogs* (1972) and *Soylent Green* (1973).⁶

Carter Soles asserts that, "*Silent Spring* is one of the most influential apocalyptic ecocritical texts in American history".⁷ Buell notes that *Silent Spring* "helped spark a tsunami of catastrophic rhetoric in environmental science and literature",⁸ as well as "Carson's influence" in popularizing depictions of "ecological poisoning and breakdown".⁹ It is from such depictions that the texts we most readily recognise as ecohorror began to emerge.

Take, for example, John Cardos's 1977 film, *Kingdom of the Spiders*. A relatively late entry to the decade's ecohorror *oeuvre*, it exemplifies the formula that tends to define the narratives that we call "ecohorror".¹⁰ When animals in rural America begin to die, seemingly as a result of massive doses of venom, local veterinarian Robert "Rack" Hansen (William Shatner) is at a loss to explain what could be causing their deaths. With the help of arachnologist Diane Ashley (Tiffany Bolling), he soon locates the source of the problem: a giant "spider hill" on a local farmer's land. Ashley postulates that man-made pesticides are killing off the spiders' natural food-sources and driving them to band together and attack larger animals in order to survive. The local authorities undertake

⁶ David A. Kirby, "Cinematic Science," in *Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology*, ed. Massimiano Bucchi and Brian Trench (London: Routledge, 2008), 103.

⁷ Carter Soles, "And No Birds Sing': Discourses of Environmental Apocalypse in *The Birds* and *Night of the Living Dead*," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 526.

⁸ Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Four Decades of Environmental Crisis in the U.S.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), x.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁰ Refer back to Bernice M. Murphy's taxonomy of ecohorror cited in the introduction for a full outline of these particular structures.

a number of efforts—futile, of course—to eradicate the spiders, including burning down their mound and trying to douse the countryside with further pesticides. These attempts only draw the arachnids down upon the townspeople faster, however, and their attacks intensify. Hansen and Ashley survive the brunt of the offense, but the film ends on a warning note: they emerge from a besieged building, having survived a night plagued by spiders, only to find the whole town completely shrouded in webs. There is no news of the attacks on the radio—the rest of America, it seems, is being kept in the dark about these events.

During these decades, a huge number of species were given a similar revenge-of-nature treatment —worms (*Squirm*, 1976), rabbits (*Night of the Lepus*, 1972), frogs (*Frogs!*, 1972), bears (*Grizzly*, 1976), and ants (*Phase IV*, 1974), among others—and, as detailed in the introduction to this thesis, ecohorror films tend to be evaluated with regard to how they participate in or interact with this formula. This perspective, however, is a limiting one, operating on a distinctly human scale, and always in danger of positioning nature as “enemy” and “other”. For the remainder of this chapter, I will examine how we might turn more nuanced contemporary ecocritical gazes backwards to gain fresh perspectives on environmental representation of this era.

The Birds, which begins this discussion, is usually mentioned as a founding ecohorror text, though critics often point out that the lack of identifiable motivation for the birds’ attacks causes uncertainty about its ecological engagement. However, looking at the choice of birds as antagonists in both the film and Daphne Du Maurier’s original story (a notably British rather than American text) as well as its links with nuclear anxiety and apocalyptic dread demonstrates close parallels with—and developments of—themes that began to emerge in the 1950s ecohorror texts discussed in the previous chapter. *Jaws*, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, is frequently dismissed as ecohorror, but a closer look at the original novel’s treatment of the economy as a kind of ecosystem demonstrates an allegory at work that is much more subtle than a simple revenge-of-

nature narrative. Finally, *The Stepford Wives* may seem an unusual choice of text to include, as it is almost never discussed in terms of ecological content despite a significant subplot featuring suspected contamination of the titular town's water supply. However, much as *Jaws* shows parallels between economic and environmental exploitation, so *Stepford Wives* draws parallels between male oppression of women and humans' attempts to dominate the environment.

“Never Satisfied, Never Still”: *The Birds*

A consideration of Hitchcock's *The Birds* illustrates the benefits of extending the boundaries of “ecohorror” as a concept beyond the simple revenge-of-nature narrative. Although frequently evoked as a text central to the evolution of ecohorror, the question of *why* the birds are attacking never receives a concrete answer. The very multiplicity of interpretations that the birds have been through—as symbols of sexual tension and cold war anxiety, among others—suggest that the film's explicit links to the environmental movement of the time are tenuous at best. Yet the film both establishes a formula for many ecohorror texts to come and reflects a number of concerns common to the 1950s ecohorror that preceded it, and as such acts as a bridging text between the two periods.

The Birds follows young socialite Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) and her pursuit of an intriguing lawyer, Mitch Brenner (Rod Taylor), to his weekend home in Bodega Bay. The pair meet in a bird shop in San Francisco, where Brenner is trying to buy a pair of lovebirds for his sister, and catches Daniels's attention by pretending to mistake her for a salesperson. Unable to get the birds in this particular shop, he leaves, and Daniels decides to purchase a pair elsewhere and make the long drive to his house to deliver them. Brenner spots her leaving the house in a boat, and rushes around the bay in his car in an attempt to intercept her on the other side. After being attacked by a lone seagull, she accepts his invitation to dinner.

As she gets to know Mitch, his family, and his neighbours, a series of increasingly intense bird-attacks baffle the community—a gull kills itself by flying into a door, seagulls attack a birthday party, sparrows break into the Brenners' house through the chimney. After Daniels discovers the lifeless body of a farmer nearby, she flees to safety before deciding to collect Brenner's sister from school before any other attacks occur. When she gets there, however, a large group of crows is waiting in the playground and they attack as the pupils and teacher attempt to evacuate.

Seeking refuge in a restaurant in the town, Daniels hears of even more attacks by the birds from other patrons, and witnesses a number of other horrifying incidents as they continue to act aggressively. Mitch arrives to rescue her from yet another attack, and at this point the other inhabitants of Bodega Bay begin to accuse her of causing the attacks, as they coincided with her arrival. The pair flee the restaurant, returning to the Brenner house after discovering the body of another friend at her home.

The family begins to reinforce the house, boarding up the windows against attacks. That night, wave after wave of birds pound upon the outside of the house. During a quiet period, Daniels notices a sound coming from above, and creeps upstairs only to discover that the birds have broken through the roof of one of the bedrooms. They attack her violently, and after Brenner rescues her he decides that they must risk driving to the hospital in San Francisco if she is to survive. On the radio, newscasters report that the attacks are no longer isolated to Bodega Bay, and are beginning to spread. As the car leaves the house at dawn, it is watched by innumerable, menacing birds perched over all the landscape.

The Birds is based on Daphne Du Maurier's 1952 short story of the same title, and although Hitchcock's adaptation differs wildly from the original, looking at Du Maurier's story in conjunction with Hitchcock's film allows us to see a number of ways in which both texts are significant in terms of contemporary ecological representation. Most importantly, they continue

to interweave environmental and nuclear anxiety in ways similar to 1950s popular culture, while also creating a formula for much of the more explicitly “green” ecohorror that follows. Although Du Maurier’s text takes place within a distinctly British postwar context, establishing the central role that anxiety about nature plays within the story provides an important base for an ecocritical reading of Hitchcock’s film.

Du Maurier’s “The Birds” centres on a family living in Cornwall in the south of England, shortly after the end of World War II. They live a rural existence within a small farming community, where the protagonist, Nat Hocken, works for a farm owner to support his family. When the weather turns unexpectedly and unprecedentedly cold one spring, Nat notices the birds acting oddly, gathering and flocking in unusually large numbers. The same night, he hears a tapping on the window and opens it to find a bird that attacks his hand. Later he hears even more pecking at the glass, and a large number of small birds break into his children’s room.

The next morning, his neighbours dismiss his stories as exaggeration, saying that the birds must just be hungry as a result of the cold weather, but when Nat brings a sack of dead birds from his house to the beach to dispose of them, he sees a huge cloud of gulls hovering over the sea. Upon returning home, his wife informs him that similar reports of bird attacks all over the country are being announced on the radio. Nat begins to board up the house as a precaution, but his neighbours dismiss the grievousness of his concerns, preferring instead to bring out their guns with the intent of shooting the birds from the sky. They invite Nat to join them, but he instead hurries home with his daughter, and narrowly escapes attack from a flock of gulls as he reaches his cottage. On the radio, the BBC declares a state of emergency across the country, and announces that it will not be broadcasting again until the next morning. Nat and his family spend the night in the kitchen for safety, and overhead hear planes attempting to cull the birds only to come crashing

down out of the sky under the weight of their attacks. In the morning, the attacks stop, but no broadcast is heard on the BBC.

Having figured out that the birds' attacks seem to come and go with the tides, Nat ventures out in the morning to seek supplies from neighbouring farms. The gulls have returned to the sea, and the land-based birds sit menacingly but quietly on the fences and in the hedgerows. Finding all of his neighbours dead, and his house surrounded by piles of dead birds' bodies, Nat prepares the house for another onslaught when the tide turns once again. When night falls, he smokes the last cigarette in his packet, throws the packet into the fire, and watches it burn.

Although a great deal of the anxiety within the story pertains to a specifically British experience of postwar life—one which is beyond the remit of this thesis—the similarities to many American horror films of the 1950s are worth noting, some of which seep through into Hitchcock's film as well. As argued in the previous chapter, 1950s horror evinces an emerging awareness of environmental concerns, frequently filtered through representations of irradiated monsters. While "The Birds" features no such mutants, but instead large numbers of normal-sized birds, it nonetheless exhibits a similar concern with the impact of human activity upon the natural world.

The importance of the postwar context to Du Maurier's fiction needs little teasing out: her protagonist is a veteran of the war whose homeland comes under aerial attack. As in many other horror stories of the period, the birds' destruction parallels that of recent warfare:

He felt the thud of bodies, heard the fluttering of wings, but they were not yet defeated, for again and again they returned to the assault, jabbing his hands, his head, the little stabbing beaks sharp as a pointed fork. The blanket became a weapon of defence; he wound it about his head, and then in greater darkness beat at the birds with his bare hands.¹¹

¹¹ Daphne Du Maurier, *The Birds and Other Stories* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1990), 4.

Phrases like “thud of bodies”, “not yet defeated”, “returned to the assault”, and “weapon of defence” evoke battles more familiar to readers than those with a flock of birds. The creatures bring down aircraft from the skies, cause mass destruction to buildings, and hover over the bay “like a white cloud” (19)—suggestive of nothing more than of the cloud following nuclear detonation. Their behaviour resonates so much with fears about warfare that one of the main suggestions that the townspeople have for their behaviour is that “the Russians have done it” (19). Just as the mass destruction of the ants in *Them!* or the Rhedosaurus in *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* mirrored the impact of atomic weaponry, so do the natural attacks in “The Birds”.

Indeed, fears about nuclear warfare and the scale of its impact on the environment do not just permeate du Maurier’s short story, but seep into Hitchcock’s film as well—the former is more immediate in its parallels between the birds and the recent destruction of the war, but the latter approaches the subject in a more oblique fashion, concerned as it is with directionlessness and indecision followed by unexpected aerial attacks. “Hitchcock’s *The Birds* was released only five months after the Cuban missile crisis”, writes John Bruns, “and there is no reason to suggest that the idea of death falling from the sky haunted Hitchcock’s audience any less than it did du Maurier’s readers”.¹² Bruns contrasts the characters’ lack of certainty and purpose in the film with the precisely directed nature of the birds’ attacks, and links this with cultural anxieties about the futility of trying to survive in a world where atomic annihilation could put an end to daily life at any moment. Others have also pointed to the “directionless present” as an important context for the film.¹³ Although the story and the film are separated by a decade, both rely on a similar set of fears to appeal to their audiences.

¹² John Bruns, “‘The Proper Geography’: Hitchcock’s Adaptation of Du Maurier’s ‘The Birds,’” *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 58.

¹³ Bruns, 63.

Where du Maurier's "The Birds", in particular, parallels other 1950s ecohorror is in its linking of this destruction to wider interference with patterns of nature, hinting at an emerging fear of disrupting the environment on a global scale rather than a local one. Minette Walters observes that "on a surface level", the birds are "provoked" by the "harsh winter", but "it is man's complacency about his own superiority that leads to the huge number of deaths".¹⁴ The story opens with a sudden shift: "On December the third the wind changed overnight and it was winter".¹⁵ This is followed by lengthy descriptions of birds wheeling and swooping in the air above the farmlands. "In spring", the reader is told, "the birds flew inland, purposeful, intent; they knew where they were bound, the rhythm and ritual of their lives brooked no delay".¹⁶ They are creatures reliant on pattern and instinct to structure their lives, propelled by "driving urge[s]" and "follow[ing] a pattern of their own".¹⁷ Although they are not presented as a threat at this point, they are also not a peaceful, pastoral type of nature; Hocken sees them as always "seeking some sort of liberation, never satisfied, never still".¹⁸ While they do not interfere with humanity, keeping instead to "their own flock and their own territory",¹⁹ they exist as more than a backdrop to human activity.

The danger, when it does emerge, comes as a disruption to these natural cycles. Although never explicitly positioned as an environmentalist warning, du Maurier hints at a variety of human-

¹⁴ Mary Ellen Bellanca, "The Monstrosity of Predation in Daphne Du Maurier's 'The Birds,'" *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 39.

¹⁵ Daphne Du Maurier, *The Birds and Other Stories*, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

induced ecological changes that could be responsible for the birds' behaviour. Listening to the radio, Hocken and his family learn that "in London the sky was so dense at ten o'clock in the morning that it seemed as if the city was covered by a vast black cloud".²⁰ While literally describing the birds, it also evokes another pressing environmental issue of the time—smog. In 1952, the same year as the publication of "The Birds", Londoners experienced the "Great Smog", an event which claimed thousands of lives in a few short days. From December 5th to December 9th, the city was enveloped in a thick, black cloud of airborne pollutants which collected as the result of a period of windless weather. Although this specific event followed the publication of "The Birds", the problem was an ongoing one, with the "Great Smog" merely standing as a particularly dramatic example of the issue, and visions of a "vast black cloud" would undoubtedly have held significance to contemporary audiences in this respect. Similar fears of environmental contamination are invoked when Hocken muses on ways that the authorities might combat the birds' attacks: "Where the trouble's worst they'll have to risk more lives, if they use gas. All the livestock, too, and the soil—all contaminated".²¹

Du Maurier's evocation of contemporary environmental concerns echoes Matheson's depictions of ecological disruption in *I Am Legend*, published two years after "The Birds". Where Matheson evokes the Dust Bowl of the 1930s in his depiction of the aftermath of human warfare, du Maurier draws upon more local events as a touchstone for understanding the scale of the destruction. It is important to emphasise that neither author appears to have an explicitly "green" agenda, as these motifs reveal themselves only upon close reading of the texts, but the fact that both authors—as well as other writers and filmmakers of the time—begin to intertwine images of

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 25.

nuclear destruction with images of environmental degradation suggests that this association was beginning to become important to the contemporary mindset.

It is in Hitchcock's taking and reshaping of du Maurier's original text that *The Birds* becomes emblematic of the shift between 1950s ecohorror and that of the 1960s and 1970s. While he claims to have borrowed nothing from the original story but the title and the birds themselves, there are more threads connecting the two texts than this snappy statement suggests. "According to Hunter [screenwriter for *The Birds*]", write Raubichek and Srebnick, "Hitchcock decided to take from the story only the motif of a menacing natural force beyond human control".²² A closer look, however, reveals that despite the extensive changes to many aspects of the story, "more was kept than has been recognised".²³ This pertains mainly to specific scenes in the film, in which Hitchcock replicates bird attacks and methods of fortification,²⁴ but highlights a crucial point: the film draws on the story in more ways than critics have generally acknowledged, raising the possibility that du Maurier's environmental representation also has greater influence on Hitchcock's as well.

Indeed, despite many assertions that the birds' intentions in Hitchcock's film are unknowable, there exists one quite explicit explanation as to why they are acting as they do: a trailer for the film, starring Hitchcock himself. In the piece, he refers to *The Birds* as a "lecture" on birds "and their age-long relationship with man".²⁵ As he wryly explains the ways in which humans

²² Walter Raubichek and Walter Srebnick, *Scripting Hitchcock: Psycho, The Birds, and Marnie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 38.

²³ Raubichek and Srebnick, 38–9.

²⁴ A full account of these can be found in *Scripting Hitchcock*, 38–45.

²⁵ "The Birds Official Teaser Trailer #1 - Alfred Hitchcock Movie (1963) HD - YouTube," accessed January 3, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICxR7dlavwg>.

have made birds part of their lives—from feathered hats to chicken dinners—it becomes increasingly clear that this is really a list of atrocities that we have committed against their species:

Thousands of years ago, man was satisfied merely to steal an egg from a nest and use it for food. Now he has perfected this process by imprisoning each hen in a separate cage and by scientifically manipulating the lights so that she doesn't fall into the rut of the old twenty-four-hour day. Thus he can induce the bird to reach fantastic heights of egg production.²⁶

"Surely the birds appreciate all we've done for them", he concludes, approaching a small canary in a cage. Poking a finger through the bars in the cage as a greeting, he gets bitten by the bird—"Oh! Now why would he do that?"²⁷ At this point, the trailer segues to footage from the film itself, with birds beating on the roof of the building and Tippi Hedren bursting through the door shouting, "They're coming! They're coming!" Although this revenge is not laid out so starkly in the film, Hitchcock's promotion of it certainly suggests that the birds' motives are not as unfathomable as they may seem, linking the text with later ecohorror narratives.

"The Town is Dying": Ecosystems and Economy in Peter Benchley's *Jaws*

Moving from the air to the ocean, the sea inhabits an important space within American culture. "From sea to shining sea" the country stretches in "America the Beautiful", and the oceans have long been sites of both great beauty and immense terror. The mythic figure of the frontier individualist, concerned with reasserting his masculinity and conquering the wilderness, not only longs to live off the land, but to traverse the oceans as well. The most famous example of this is, of course, Captain Ahab of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), whose quest to conquer the white whale embodies the single-minded desire at the heart of America's frontier identity to confront

²⁶ "The Birds Official Teaser Trailer."

²⁷ "The Birds Official Teaser Trailer."

and overcome the unknown wilderness. Within an American context, the watery expanse serves as both “the last frontier”²⁸ for exploration, but also the first, for as Nathaniel Philbrick writes, “America’s first frontier was not the west, it was the sea”.²⁹

Since the idea of the vacation emerged during the nineteenth century, however, another vision of the sea has risen to prominence, one which paints it as relaxing, peaceful, and above all, natural. Much as the sublime terror of the landscape, as documented by writers such as Wordsworth and Thoreau, gave way to a more nostalgic view of the frontier lifestyle, so too has the sea become a domesticated space:

As seaside tourists started to explore the waves . . . a new freedom of movement and body developed. Life at the seaside was natural and unpolluted in several ways, bathers now recognized; it was far removed from the fumes and refuse of the cities and industries and it was pure: clean water and fresh, invigorating air, but it was also a refuge in which to enjoy a true life—simple and natural.³⁰

When we take a beach holiday, we seek to escape day-to-day life, work, social obligation, and, of course, responsibility. The weekend, week, or even month spent by the sea is free of cares, worries, and stress—or so we hope—and the sea becomes a beautiful backdrop to our beautiful lives.

Peter Benchley’s *Jaws* (1974), however, problematises the fantasy of the seaside retreat, and promotes an approach to the natural world that takes its cue from contemporary environmentalist ideals. Placing emphasis on the importance of ecological balance through its treatment of male relationships, wealthy holidaymakers, and the economy of seaside villages, it also stresses that nature exists neither to be conquered by humanity nor to be its peaceful retreat; instead, Benchley’s

²⁸ Shin Yamashiro, *American Sea Literature: Seascapes, Beach Narratives, and Underwater Explorations* (New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2014), 9.

²⁹ Nathaniel Philbrick, *Sea of Glory: America’s Voyage of Discovery, The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (New York: Penguin, 2004), xvi.

³⁰ Orvar Löfgren, *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 118.

view of the sea is as a reflection of terrestrial tensions and disruptions, and *vice versa*. Rachel Carson perhaps put it most clearly in *The Edge of the Sea* (1955):

The shore is an ancient world, for as long as there has been an earth and sea there has been this place of the meeting of land and water. Yet it is a world that keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life. Each time that I enter it, I gain some new awareness of its beauty and its deeper meanings, sensing that intricate fabric of life by which one creature is linked with another, and each with its surroundings.³¹

From an ecocritical perspective, the “intricate fabric of life”—an approach to the natural world Carson further promotes in *Silent Spring*, and which was central to environmental movements in the 1970s—informs the relationship between *Jaws*’s characters, plot, and setting, giving the text significance as a work of ecohorror beyond the simple fact that “a shark did it”.

The narrative of *Jaws* follows the disruption of the small island community of Amity by a series of shark attacks, with considerable attention placed on the outward-rippling effects of small systemic upsets. Martin Brody, Amity’s chief of police, attempts to close down the beaches in the wake of the first attack, but the town officials—corrupt Mayor Larry Vaughan, in particular—insist that he attempt to hush up the danger instead. As a small seaside resort, Amity depends entirely on its “summer people”, wealthy holidaymakers from New York, for its economic longevity; if tourism is disrupted, most of the town’s businesses will fail, and its year-round residents will spend the quiet, non-summer months on welfare. With this in mind, Brody—who is himself a lifelong islander, and a central part of the community—enlists the help of Matt Hooper, a wealthy marine biologist from a family of summer people, in an attempt to understand the cause of the attacks, and to avert any more before they destroy the holiday trade. After another beachgoer narrowly escapes death, however, Brody closes the beaches and hires professional shark-hunter Quint to kill the creature. The three men manage to track down the shark off the

³¹ Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 2.

coast of Amity and, after a number of unsuccessful hunts, succeed in destroying it. But not before it kills both Hooper and Quint in the process. The novel's final scene sees Brody alone in the water, clutching a cushion from their sunken ship to keep himself tentatively afloat, watching Quint's lifeless body suspended in the sea: "Brody watched until his lungs ached for air. He raised his head, cleared his eyes, and sighted in the distance the black point of the water tower. Then he began to kick towards shore".³² Although he has technically triumphed over the creature, he must still escape the sea itself before he can feel in any way secure.

This ending may come as a surprise to anyone whose familiarity with *Jaws* is based on Steven Spielberg's 1975 film adaptation, which puts a decidedly optimistic spin on the narrative. For one, Hooper survives, and the final scene of the film shows the two men laughing and joking as they swim towards the shore—a significant departure from Benchley's sombre closing. Other decisions also imbue the film with a different tone to the novel. Perhaps of most significance after Hooper's death is the transformation of Brody from native islander to displaced New York cop. Where one of the central tensions in the novel comes from the relationship between Brody and his wife, Ellen, an ex-summer person who increasingly feels alienated from both the native islanders and her previous upper-class lifestyle, the film instead depicts their married life as free of conflict, and Ellen as a cardboard-cut-out homemaker. Her affair with Hooper and Brody's growing jealousy are both erased, and Brody and Hooper become amicable partners instead. While it is not the aim of this analysis to evaluate the artistic merit of these changes, it is important to note their implications for critical interpretations of the novel versus the film.

For although the novel spent forty-four weeks on *The New York Times* bestsellers list, most of the critical attention that *Jaws* has received to date has focused on Spielberg's treatment of it,

³² Peter Benchley, *Jaws* (London: Pan, 2012), 330.

and on the film's status as popular culture icon. Far outstripping the original text's popularity, *Jaws*-the-film grossed over four hundred and seventy million dollars, making it the second-highest grossing film ever at the time of its release. The terror inspired by its villain, not to mention the iconic graphic-design and movie score, helped to demonise sharks in the minds of moviegoers worldwide. In this respect alone the film is culpable in environmental terms—it sparked attacks on sharks and was at least partly responsible for characterising them as a dangerous enemy. Benchley has repeatedly expressed his regret over this, and devoted significant effort to the promotion and conservation of sharks in the years after *Jaws* was released.³³ Even before we arrive at the environmental issues encoded in the film or the novel, then, we can see that environmental concerns are nonetheless an issue for *Jaws* at the highest level.

Of the film's marketing strategy, Miller has written that it “mirrors the character of its animal antagonist”: “The concept of the blockbuster film is to ‘eat’ its audience before they know what is happening. Both *Jaws*-the-film and *Jaws*-the-shark take on the character of this all-consuming impulse”.³⁴ Such an “all-consuming impulse” extends to critical interpretation of the text, as it is not just the film adaptation, but also the question of what the shark “means” that has tended to take precedence over any other interpretation. As Frederic Jameson points out, “critics from Gore Vidal and *Pravda* all the way to Stephen Heath have tended to emphasise the problem of the shark itself and what it ‘represents’”.³⁵ It has been seen as “the young man's sexual passion,

³³ David Dowling, “How the Creator of *Jaws* Became the Shark's Greatest Defender,” *Narratively*, 15 August, 2014, <https://narratively.com/how-the-creator-of-jaws-became-the-sharks-greatest-defender/>.

³⁴ Stephen Paul Miller, *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 93.

³⁵ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1, no. 1 (1979): 142.

a greatly enlarged, marauding penis”,³⁶ a response to the Watergate scandal,³⁷ and many other sublimated societal anxieties, as drawn together by Michael Fuchs:

Admittedly, *Jaws* invites interpretations from various perspectives. Its more than suggestive poster design and the iconography of the first kill seem to be asking for feminist readings, Quint’s story about the *U.S.S. Independent* connects the shark tale to World War II and thus—by extension—also the Vietnam War, turning it into an ideal cast study for scholars with a historicist bent, and Amity’s unwillingness to close down the beaches in view of the—ignored—shark presence in order not to lose money seems to be tailor-made for Marxist interpretations”.³⁸

While these many interpretations may primarily signal their authors’ interests rather than uncovering any fundamental “truths” about the shark, Jameson astutely observes that “their very multiplicity suggests that the vocation of the symbol—the killer shark—lies less in any single message or meaning than in its very capacity to absorb and organize all of these quite distinct anxieties together”. The shark as symbol, he says, is better understood as a vehicle for anxiety than as expressive of a particular anxiety. As such, this analysis focuses less on the shark itself as environmental allegory, and more on Benchley’s use of ecology and ecosystems to underpin the plot of *Jaws*—for the novel repeatedly suggests that the shark’s attacks are caused by a system thrown out of balance, which mirrors the immense impact that small changes have on the economy of Amity in the wake of the incidents. Although the shark itself may not explicitly be taking revenge for humankind’s transgressions against nature, as is common in other ecohorror texts of the period, *Jaws* repeatedly highlights the importance of balance within a system, and demonstrates the disaster that results from disrupting that balance.

³⁶ Peter Biskind, “Jaws: Between the Teeth,” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 9 (December 1975): 1.

³⁷ Stephen Heath, “Jaws, Ideology, and Film Theory,” in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 510.

³⁸ Michael Fuchs, “‘They Are a Fact of Life out Here’: The Ecocritical Subtexts of Three Early-Twenty-First Century Aussie Animal Horror Movies,” in *Animal Horror Cinema*, ed. Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hallén (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 41.

Environmentalists in the 1960s and 1970s rallied behind the concept of a balanced ecosystem, and it played a large part in their ideal views of how humanity would approach the natural world—as a system that it is very much a part of. In *Silent Spring*, Carson wrote that:

The balance of nature is not the same today as in Pleistocene times, but it is still there: a complex, precise and highly integrated system of relationships between living things which cannot safely be ignored any more than the law of gravity can be defied with impunity by a man perched on the edge of a cliff.³⁹

While hers may be the most-cited voice of the era, she was far from the only advocate of nature's balance. Popular perception of Earth as a delicate ecosystem grew throughout the 1970s. One placard at the first Earth Day in 1970 depicts the planet with a speech-bubble reading "Help!!", emphasising its existence as a unified being rather than a range of disparate geographies. In 1972 the crew of Apollo 17 photographed the planet from tens of thousands of miles away, and one of the photos assumed iconic status within the environmentalist movement, capturing as it did the fragile nature of the Earth and the unity of all its inhabitants.⁴⁰ The 1970s also saw the emergence of two other significant theories supporting environmental balance: James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis and Arne Naess's conception of deep ecology. The former, outlined in Lovelock's 1974 book, *Gaia*, proposes that the planet is essentially a living organism—"The entire surface of the Earth including life is a self-regulating entity and this is what I mean by Gaia".⁴¹ The latter, outlined by Norwegian philosopher Naess in a 1973 essay, "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement", argues for an approach to nature that goes beyond simply fighting for "the

³⁹ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 215.

⁴⁰ Robert Brulle, *Agency, Democracy and Nature: The U.S. Environmental Movement from a Crucial Theory Perspective* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 187.

⁴¹ James Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.

health and affluence of people in the developed countries”,⁴² and focuses instead on a more complete rejection “of the human-in-environment image in favour of *the relational, total-field image*”, seeing all organisms as “knots in the biospherical net or field of intrinsic relations”.⁴³ Both influential in their own right, they—coupled with Carson and her advocates—demonstrate a deep concern with the natural world as a balanced system in 1970s discourse.

It is within this context that *Jaws* made its way to American bestseller lists in 1974, and although the book and the film have been the subject of several eco-centric readings, none have focused on their parallels with this particular strand of environmental thought. Pat Brereton, in *Hollywood Utopia* (2005), builds on the class-based analysis offered by Jameson and others to find ecological meaning in the relationship between Brody, Quint, and Hooper, as depicted in the film:

Derived from Melville’s *Moby Dick*, the deep story in *Jaws* is not in the familiar, mythic story of the hero ‘revitalising the civilized world by slaying the leviathan, but in the relationship among the male characters’ . . . Such relationship conflicts serve as a potent allegory of opposing methods and philosophies for dealing with nature and its aberrations.⁴⁴

He sees the interaction between the three “heroes”⁴⁵ as illustrative of the film’s core concerns. Hooper, the biologist and intellectual, “loves and respects sharks as ‘miracles of evolution’ and because of his family wealth can supply the latest technology to catch the shark which, predictably, proves to be of little use”.⁴⁶ Quint “truly hates sharks” and “represents a conventional rogue

⁴² Arne Naess, “The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary,” in *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, ed. Alan Dregson and Yuichi Inoue (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995), 3.

⁴³ Naess, 3.

⁴⁴ Pat Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 62.

⁴⁵ Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” 142.

⁴⁶ Brereton, *Hollywood Utopia*, 63.

hunter who nonetheless remains exploitative of nature”.⁴⁷ Meanwhile Brody, in between both these men, “has to learn from the (pre-industrial) archetypical male hunter Quint and the ‘weedy’ scientist Hooper”.⁴⁸

Brereton’s analysis focuses primarily on the film, however, which made significant edits to the novel’s storyline, all but erasing the class tension that fuels the plot of the latter. Jameson succinctly lays this out, explaining that:

[The] novel involves an undisguised expression of class conflict in the tension between the island cop and the high-society oceanographer, who used to summer in Easthampton and ends up sleeping with Brody’s wife: Hooper is indeed a much more important figure in the novel than in the film, while by the same token the novel assigns Quint a very minor role in comparison to his crucial presence in the film. Yet the most dramatic surprise the novel holds in store for viewers of the film will evidently be the discovery that in the book Hooper dies . . . [The] social overtones of the novel’s resolution—the triumph of the islander and the yankee over the decadent playboy challenger—are surely unmistakable, as is the systematic elimination and suppression of all such class overtones from the film itself’. (142–43)

Jameson identifies the most notable feature of Spielberg’s *Jaws* adaptation: the erasure of the central dynamic of the original text. It is true that in Benchley’s novel, as in Spielberg’s film, each of the men belongs to a distinct social class, and comes to stand as a representative of a particular way of life, but the novel’s ending prioritises a motif that runs throughout the novel and is far less prominent in the film: the dangers of upsetting the balance of nature.

If the relationship between the three men illustrates different approaches to the environment, then the backdrop to their exploits illuminates the implications of their fates even further. It is not just the men who have a relationship to the environment, it is also the town of Amity itself. Although the narrative of scandal and corrupt local officials has frequently been read in light of wider government subterfuge, the relationship between Amity’s economy and the shark

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

attacks is also of considerable environmental significance. The attacks themselves, though never given explicit cause, are repeatedly linked to environmental disruption. The shark is not positioned as a vengeful enemy, but rather a cog in the ecological machine. It is driven purely by instinct, and acts according to its place within the system: “That shark isn’t evil”, Hooper adamantly explains. “It’s not a murderer. It’s just obeying its own instincts”.⁴⁹ The narrative repeatedly underscores this during descriptions of the attacks, emphasising that the creature is “impelled to attack”⁵⁰, and has its movement “dictated by countless millions of years of instinctive continuity”.⁵¹ It does not plan its violence against members of the community of Amity: “The fish did not hear the sound, but rather registered the sharp and jerky impulses emitted by the kicks . . . They were signals . . . and the fish locked on them, homing”.⁵² Although Quint later ascribes greater sentience to the shark, for the most part its actions are more characteristic of a programmed machine than an agential being. “The patterns of his life are so beyond his control”, Hooper goes on to posit, “that damage to one small mechanism could cause him to disorient and behave strangely”.⁵³ Rather than acting on emotion or desire, the creature simply functions as part of a wider system.

Consequently, the shark’s altered behaviour becomes linked to a wider disruption of the system within which it operates. “It’s just that it’s damn funny that we’ve got a shark around here when the water’s still this cold”, muses Meadows, the local journalist.⁵⁴ Later, Hooper insists that it can all be explained by “the ecological balance”: “When something tips too far one way or the

⁴⁹ Benchley, *Jaws*, 100.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

other, peculiar things happen”.⁵⁵ Hooper also explicitly divorces the attacks from the realm of ‘ordinary’ natural disaster: “Christ, I’d rather have a hurricane. Or even an earthquake. At least after they happen, they’re over and done with. You can look around and see what’s been done and what has to be done. They’re events, something you can handle. They have beginnings and ends”.⁵⁶ Although the precise cause of the shark’s altered behaviour is never identified, repeated mentions of ecological upset certainly suggest that environmental change is a potential culprit. Hooper, naturally, is the source of most of these anecdotes:

A few summers ago, for example, a completely inexplicable phenomenon took place off the shore of parts of Connecticut and Rhode Island. The whole coastline was suddenly inundated with menhaden – fishermen call them bunker. Huge schools. Millions of fish. They coated the water like an oil slick . . . Then suddenly it stopped . . . I spent three weeks down there trying to figure out what was going on. I still don’t know.⁵⁷

Perhaps most significantly, though, Brody notes an explicitly anthropogenic event towards the end of the book, right before a shark hunt: “Driving to the dock, Brody had heard on the radio that the pollution in New York City had reached crisis stage—something about an air inversion. People were falling sick and of those who were sick already, or very old, some were dying”.⁵⁸ The shark may be killing people off the coast of Amity, but it is not the only culprit involved in human death, and may in fact be driven by forces outside of its control.

Crucially, the town of Amity itself also depends on patterns beyond its control for survival. Just as the cycles of the seasons bring sharks to warmer waters, so they bring tourists to Amity, and the balance of its existence is entirely dependent on the continuation of these cycles:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 258.

It was the beginning of the summer season, and Brody knew that on the success or failure of those twelve brief weeks rested the fortunes of Amity for a whole year. A rich season meant prosperity enough to carry the town through the lean winter. The winter population of Amity was about 1,000; in a good summer the population jumped to nearly 10,000. And those 9,000 summer visitors kept the 1,000 permanent residents alive for the whole year.⁵⁹

Again and again the narrative reminds the reader that the town exists in a precarious state; Hooper's observations about the shark's ecosystem could apply just as aptly to Brody's seaside town: "Brody knew that one bad summer would nearly double the relief rolls [for Amity's year-round population] . . . And two or three bad summers in a row . . . could create a cycle that could wreck the town".⁶⁰ Though the shark may be the town's enemy, their existences parallel one another in a way that emphasises the importance of interconnected systems, just as the contemporary environmental movement did.

Benchley also frequently uses language that characterises Amity as a living organism, dependent on ecological balance to survive and, indeed, thrive. "The town survives on its summer people", says Brody. "Call it parasitic, if you will, but that's the way it is. The host animal comes every summer, and Amity feeds on it furiously, pulling every bit of sustenance it can before the host leaves again after Labor Day".⁶¹ And when publicity around the attacks begins to harm the economy, Brody describes the town as a dying creature: "Amity was showing all the signs of imminent death";⁶² "The town is dying".⁶³ Just as the shark feeds on those who venture into the sea, so Amity feeds on the outsiders who venture within its boundaries, and begins to sicken and suffer when the cycles upon which it depends are altered.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁶¹ Ibid., 228.

⁶² Ibid., 104.

⁶³ Ibid., 187.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the only group in the text who do not appear much concerned with the maintenance of a stable ecosystem—environmental or economic—are exactly those who bear the greatest responsibility for it: the “summer people” from New York. Theirs are lives of material pleasure and comfort, and they seemingly give little thought to anything that exists outside of their own sphere. Of them, Benchley writes that:

They uttered none of the platitudes of peace or pollution, of justice or revolt . . . And they had been, were being, educated, at schools that provided every discipline, including . . . ecological hypotheses . . . Intellectually, they knew a great deal. Practically, they chose to know almost nothing . . . Nothing touched them . . . not the fact that parts of the Missouri river were so foul that the water sometimes caught fire spontaneously . . . or revelations that hot dogs contained insect filth and hexachlorophine caused brain damage.⁶⁴

Again and again the text emphasises the unintended/unconsidered consequences of one group’s actions upon another; as the summer people give little thought to how their activities influence Amity’s economy, so humankind as a whole gives little thought to its environmental impact. Economy and ecosystem are closely connected throughout the text—a fact that has perhaps been overlooked due to an overemphasis on the ambiguity of *Jaws*’s “revenge of nature” motifs. Crucially, the shark is not taking an active decision to wreak vengeance on the humans who have wronged him, but rather this horror is the inevitable result of a careless, unthinking relationship with the natural world.

Home-Sick: The Stepford Wives

Unlike *Jaws*, Ira Levin’s 1971 novel, *The Stepford Wives*, is certainly not the first text to spring to mind when 1970s ecohorror is mentioned. Although it features neither rampaging fauna nor vengeful flora, Ira Levin’s novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) weaves the landscape and its despoliation

⁶⁴ Ibid., 52–53.

carefully into its horrific treatment of gender relations. In drawing on environmental concerns prominent in media discourse at the time, Levin situates the text within an emerging discourse around ecofeminism, drawing attention to the ways in which a society's technological development may encode power struggles with potentially devastating results for both the natural world and its less-privileged inhabitants. The lack of explicit, didactic environmentalist motifs means that *The Stepford Wives* has so far been excluded from studies of ecohorror, despite the text's encoding of contemporary environmental anxieties within the context of another of the era's major concerns: the rise of feminism in the United States.

The space where environmentalism and feminism meets was originally termed "ecofeminism" in the 1970s, but the appellation now carries with it the baggage of several decades of intra-disciplinary debate. Although ecofeminism as a practice has its roots in the work of female environmentalists in the nineteenth century,⁶⁵ it was the French feminist writer Françoise d'Eaubonne who first used the term *ecoféminisme*, defining it as the effort "to eliminate gender inequalities and hierarchies in a way that value[s] the environment and articulate[s] parallels between women's and environmental exploitation".⁶⁶ Since its emergence, however, the ecofeminist approach has come under fire for "its dangerous essentialisms" and tendency to assume some intrinsic affinity between woman and nature, as well as its alignment with the second-wave feminist practice of universalizing the category of "women" while assuming "whiteness, heterosexuality, upper middle class status, and fertility".⁶⁷ Sturgeon describes the ecofeminist

⁶⁵ Greta Gaard, "Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002): 117.

⁶⁶ Peter C. Kunze, "Winnie-the-Conservationist: Tuck Everlasting, Ecofeminism, and Children's Literature," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 38, no. 1 (May 2014): 31.

⁶⁷ Rebecca Evans, "James Tiptree Jr.: Rereading Essentialism and Ecofeminism in the 1970s," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2015): 223.

movement that grew from such debate as a “fractured, contested, discontinuous entity”, with “scattered, uneven, and in many ways disconnected beginnings, retreats, dormancies, and proliferations imbedded within several different political locations”.⁶⁸ One constant has remained, however: at their core, all ecofeminist approaches share a concern with the locus of power and the interconnectedness of oppression. Warren explains that ecofeminism as a methodology comes first and foremost from “the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other”.⁶⁹ While greater focus has come to issues of intersectionality and critique of an imagined “essential” relationship between woman and nature, ecofeminists remain committed to drawing out the parallels between exploitation of the natural world and exploitation of women. Kings lays out the state of contemporary ecofeminism in a 2017 article:

It is the central contention . . . that the oppressions of women and nature are linked “conceptually, historically, materially but not essentially”—that is, at least not any more or less essentially than their male counterparts. Ecofeminism recognizes the ethical interconnection of the domination of women and the domination and exploitation of nature . . . Ecofeminists highlight that [a] dualistic conception of culture/nature seeks to maintain both the “ecological superiority of human and the cultural superiority of men”, meaning that the liberation of women cannot be achieved without the simultaneous liberation of nature from the clutches of exploitation.⁷⁰

It is in this spirit that I employ the term throughout the rest of my analysis, as the most useful descriptor for the interrelatedness of power imbalance across the nature/culture divide.

While the intersections between feminism and horror have been thoroughly explored in recent decades—perhaps most notably in Carol J. Clover’s landmark *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*:

⁶⁸ Noel Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action* (London: Routledge, 2016), 3.

⁶⁹ Karen J. Warren, “Introduction,” in *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, and Nature*, ed. Karen J. Warren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), xi.

⁷⁰ A. E. Kings, “Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism,” *Ethics & the Environment* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 70.

Gender in the Modern Horror Film (1992)—the intersection between *ecofeminism* and *ecohorror* has received comparatively little attention. In *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen* (2016), Murray and Heumann consider the gendered implications of the relationship between themes of cannibalism and manifest destiny in contemporary horror, arguing that films such as *Ravenous* (1999), *American Psycho* (2000), *Trouble Every Day* (2001), and *Jennifer's Body* (2009) “explore multiple manifestations of cannibalism within a gendered framework that complicates colonial fantasies of land, women, and wendigo”.⁷¹ In the collection *Eco-Trauma Cinema* (2014), Roland Finger’s article “Biting Back: America, Nature, and Feminism in *Teeth*” similarly tackles questions around gender, landscape, and colonialism, arguing that “*Teeth* suggestively builds on an American tradition of associating women with nature . . . [and] transforms the notion of feminine nature as merely attractive, passive, or nurturing into a self-preserving force”.⁷² Both pieces ground themselves in the work of Annette Kolodny, a feminist critic whose book *The Lay of the Land* (1975) explores “the continued repetition of the land-as-woman symbolization in American life and letters”⁷³:

Kolodny shows how male explorers, settlers, and even flower children imagined America as feminine to satisfy their particular personal and political goals, ranging from the conquest of valuable land to the establishment of fraternal communities on nature’s bosom . . . Men imagine themselves to represent civilization, rationality, and mastery spreading across America’s land, fulfilling the narrative of manifest destiny, while they paradoxically also long to find carefree bliss and satisfaction acquired through immersion in feminized nature. Men dream of having it all: civilized dominion but also passionate release, available through the wonder lay of the American landscape.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 147.

⁷² Roland Finger, “Biting Back: America, Nature, and Feminism in *Teeth*,” in *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, ed. Anil Narine (New York: Routledge, 2014), 134.

⁷³ Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), ix.

⁷⁴ Finger, “Biting Back,” 134.

In the context of American ecohorror, then, there appears to exist a foundational association between place and gender, even if it has not yet been fully fleshed out.

A close reading of the role of nature in *The Stepford Wives*—both Levin’s novel and Forbes’s mostly faithful film adaptation—suggests that an ecofeminist approach to horror is another avenue that can expand our ideas about which texts overlap with the ecohorror subgenre. Although it does not employ any explicit “nature bites back” motifs, the possibility of water contamination and environmental pollution constitutes a significant subplot in *Stepford*, and the presence of these motifs provide added dimensions to Levin’s treatment of gender and power.

Critical treatment of *The Stepford Wives* has, naturally, centred primarily on its depiction of gender and power, as both the novel and the film focus primarily on the plight of the women of Stepford at the hands of its Men’s Association. The story follows photographer Joanna Eberhardt, a young mother who uproots her busy life in New York to move with her family to the idyllic town of Stepford, Connecticut. Although at first she makes an effort to settle in to her new existence, she finds the women of the neighbourhood to be uncannily perfect; they clean, they cook, they are perfectly groomed, and, above all, seem entirely satisfied with this way of life. Two other women, Bobbie and Charmaine, also recently arrived in Stepford, provide her with an outlet for a less idyllic version of femininity—they bond over messy kitchens, scuffed floors, and disorderly lifestyles. Bobbie is described as “short and heavy-bottomed”, dressed in “a blue Snoopy sweatshirt and jeans and sandals”, in contrast to the other immaculate women of the neighbourhood. “Her mouth was big”, Joanna observes upon meeting her, “and she had blue take-in-everything eyes and short dark tufty hair. And small hands and dirty toes”. In a similar departure from the norms of Stepford, Charmaine talks freely and animatedly about her and her husband’s “manifold incompatibilities—social, emotional, and above all, sexual”.

Yet as time passes Joanna continues to become increasingly unsettled, and when Charmaine changes into yet another docile housewife seemingly overnight, Joanna and Bobbie become convinced that something in the water is responsible for this strange behaviour. It is only after Bobbie succumbs too that Joanna learns the truth: the Men's Association have been replacing their wives with robotic doppelgangers. The ending is where the novel and the film diverge; the novel ends with the android Bobbie brandishing a knife at her former friend, while in the film Joanna is murdered by the android version of herself. The epilogues of both novel and film then see a newly "perfect" Joanna wandering docilely through the supermarket, talking with the town's newest resident, whose future now seems apparent.

Contemporary reactions to the book and film were divided as to whether it supported or mocked feminist aims. The popular press pitched it as "a text that 'women's lib can take for a manifesto'" and "the only viable, intelligently conceived movie about women and their future made in the past decade", while also "forcefully [condemning] the film as insulting to women and equally demeaning to men":

Descriptions of the film range from "far more cerebral than visceral" and "disquieting" to "sleazy"; and from "glib," "gimmicky," "silly," driven by "facetiousness," and "wildly funny"—perhaps unintentionally in places—to "ridiculous". By the time one has read the many critical pronouncements that emerged after the box office release, one might conclude that the "black humour and sophistication of the plot is handled extremely well" or, just as easily, "maybe they just should have skipped the whole thing".⁷⁵

Appearing at the same time as feminism had become a ubiquitous, impossible-to-ignore force in the United States (Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" appeared in the same year), many saw Levin's novel as a cynical attempt to cash in on the currency of feminist activism,

⁷⁵ Sherrie A. Inness, *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 25.

or as a bleak depiction of “every fear we ever had about the battle of the sexes, [that] says there is no way for people to get together and lead human lives”.⁷⁶

But despite such criticism”, the idea of a “Stepford Wife” has endured in popular parlance as shorthand for a specific, quite archaic vision of womanhood—“compliant, perpetually sexually available, intellectually vacuous, and perfectly well-coiffed” (Leonard 14). Its longevity suggests that, even if critics at the time received it as an unsuccessful parody, it spoke to something within the cultural mindset, and subsequent critical reappraisals have been more frequently positive about its treatment of feminist concerns—or at least embraced its ambiguity rather than condemning it as satire. “[The] film and the label that has emerged from its title exemplify polysemy—the availability of text for multiple readings”, writes Helford.⁷⁷ “*The Stepford Wives* was more faithful to the feminist discourse of its day than its critics were willing to accept at the time”, says Elliott.⁷⁸ “[Representations] of the maternal in *The Stepford Wives* can . . . be read as evasive, cynical, or both”, observes Paasonen.⁷⁹ Although there clearly exists room for debate, the general movement from viewing it as a “rip off” to “in part a science fiction rewrite of Betty Friedan’s pioneering 1963 liberal feminist polemic *The Feminine Mystique*” is notable.⁸⁰

Indeed, a sympathetic critic might turn to Levin’s other work in order to lend support to readings of *The Stepford Wives* as an earnest rather than parodic text. Although it is of course worth noting that neither the film nor the novel had women at the helm, Levin had previously

⁷⁶ Inness, 24.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁸ J. Elliott, *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time* (New York: Springer, 2008), 72.

⁷⁹ Susanna Paasonen, *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), 40.

⁸⁰ Anna Krugovoy Silver, “The Cyborg Mystique: *The Stepford Wives* and Second-Wave Feminism,” *Arizona Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 109.

demonstrated a serious engagement with women's experiences in *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), his other lasting work, which was adapted for film with Roman Polanski as director in 1968. The story follows a woman whose pregnancy becomes increasingly nightmarish as she realises that a satanic cult, with the help of her husband, wants to appropriate her baby—not, as she initially believes, for the purposes of human sacrifice, but rather because Satan is his real father and he is the Antichrist. As a novel “of violence, deceit, and misappropriation of a woman's body by people she trusts”,⁸¹ *Rosemary's Baby* has a lot in common with *Stepford Wives*, and also shares a concern with “the use of reproductive technologies to ensure the production of a heteronormative future that secures the proliferation of the dominant social formation”.⁸² Although both narratives have been critiqued for their engagement with feminism, Levin's interest in the subject appears to have been sustained and genuine, and to dismiss *The Stepford Wives* as a “rip-off” is perhaps to do it an injustice.

What critics have so far focused very little on, however, is the role of the environment in Levin's book and Forbes's film. For as well as capturing various tensions involved in the feminist movement of the time, the narrative also incorporates environmental concerns that would have been prominent in media discourse when Levin was writing. Most obviously, Joanna and Bobby spend a significant portion of the text convinced that pollutants in the water are what cause the women of Stepford to change. Bobby is first to raise the possibility, citing “a thing in Time a few weeks ago” that she read:

“They have a very low crime rate in El Paso, Texas,” she said. “I think it was El Paso. Anyway, somewhere in Texas they have a very low crime rate, much lower than anywhere else in Texas; and the reason is, there's a chemical in the ground that gets into the water,

⁸¹ Karyn Valerius, “‘*Rosemary's Baby*,’ Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects,” *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 116.

⁸² Charles Hicks, “The Perverse Mother: Maternal Masochism in Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*,” *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (May 1, 2017): 300.

and it tranquilizes everybody and eases the tension . . . I think there's something here. In Stepford. It's possible, isn't it? All those fancy plants on Route Nine—electronics, computers, aerospace junk, with Stepford Creek running right behind them—who knows what kind of crap they're dumping into the environment”.

An article just as she describes was indeed published in *Time* in 1971, entitled “The Texas Tranquilizer”. While not making any definite claims, it speculates that high levels of lithium in the groundwater around El Paso may be responsible for the city’s low crime-rate and low levels of admission to mental-health facilities.⁸³ Its conclusion posits exactly the question that Bobby asks in *Stepford Wives*:

FBI statistics show that while Dallas had 5,970 known crimes per 100,000 population last year, El Paso had 2,889 per 100,000. Dallas (pop. 844,000) had 242 murders, El Paso (pop. 323,000) only 13. Dr. Frederick Goodwin, an expert on lithium studies for the National Institute of Mental Health, doubts that “lithium has these magical properties in the population”. Others are not so sure. If lithium does have anything to do with the relative peace in El Paso, what would it do for other cities like New York and Chicago?⁸⁴

What *would* the chemical content of the water elsewhere in the United States do for those dependent upon it? The question was not far from the American public’s mind in the 1970s, following the influence of *Silent Spring*:

Silent Spring put several aspects of the environmental crisis—toxication of ecosystems and human bodies—in terms so unforgettable that the force of her presentation has never been equaled. Readers came away feeling that they were on the verge of living irrevocably in a poisoned world, one in which the air, waters, and soils were becoming toxic and unnatural to them.⁸⁵

“Serious attention”, write Howden and Mather, “to this type of [groundwater] contamination would wait until the 1970s and 1980s”, but scientists were aware of the scale of the problem much

⁸³ While also noting that the fact that the nearest mental-health hospital to El Paso is 350 miles away, which may affect those figures somewhat

⁸⁴ “The Texas Tranquilizer,” *Time*, October 04, 1971,
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,905404,00.html>.

⁸⁵ Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, 165.

earlier—note the “number of significant sources of groundwater contamination” mentioned in a 1963 “Primer on Groundwater” report published by the United States Department of the Interior: “These included contamination of aquifers by industrial wastes with arsenic, cadmium, chromate, nitrate, sulfate, chlorinated solvents, and potentially radioactive materials; by agricultural chemicals such as fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides, and defoliants; leachates from landfills; and effluents from septic tanks that included household detergents, nitrate, and pathogens”.⁸⁶

It was only after the severity of public backlash to events like those at Love Canal in the late 1970s and early 1980s that the government began to publicly address these problems—with the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (1976) and the Superfund Act (1980), which “resulted in serious consideration of groundwater contamination from a variety of sources”.⁸⁷ *The Stepford Wives*, meanwhile, was written during the rising awareness of these issues, and in this instance, they translate into the women’s fear that the chemical content of the water could be responsible for both mental and physical changes in Stepford’s female population—as well as becoming docile and subservient, the women are also universally tiny-waisted and big-breasted. Levin’s awareness of this type of media coverage suggests that the significance of environmental anxieties to the mood of the 1970s was not lost on him, and that such ecological concerns are more central to the text than has so far been acknowledged.

Little attention has been paid, however, to these environmental undertones of *The Stepford Wives*, despite the potential they have to complement its explorations of gender, power, and space. In their 2011 article, “*The Stepford Wives* and the Technoscientific Imagery”, Jessica Johnston and Cornelia Sears do touch upon the subject while examining the text’s gender relations through

⁸⁶ Nicholas Howden and John Mather, *History of Hydrogeology* (Florida: CRC Press, 2012), 396.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 397.

theories of technoscience in order to further elucidate its structures of power. They note that the film's gendered struggles are dependent upon its representations of technoscience, which they link closely with its suburban setting. The term "technoscience", the authors explain, implies that "the 'technical content of science' is value-laden and influences what 'gets built into' machines":

Technoscience is more than just the combination of technology and science, and refers to the complexity and contingency inherent in scientific processes and their technological products. From this perspective, scientific knowledge is not simply a collection of objective facts, but rather combines the complex negotiations and intersections among political, economic, social and cultural influences.⁸⁸

Or, as Donna Haraway notes, investigations of technoscience ask "how the practices of masculine supremacy, or many other systems of structures inequality, get built into and out of working machines". She goes on to argue that "[h]ow and in what directions these transferences of 'competencies' work should be a focus of rapt attention. Systems of exploitation might be crucial parts of the 'technical content' of science".

The significance of technoscience to *The Stepford Wives* is obvious, as the Men's Association literalises the encoding of patriarchal power structures into machines, replacing real, 'imperfect' women with ideal cookie-cutter wives who "enact domestic bliss" without complaint.⁸⁹ Johnston and Sears argue that technoscience is the "necessary ubiquitous presence through which the power struggles over gendered bodies are enacted",⁹⁰ acting as the conduit through which the text lets the relationship between Stepford's men and women unfold. Both the real women and the

⁸⁸ Jessica Johnston and Cornelia Sears, "The Stepford Wives and the Technoscientific Imaginary," *Extrapolation* 52, no. 1 (2011): 76.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 77.

“fembots” of the story reveal the impossible standards of femininity, highlighted particularly through the scene in which Joanna and Bobby attempt to conduct a consciousness-raising meeting. Women and robots alike articulate a frustration with the impossible standards of domestic life, but their reactions to these feelings are mediated by their very different loyalties. Bobby and Joanna express a desire for independence, for lives of their own, while their android counterparts reach instead for a consumer solution to the problem. The values encoded in them through their technoscientific origin places the blame for their feelings of inadequacy squarely back on them, rather than on any structural inequality, thus “render[ing] invisible the inequitable power relations that produce such demanding expectations for women in the domestic sphere”.⁹¹

Unlike many other artificial intelligences in popular media, the fembots never transcend their programming, and so function only as technoscientific products, controlled by their male creators. They are “programmed to deny any agency or identity outside their domestic roles, and never break out of their pre-programmed technologically-delimited world”.⁹² Even their malfunctions ground them in patriarchal ideology—there is no sense of danger or overstepping of boundaries, merely endless repetition of bland, domestic phrases.⁹³ The final horror of both the book and film is a vision of this uninterrupted technoscientific spectacle—the fembots sailing peacefully through the supermarket, the idealised, artificial heteronormativity having triumphed. “That we do not witness Joanna’s violent death”, point out Johnston and Sears, “but only Joanna’s reappearance as a shopping fembot sanitises the reality of the technoscientific replacement process. We see no blood, no dead body, no remnants of her struggle”.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid., 83.

⁹² Ibid., 85.

⁹³ Ibid., 86.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 90.

Levin in fact encodes gendered power struggles in his depiction of Stepford's environment as well in his representations of technoscience, with profound implications for the ecological content of the novel. For, as mentioned already, *The Stepford Wives* is hardly considered representative of the ecohorror of the 1970s in a way that *Jaws* or *The Birds* are, and its technoscientific explorations seem little engaged with any explicit environmental themes. But a little-explored facet of the narrative rewards closer examination. Paying closer attention to the depiction of environmental upset in *The Stepford Wives* allows us to see how Levin uses it as potent allegory for the plight of the women of the novel. Johnston and Sears do touch upon the role that Stepford's environment plays in the novel, but they approach it from a purely technoscientific perspective. In the context of this thesis, however, the intersection between gender and environmental concerns provides a more appropriate point from which to approach the horrors of Levin's narrative, and to situate *The Stepford Wives* within the lineage of ecohorror texts.

To begin with, Stepford as a place plays as central a role in the text as any of the characters. The space of the town is crucial to the dynamics of the story, from the claustrophobic atmosphere of suburban life to the Men's Association house towering like a Gothic castle over the populace. Throughout the text, the town's artificiality underscores the plight of Joanna and her ever-shrinking group of friends. Even the title of the novel highlights the significance of its environment—these women are not individuals, they are “Stepford wives”, and their character and the character of the town are one and the same. The reader's understanding of the *kind* of person a Stepford wife is rests heavily on their understanding of expectations surrounding the kind of place Stepford is, and vice versa. “It's a nice town with nice people!” the Welcome Wagon lady tells Joanna in the opening pages of the book.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2011), 3.

Interestingly, descriptions of Stepford itself are quite sparse, and rely strongly on public awareness of the type of suburban idyll that it represents. In the opening chapters of the novel it is mostly represented as a contrast to the city from which the family has come: “She wished that they would be happy in Stepford . . . That the lives of all four of them would be enriched, rather than diminished, as she had feared, by leaving the city—the filthy, crowded, crime-ridden, but so-alive city”.⁹⁶ This contrast between city and suburb, and the weight of expectations placed on suburbia as the opportunity for a “fresh start”, is common throughout horror of this era. Murphy explains how “the Suburban Gothic is concerned with exploiting a closely interrelated set of contradictory attitudes, which can most clearly be expressed as a set of binary oppositions”—while the suburbs can offer the potential for a utopian life, they can also be a place of confinement and misery; while they may seem like a clean, fresh contrast to the city, they are also one of the biggest culprits in pollution and environmental degradation; in short, while they are a refuge from the dangers of urban lifestyles, the biggest dangers may prove to lie *within*.⁹⁷

The space of Stepford is repeatedly contrasted with the environment of New York to begin with, pitted as a clean, quiet counterpart to its urban filth. Joanna receives a welcome pack at the beginning of the novel which includes “a toy-size box of non-polluting detergent”,⁹⁸ their family trips take them past a “you’d-never-guess-what-it-is-from-the-outside non-polluting incinerator plant”,⁹⁹ and much of Joanna’s initial positivity towards the town is based on the absence of city grime: “Closing her eyes, she threw her head back and breathed the smell of grass

⁹⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁷ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic*, 3.

⁹⁸ Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 14.

and trees and clean air: delicious. She opened her eyes, to a single speck of star in dark blue sky, a trillion miles above her”.¹⁰⁰

Culturally, of course, Stepford represents a type of suburban enclave extremely familiar in the United States during the decades after World War II, when huge numbers of Americans migrated from the cities to new suburban developments. When it comes to horror and the Gothic, the suburbs have since their emergence been a site for fears about conformity and the sapping of individuality, amongst others, made particularly resonant by the huge growth in suburban lifestyles:

They came to the suburbs in pursuit of a dream . . . They came in search of green grass and trees, away from the hassle . . . where there was room for a garden . . . They came to escape the city’s dirt and noise and crime and traffic . . . More than anything else, they came because the suburbs symbolized that Good Life . . . The suburbs symbolized “making it”. They came by the millions.¹⁰¹

But Stepford, representing one of any number of suburban developments that sprang up across the United States in the years after World War II, is also complicit in a type of lifestyle that proved to have a massive environmental impact:

The problems did not become apparent all at once. Though the postwar building boom was an environmental catastrophe on the scale of the Dust Bowl, the signs of trouble were not nearly so striking as in the 1930s. No black clouds darkened suburban streets at midday . . . Yet, one by one, the environmental costs of tract-house developments became subjects of debate . . . By the mid-1960s, indeed, the sprawl of the tracts had provoked hundreds of grass roots campaigns to stop “the rape of the land”.¹⁰²

Although Joanna tries to see it as a clean alternative to the city—mirrored by her new, sparkling domestic lifestyle—Levin does not allow the murkier underside of suburban lifestyles to go forgotten. There is a certain hypocrisy hinted at in the “you’d-never-guess-what-it-is-from-the-outside non-polluting incinerator plant” which draws parallels with the darker side of Stepford’s

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹⁰¹ Stephen Birmingham, *The Golden Dream: Suburbia in the 1970s* (New York: Open Road Media, 2016), i.

¹⁰² Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, 3–4.

seemingly idyllic feminine domesticity; everything is not as squeaky-clean as it looks. Just as the ecological catastrophe of suburban development is hidden by its image as a clean break from the city, so the damage wrought by enforced heteronormativity is hidden beneath a veneer of the perfect lifestyle.

Also of significance to Stepford as a space is the literal as well as figurative domination of the town by its Men's Association. While they are the obvious locus of patriarchal power in the novel, they do not just metaphorically loom over the town—their meeting-house also physically looms over the landscape, sitting like an archetypal Gothic castle on the top of a hill. As horror critic Robin Woods notes, the “terrible house” has functioned throughout American literature as an extension of its inhabitants’ personalities,¹⁰³ and theirs is no exception. Gendered relations are given physical expression, and men have colonised the landscape as well as the minds of their wives.

Through these parallels, Levin links male domination of the landscape with male domination of women, highlighting the interconnectedness of power structures. That the women suspect the land is being polluted, then, places greater significance on this aspect of the story than critics have generally recognised. For the suspected source of the pollution is made quite clear: the industrial plants where most of the Men's Association figureheads work. Driving along the edge of Stepford, Joanna notes the clustered factories and their connection to the town's men:

They passed the shopping mall and the antique stores, and came to the industrial plants . . . “Poisoner's Row,” Bobbie said . . . Joanna looked at the neat low modern buildings, set back from the road and separated each from the next by wide spans of green lawn: Ulitz Optics (where Herb Sundersen worked), and CompuTech (Vic Stavros, or was he with Instatron?), and Stevenson Biochemical, and HaigDarling Computers, and Burnham-Massey-Microtech (Dale Coba—hiss!—and Claude Axhelm, and Instatron, and Reed and

¹⁰³ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan — And Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 80.

Saunders (Bill McCormick—how was Marge?), and Vesey Electronics, and AmeriChem Willis.¹⁰⁴

In the list, the men's names and the company names blur together until they are almost indistinguishable. As such, Levin draws upon the familiar industry/nature dichotomy to complement the social structures at play: the men pollute the women's lives with their patriarchal fantasies, while their workplaces pollute (or so the women think) the environment around them. In this way, the space of Stepford has an almost schizophrenic quality: it is a safe, idyllic utopia for the men, but a potentially toxic, paranoid prison for the women. The duality of the space underscores the disparate experiences of environmental risks endured by its inhabitants, and calls attention to the inequalities that allow for the divide.

Of course, it transpires that the factories are *not* polluting the land around Stepford (or, at least, are not responsible for altering the women's personalities). If it had, in fact, been a story of mutant housewives, then *The Stepford Wives* would undoubtedly have received extensive recognition as an ecohorror text. In the context of this argument, however, the eventual disproving of the women's suspicions does not negate Levin's engagement with contemporary environmental concerns. If ecohorror is to be viewed as horror that responds to humankind's fears about our impact on the environment, then *Stepford's* use of the imagery of pollution to underscore the plight of its characters should have plenty to tell us about what might be seeping out of suburbia.

Conclusion: Ecohorror goes mainstream?

As the 1970s drew to a close, revenge-of-nature motifs had become prevalent enough in horror that Paramount attempted to cash in on the trend with a big-budget box-office eco-nightmare of its own, releasing John Frankenheimer's *Prophecy* in 1979. The film tells the story of

¹⁰⁴ Levin, *The Stepford Wives*, 68.

an EPA officer, Dr Robert Verne (Robert Foxworth), tasked with reporting on logging operations by the Androscoggin River in Maine. There, industry workers are clashing with the area's Native American population, who believe that disruptions to the environment have awakened the vengeful *Katahdin*, spirit of the forest. Verne's examinations implicate mercury contamination from a local paper mill in recent environmental destruction, and reveal Katahdin to be a mutated bear, deformed by chemical spill-off and driven to rage in an effort to protect her (equally monstrous) newborn cubs.

On paper, *Prophecy* had it all: a respected director¹⁰⁵, a proven horror screenwriter (*The Omen*'s David Seltzer), a twelve-million-dollar budget, and a message relevant to audiences of its time. Unfortunately, the reality was not quite the same. Although it turned a profit in cinemas,¹⁰⁶ contemporary reviews were less than enthusiastic about Frankenheimer's film. "*Prophecy* is silly, overproduced, and boring", proclaimed *Time* magazine, adding, "[i]f this tepid horror movie had been made for peanuts by struggling B-movie makers, it would be easy to forgive and forget".¹⁰⁷ *Cineaste* was similarly scathing: "The creature, resembling a snaggly-toothed bear covered with slime, is the genetic product of industrial chemicals and the Native Americans' prophesied revenge. It is also indescribably shabby and poorly constructed, traits the creature shares with the film".¹⁰⁸ *The New Yorker* also had little positive to say, calling *Prophecy* "an ill-cut jigsaw puzzle re-

¹⁰⁵ Frankenheimer had, by 1979, a well-respected history in both television and film, and on his death in 2002, Roger Ebert called his films "some of the most distinctive . . . of their time" and called Frankenheimer himself "one of the most gifted directors of drama on television." Roger Ebert, "John Frankenheimer: A Master Craftsman," RogerEbert.com, July 08, 2002, <https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/john-frankenheimer-a-master-craftsman>.

¹⁰⁶ Stephen B. Armstrong, *Pictures about Extremes: The Films of John Frankenheimer* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007), 37.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Lee Rozelle, *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld* (University of Alabama Press, 2006), 37.

¹⁰⁸ D.G. et al., "Film Guide," *Cineaste* 9, no. 4 (1979): 68.

assembled by force by someone who has lost a few of the pieces”.¹⁰⁹ The film may have identified many of the key issues for revenge-of-nature films—“human overpopulation, pollution, clear-cutting, species extinction, and Native American land rights”¹¹⁰—but it collects them into something half-coherent rather than inspiring.

It is hard not to see Frankenheimer’s underwhelming end-product as somewhat of a tragedy for the ecohorror subgenre, as it was evidently aiming to be a blockbuster in the mould of *Jaws* with a more explicitly ecological message. In concept, it also weaves together other emergent strands of the environmentalist movement, tackling the implications for both women and indigenous people of commercial exploitation of the planet’s resources. *Prophecy* and *The Stepford Wives* hardly make for obvious bedfellows, but both bring into relief the gendered implications of poisoning the landscape. In the former, Maggie Verne (Talia Shire)—our EPA officer’s wife—keeps her pregnancy secret from her husband, as he believes that bringing children into a polluted, overpopulated world is immoral and undesirable. Accompanying him on his trip, however, means that she is exposed to contaminants herself, and after learning about the mutant animal offspring, fears for her own child’s safety. In opening up this dialogue, the film creates obvious parallels between Maggie and Kathadin, and situates itself—like *The Stepford Wives*—within the often-critiqued tradition of linking women with the landscape, and the oppression of one with the other. Mystifyingly, however, Frankenheimer drops this subplot entirely towards the end of the film. While many revenge-of-nature texts revel in open-ended conclusions (and, indeed, *Prophecy* does with its main plotline, revealing the existence of another mutant bear—the father of the original Kathadin’s cubs—as the survivors escape in a helicopter), in this instance it seems to be ambiguity

¹⁰⁹ “*Prophecy*,” *New Yorker* 55, no. 20 (July 2, 1979): 66.

¹¹⁰ Rozelle, *Ecosublime*, 95.

through negligence rather than in the service of prompting audience reflection. Frankenheimer has attributed his directorial failures on the film to an ongoing personal issue of alcohol abuse, claiming that he “should never have done [it]”.¹¹¹ In this light, the film seems like even more of a missed opportunity for the subgenre—although *Prophecy* came with the grandiose tagline of “The Monster Movie”, the monster of 1979 is now Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, and Kathadin has been relegated to the bargain-bin of horror history.

As we move from 1979 into discussion of the 1980s and ‘90s, however, it is worth keeping in mind ecocritic Lee Rozelle’s observations about *Prophecy*’s reception: in 1979, although reviewers responded negatively to the film, they did so “on aesthetic and formal grounds”.¹¹² Upon its DVD re-release in 2003, however, the reception was quite different:

The second wave of reviews—internet postings that coincide with DVD re-releases—forgive (or even revel in) the movie’s ‘cheesy’ special effects and stilted dialogue; these critics instead attack the film for its imposition of “message”. *Prophecy*’s reviewers also expose a critical distinction between the climate of the 1970s and millennial movie culture. What most of the recent reviewers deride as bleeding-heart conceit in the film apparently wasn’t perceived as particularly repugnant when *Prophecy* was made.¹¹³

The following chapter will look more closely at the changes, both cultural and political, that may help to account for this shift in perception of *Prophecy*’s flaws, and trace the move from the heart-on-your-sleeve activism so popular in the 1960s and ‘70s to a more oblique approach to environmentalist representation in horror.

¹¹¹ Charles Champlin and Place Unknown, *John Frankenheimer: A Conversation* (Riverwood Press, 1995), 37.

¹¹² Rozelle, *Ecosublime*, 97.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 97–98.

4. “Take a Deep Breath America—While You Still Can”:¹ The 1980s and 1990s

Introduction

The 1980s and ‘90s tend not to receive much attention when it comes to ecohorror, for the subgenre went comparatively silent during these decades. The cultural climate in the United States, as we shall see, was such that being an “environmentalist” was to be a zealot, and the activist mood of the ‘60s and ‘70s no longer retained its social currency. This is not, however, to say that ecohorror themes were entirely absent from the horror genre in these decades, and this chapter examines motifs of individualism, toxicity, and environmental justice in *The Toxic Avenger* (dir. Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz, 1984), *American Psycho* (Bret Easton Ellis, 1991), *They Live* (dir. John Carpenter, 1988), and *Safe* (dir. Todd Haynes, 1995). *The Toxic Avenger*, a lowbrow cult comedy, demonstrates the potential for comedic approaches to environmental subjects to speak to audiences that might otherwise feel alienated by the subject matter. *American Psycho* and *They Live* participate in a kind of “toxic consciousness”, whereby their depictions of modern American life are underpinned by a pervasive sense of pollution, waste, and unsustainability. *Safe*, which concludes the chapter, offers a commentary on individualistic tendencies in American society, highlighting the ways in which they can thwart broader environmental action and turn the focus back on individuals as consumers. Although it may not have had quite the same profile as before, ecohorror as a subgenre continued to evolve alongside environmental discourse and

¹ Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980's* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 142.

understanding, and we can see its concerns expand during this '80s and the '90s, moving towards the ever-more nebulous ecohorror of today.

Branching Out: North American Environmental Policy in the 1980s

In 1980, NBC News announced “the end of the environmental movement”.² It seemed that the revolution that had taken place over the past decade would inevitably meet its demise after the presidential elections of November 1980, in which Ronald Reagan, former Governor of California, emerged victorious. His administration certainly offered no hope to environmental campaigners, as key appointees were deep-rooted conservatives or inexperienced in their area of work. James Watt, Reagan’s choice for interior secretary, strongly believed in developing federal lands through forestry and ranching, and denounced environmentalism as “the greatest threat to the ecology of the West” and “a left-wing cult which seeks to bring down the type of government that I believe in”.³ He accordingly supported Reagan’s other controversial environmental appointee: Anne Gorsuch as head of the EPA. Like Watt, Gorsuch was an avowed conservative who believed in federal downsizing and deregulation. After her appointment she announced that she wanted “cooperation rather than confrontation” with the industries regulated by the EPA.⁴ A lawyer from Denver, she also had little to no experience in any environmental matters.

Despite the seemingly hopeless situation, however, NBC’s declaration proved at least a little premature. The Reagan administration’s efforts to undo environmental legislation failed to take one major fact into account: environmentalism had become a subject close to Americans’

² Dennis W. Johnson, *The Laws That Shaped America: Fifteen Acts of Congress and Their Lasting Impact* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 385.

³ Troy, *Morning in America*, 141.

⁴ Andrew J. Hoffman, *From Heresy to Dogma: An Institutional History of Corporate Environmentalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 87.

hearts. Although the fervour of the movement had begun to wane in the late 1970s, when it seemed to be succeeding at its aims of legislative change and mainstream acceptance, the backlash to Reagan's appointees' attempts to dismantle that progress "did more to reenergise the environmental movement than did the pro-environment Carter administration".⁵ Membership of environmental organisations soared as the North American public sought to express their concern—"membership of the Sierra Club jumped from 181,000 to over 480,000 by 1988".⁶ Ultimately, Reagan was forced to respond to the public's wishes, and by the end of his tenure the *Sierra* reported that

More acreage was added to the National Wilderness Preservation System in the lower 48 states under Reagan than under any other president. Twenty-nine new wildlife refuges were established, encompassing a total of 500,000 acres; 200 new plants and animals were added to the nation's lists of endangered species.⁷

This is not to suggest, however, that the 1980s were an overall success for the environment in the United States. Dennis Johnson notes that despite public backlash, the damage had already been done: "As political scientist Walter A. Rosenbaum has summed up, to environmental leaders the Reagan years meant 'above all, dangerous drift and indecision, almost a decade of lost opportunities and environmental ills.'"⁸ Also notable is the type of success defined by *Sierra* in their list of positive outcomes: they tend to be triumphs of conservation, not regulation. Although Reagan may have tried to undo some of the budget cuts and policy changes implemented by his administration, their initial assault on the progress of the 1970s was not without negative impact.

⁵ Andrew Kirk, "The New Alchemy: Technology, Consumerism, and Environmental Advocacy," in *The Columbia History of Post-World War II America*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 358.

⁶ Troy, *Morning in America*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 143–44.

⁸ Johnson, *The Laws That Shaped America*, 386.

Greening Consumption: Redefining Environmentalism

If the U.S. population was so concerned with environmentalism, though, why is the enduring image of the 1980s one of greed and materialism instead of a continuation of the 1970s' activist fervour? The answer perhaps lies in the fact that popular environmentalism was itself redefined in the 1980s. The mood shifted towards individual rather than collective action, largely at the behest of PR efforts by corporations with vested interests in avoiding regulatory constraints on their environmental impact.

In 1983, T. J. Jackson Lears argued in *The Culture of Consumption* that over the course of the twentieth century Americans increasingly turned to consumer culture in an attempt to quell their “feelings of unease” about modern life.⁹ These feelings, writes Dunaway,

stemmed from a variety of factors, including urbanization and the rise of a corporate economy, the secularization of Protestantism, and the rationalization of culture. Feeling that they had lost autonomy at work, no longer searching for salvation through religions, and obsessed with their own sense of personal wellbeing, they now sought self-realization through consumer culture.¹⁰

By the late 1980s, the idea of green consumerism had fully entered the mainstream, marrying a modern concern for the state of the planet with an equally modern desire for ever-more possessions. In 1988, John Elkington and Julia Hayes published *The Green Consumer Guide*, offering the public a pocket-sized manual for ethical consumption—its subtitle was “From shampoo to champagne—high-street shopping for a better environment”.¹¹ Selling over a million copies, its success reflects the importance now placed on personal choice as a tool for environmental

⁹ Finis Dunaway, “Cultures of Nature: Twentieth Century,” in *A Companion to American Environmental History*, ed. Douglas Cazaux Sackman (Chichester: Blackwell, 2010), 270.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹¹ Julia Hailes and John Elkington, *The Green Consumer Guide* (New York: Gollancz, 1988).

amelioration. “The much promoted principle of consumer sovereignty”, write Haq and Paul, “placed an emphasis on individuals taking responsibility for their choices”:¹²

Like many issues, green consumerism has divided environmentalists: some believe it encourages individuals to question which products they consume, rather than whether they should be consuming them at all. They point out that the world’s problems are due to a global consuming class, and that the level of consumption is the major problem, regardless of choice.¹³

As Tom Athanasiou points out, “Antienvironmental and ‘green’ PR . . . are a billion-dollar-a-year industry, and the largest PR firms in the world are self-consciously involved in what they sometimes call a ‘new environmentalism,’ one that, as *Forbes* put it, will be ‘more cooperative than confrontational—and with business at the center.’”¹⁴ Placing the responsibility on the consumer to make the “correct” choices as an individual allows the pressure to be removed in terms of systematic, regulatory changes; individual action becomes more emphasised than collective action and our concern comes to lie not with our society, but with *ourselves*.

Counterculture and Counterenvironmentalism: *The Toxic Avenger* and Comedy Ecohorror

Notable in all of the texts discussed in this chapter—with, perhaps, the exception of *Safe*—is a shift in tone from their ‘70s predecessors; humour becomes a much more visible component of ecohorror in the 1980s and ‘90s. Something happened after the 1970s to strip ecocriticism of its straight-faced, moralising stance. In *Monstrous Nature* Murray and Heumann suggest several possible reasons for the “shift to eco-horror comedy”:

¹² Gary Haq and Alistair Paul, *Environmentalism since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴ Frederick Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Four Decades of Environmental Crisis in the U.S.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 49.

- The coming-of-age of the genre allows it to be satirised as it no longer needs to be established.
- A different cultural and historical context means that we “laugh for different reasons and with differing results”.
- A shift from “rugged individualism to a more communal approach to solving ecological problems”.¹⁵

Additionally, I propose that other factors may have come into play:

- Environmentalists were branded as “apocalypse abusers” in the ‘80s and ‘90s by conservative backlash against the movement, and ecohorror became a less desirable vehicle for environmental messaging.
- Filmmakers realised the value of comedy in attracting audiences’ attention to a subject, accepting that people usually go to the cinema for entertainment.

Where ecologically minded filmmakers preciously treated their subject as an educational imperative, almost demanding a serious, weighty tone, a shift occurred in the mid-’80s that opened up a space for more light-hearted, ironic approaches to environmental subjects.

A large number of “recognisable” ecohorror films released between 1980 and 1999 fall into one of two categories: *Jaws* descendants or sequels to earlier properties. For the former we can look to *The Last Shark* (1981), *Killer Crocodile* (1989), *Lake Placid* (1999), and *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), all of which focus on attacks by unusually vicious water-dwelling creatures. In the latter category there is *Piranha Part Two: The Spawning* (1981), *Food of the Gods II* (1989), *Killer Crocodile 2* (1990), *Alligator II: The Mutation* (1991), and *The Birds II: Land’s End* (1994) (an unfortunate and largely forgotten made-for-TV movie). Two of the period’s movies even span both of these categories: *Jaws 3-D* (1983) and *Jaws: The Revenge* (1987).

Of the less simply categorised takes on the formula that do exist, most still riff on the familiarity of audiences with the subgenre’s conventions, and build on its now-well-established structures. Here we see films such as *Alligator* (1980), *Slugs* (1988), *Arachnophobia* (1990), *Mimic*

¹⁵ Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 106.

(1997), and *Bats* (1999). Of *Alligator*, Roger Ebert writes in 1980 that, “The plot is absolutely standard; this story has been filmed dozens of times”.¹⁶ *Variety* magazine calls *Mimic* “nothing more than a standard-issue big-bug item” in 1997.¹⁷ In 1999 Kim Newman writes for BFI *Sight and Sound* that, “*Bats* sticks to the ground rules of its genre”, while comparing the film to *Nightwing* (a “minor revolt-of-nature horror movie” from 1979), *Piranha*, and *Lake Placid*.¹⁸ By the 1980s, it would seem, audiences are familiar enough with the tropes of revenge-of-nature films to recognise them as a specific, repeatable formula.

It is this, argue Murray and Heumann, which facilitates the emergence of self-conscious eco-horror-comedies in the 1980s, noting Maurice Yacowar’s claim that “a genre comes of age when its conventions are well known enough to be played for laughs in parody”.¹⁹ Certainly, up until this point most ecohorror has been a serious matter, even if many of the films now elicit unintentional laughs from contemporary audiences. The heroes of *Them!*, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, *Kingdom of the Spiders*, and *Frogs*—to name just a few—are straight-faced and deathly serious in their pronouncements of doom and environmental apocalypse. And while that may work to raise awareness of emerging issues, there is the potential for audiences to quickly grow bored of being lectured in such a manner. Films that parody the tropes of ecohorror may therefore, Murray and Heumann suggest, “provide a space in which ecological problems that audience members now know about (as part of their own current sociocultural contexts) can be examined

¹⁶ Roger Ebert, “Alligator Movie Review & Film Summary (1980),” RogerEbert.com, November 26, 1980, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/alligator-1980>.

¹⁷ Todd McCarthy, “Mimic,” *Variety* (blog), August 18, 1997, <https://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/mimic-2-1117340066/>.

¹⁸ “BFI | Sight & Sound | *Bats* (1999),” accessed July 3, 2018, <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/300>.

¹⁹ Murray and Heumann, *Monstrous Nature*, 111.

and scrutinised through campy humor that intensifies an environmental message while minimizing didactic and pedantic proselytizing that a more serious approach might foster”.²⁰

This mirrors a shift in environmentalism more generally, as the movement was increasingly challenged by a series of not just *anti*environmentalists like Watt and Gorsuch in the Reagan administration, but also *counter*environmentalist thinkers. Allitt points out an important distinction between the two, one central to understanding their differing influences on environmental discourse. *Anti*environmentalists of the type initially appointed by Reagan “were bluntly and openly critical of the recent legislation and opposed to the entire concept of environmentalism”.²¹ *Counter*environmentalists, on the other hand, cultivated scepticism rather than outright rejection. These “New Right” conservatives challenged the foundations of environmental ideology, questioning the “excessive pessimism” of earlier figures like Paul Ehrlich and instead “asserting that economic growth and environmental improvement could advance together”.²²

Crucially, their approach was not to discredit environmentalism entirely, but their voices of dissent muddled the waters of the discourse, diluting what until that point had seemed like a clear message—that consumerism and endless growth were not compatible with environmental conservation—and promoting an altogether more capitalist-friendly agenda. They believed in the essential project of environmentalism, but disputed the means by which contemporary activists sought to achieve it. “In their view”, Allitt explains, “the evidence just did not support claims about impending disaster. The threats posted by acid rain, ozone depletion, pesticides, and nuclear waste were real but entirely manageable, they wrote. Citizens and governments must not

²⁰ Ibid., 113.

²¹ Patrick Allitt, *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 156.

²² Ibid., 157.

overreact”.²³ “Prophets rushing into the public space bearing environmental warnings like lanterns held high found themselves suddenly in a very crowded square”, writes Buell.²⁴

By rebranding environmentalists as “apocalypse abusers” and painting them as overzealous doomsayers, counterenvironmental thinkers began to undermine their impact on the popular consciousness. Although the public still considered environmentalism important, it became—as explored earlier in this chapter—absorbed into the language of consumerism and growth. To be a “crusty hippie” was no longer to be a modern, environmentally minded citizen, but rather a misery-peddling prophet of eco-doom. The pervasiveness of this new perspective is evident in the decline in ecohorror throughout the 1980s and 90s. It would seem that *Prophecy*’s release in 1979 marked not just the moment when po-faced environmental didacticism was deemed palatable for major studio audiences, but also the moment when earnest, activist-tinged ecohorror peaked.

This is not to say that public appetite for the darker side of nature did not exist, but rather that it took a more non-anthropogenic turn. Natural disaster narratives, as opposed to “revenge of nature”, were a common motif in popular culture, particularly towards the end of the 1990s. Movies such as *Twister* (1996), *Dante’s Peak* (1997), *Volcano* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Armageddon* (1998) all dramatise the destructive side of nature—tornadoes, volcanoes, and even meteors—but crucially none tackled human-induced crisis. Instead, they focus on events outside of humankind’s control. While it is tempting to argue that this fits within a wider pattern of rebellion against environmental ideals, representing a desire to place the “blame” back on nature rather than the actions of people, in truth it is more likely a response to a number of high-profile

²³ Ibid., 180.

²⁴ Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, 2–3.

natural disasters that occurred in the years prior to these films' release; for example, the eruption of Mount St Helens in Washington State in 1980 and Hurricane Andrew striking Florida in 1992. The 1990s also saw "an extremely large number of damaging storms causing losses exceeding \$100 million",²⁵ so public anxiety about such damage would have been high. The discovery of comet Hale-Bopp in 1995, and its subsequent visibility to the naked eye for eighteen months in 1996 and 1997, also suggests a reason divorced from environmental politics for the proliferation of speculative fiction about meteor-related catastrophe.

That a desire to avoid the "environmentalist" label would impact the horror genre specifically makes sense, and one need only look to the contemporary sci-fi genre to see that environmental themes were not absent from popular culture as a whole. *Ecohorror* rather than *ecofiction* seems to have lost popularity as a vehicle for ecological awareness. This assertion is, of course, open to debate, as it relies on an absence of certain elements rather than a proliferation, yet a documented cultural shift in the perception of environmentalism does parallel a decline in the popularity of ecohorror, and the correspondences merit consideration.

Assuming this link, then, horror-comedy seems like a natural progression for those still wishing to deal in works of ecohorror. Where ecohorror appears in a more familiar form, it takes on a new aspect specific to its cultural context—that of comedy. Just as it no longer seems appealing to be a "doomsday environmentalist", so it no longer seems advisable to raise awareness of anthropogenic catastrophe through straight-faced horror. Indeed, one of the strengths of comedy as a medium for social messaging is that it may invite viewers to laugh *with* the creators, rather than leave them feeling looked down upon or preached to by a text. Nicole Seymour, in *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*, identifies some of the problems with

²⁵ Stanley A. Changnon and David Changnon, "Record-High Losses for Weather Disasters in the United States During the 1990s: How Excessive and Why?," *Natural Hazards* 18, no. 3 (October 1, 1998): 287.

media presentation of scientific knowledge around climate change: in environmentalist documentaries, in particular, the adoption of a didactic, moralising tone may risk speaking only to viewers already in agreement, and an earnest lack of self-awareness may elicit scepticism rather than the intended agreement from an audience. She points to a gap in studies of ecomedia that engage with their subject humourously, and seeks to correct this through examination of two early twenty-first-century films: Hans Lang's 2011 documentary, *Peak*, and Mike Judge's 2006 sci-fi satire of American culture, *Idiocracy*. Both, she says, are examples of "low environmental culture",²⁶ tackling environmentalist issues not with awe or reverence, but with irony and comedy: "Both *Peak* and *Idiocracy* embrace thoroughgoing irony as a way to enact the self-awareness and self-reflection so often lacking in environmental art".²⁷

In the context of 1980s ecohorror, her analysis of *Idiocracy* in particular opens up an avenue of exploration extremely relevant to Troma Studios's *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), being well-placed to counter stereotypes of tree-hugging hippies and to open up space for ecohorror in a potentially non-receptive environment. Sharing the politically incorrect, deeply self-aware tone of *Idiocracy*, *Toxic Avenger* similarly rejects any self-aggrandising or moralising, while still inviting viewers to participate in an identification with pro-environmental sentiment. Despite grounding itself in familiar ecological concerns, and employing many of the tropes of earlier ecohorror, it avoids preaching to its viewers. Instead, it attempts to make them take the side of environmental activists by inviting them to laugh at ecological villains and to root for the triumph of "Toxie" and his community supporters.

²⁶ Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 71.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

Troma Studios as a whole, in fact, promotes the community ideals at the heart of *Toxic Avenger*, and its sympathies for the environmental movement are easily illuminated. Founded in the 1970s by Lloyd Kaufmann and Michael Herz, Troma is a tiny studio that operates on miniscule budgets and a lot of goodwill from its small but dedicated fan-base. Its position in the marketplace is that of the plucky underdog, fighting to keep its off-beat, outlandish outputs afloat amidst big-budget Hollywood releases. At its very core, then, is a battle between the “little guy” and “big business”. The *Toxic Avenger* franchise is Troma’s most popular and most successful property, comprising four movies (1984–2000); a short-lived children’s television series, *The Toxic Crusaders* (1991); and even a successful stage musical (2008). The first film, *The Toxic Avenger*, was released in 1984 to limited recognition, but its ultra-violent, ultra-campy, ultra-misogynistic style slowly gained a cult following over subsequent years.

The film follows the transformation of weedy mop-boy Melvin Junko (Mark Torgl) into the infamous superhero, the Toxic Avenger (affectionately known as “Toxie”). *The New York Times* deftly summarises the movie in a sympathetic review from 1986:

TROMAVILLE, N.J., a town whose corrupt public officials sit around stuffing themselves with junk food and collecting graft, proudly bills itself as "The Toxic Waste Capital of the World." Even the beautiful people at the local health spa are moral monsters whose favorite sport is running down children in fast cars. In between pumping iron and making assignations in the sauna, these demented health nuts also delight in tormenting poor Melvin (Mark Torgl), the gym's mop boy, who is almost a dead ringer for Mad magazine's Alfred E. Neuman.

One evening, after being made the butt of a particularly vicious practical joke, Melvin jumps out of a window of the spa and lands in a vat of toxic waste that is being transported to the town dump. After being immersed in what looks like boiling lettuce, Melvin is transformed from a 98-pound nerd into a growling Frankenstein-like hulk (Mitchell Cohen) who immediately sets about “cleaning up” Tromaville of corruption and evil.

“Corruption and evil”, in this instance, draws on archetypes familiar from many of the ecohorror texts already discussed. Tromaville’s Mayor Belgoody (Pat Ryan Jr.) is the locus of the city’s crime,

in a similar vein to the corrupt mayor of *Jaws*. Similarly, the health centre operates as another focal point for evil—its attendees are obsessed with their perfect bodies at the expense of all else. Health of the body takes precedence over health of the community, just as it would in *American Psycho* and *Safe* (as we will soon see) during the decade after *Toxic Avenger*'s release. "I wanted to deal with America's mania over creating young, beautiful bodies", says Lloyd Kaufman of the film's initial concept, which was a "conventional horror film" entitled *Health Club Horror*.²⁸

In Lloyd Kaufman's book, *All I Need to Know About Filmmaking I Learned from the Toxic Avenger* (1998), he recognises that "the inspiration for *The Toxic Avenger* came from numerous and various sources of pop culture, the mainstream media, and the underground",²⁹ and names three important environmental influences on the film: first, the environmental movement itself; second, *Silent Spring*; and third, "Pixie Dust"—"irradiated waste from x-ray machines".³⁰ While it may parody familiar structures, it draws inspiration in earnest from familiar sources as well.

Kaufman's perspective on the environmental movement, however, involves a rather different timeline than most accounts. Troma has, he claims, been accused of "jumping on the environmental bandwagon" with *Toxic Avenger*. According to him, however, the environmental movement was still an "underground" one when they made the film in 1983.³¹ Although inaccurate, as accounts of the movement in both this and previous chapters will demonstrate, this understanding does go some way towards explaining the film's appearance during a decade otherwise quiet for ecohorror. Kaufman has emphatically expressed his disdain for trends in

²⁸ Lloyd Kaufman and James Gunn, *All I Need To Know About FILMMAKING I Learned From THE TOXIC AVENGER: The Shocking True Story of Troma Studios* (New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010), 160–61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.

³¹ *Ibid.*

filmmaking, and as a result appears not to see—or at least, not to *want* to see—his film as slotting within any particular cultural zeitgeist.

Silent Spring he credits in less detail, though acknowledges that it made an “indelible impact” when he read it as a young man.³² Relatedly, he attributes the inspiration for Toxie’s mutation to an article in American journalist I. F. Stone’s magazine *Weekly*, which describes how South American children would play with a substance that they called “pixie dust”, but which was actually waste from x-ray machines. “The children had fun frolicking in the beautiful, shiny sparkles, and it ended up killing them”, Kaufman writes. “To this day, I find this chilling”.³³ Linking the two, he also tells the story of his wife, Pat, who as a child “used to dance and play in the DDT clouds sprayed in her . . . neighbourhood”, only to be later diagnosed with breast cancer.³⁴

Despite these familiar and weighty influences, the film itself declines to adopt a reverent or lofty tone on the subject of ecological destruction. Rather, it delights in punishing those responsible for its ruin in ever more gruesome and outlandish ways, implicitly positioning its audience in the role of sympathisers to the cause. Toxie, with his mutant origins and desire for revenge, is both the hero and the victim of an unjust system. His poisoned body is the result of a corrupt, uncaring system, and as we, the viewers, root for him, we also find ourselves rooting for the wider cause.

Murray and Heumann privilege the function of comedy as social unifier in their analysis of *Toxic Avenger*, arguing that “[jokes] are meant for an audience that understands the punchline,

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 166–67.

³⁴ Ibid., 167.

so they build community (and are built on it) and don't work without awareness—understanding”.³⁵ They write that,

Eco-film comedies . . . burgeoned from the late 1980s till the present, perhaps because they poke fun at extremists and provide a space where heroes like Melvin of *The Toxic Avenger* are so flawed they become nearly ineffective. These films have the potential to show us the positive consequences of placing the good of community above the individual—a climax ecosystem”. (109)

Film critic Ian Conrich concurs in his analysis of communitarianism in Troma Studios productions, arguing that there is “a deep belief in Tromaville . . . in the value of community, the family, and the environment”,³⁶ and that *Toxic Avenger* is “for justice and democracy, good citizenship, social solidarity, and *against* crime, corruption, greed, pollution, and the excesses of capitalism”.³⁷ Despite the irreverence of its presentation, it nonetheless offers a sincere message about the need for collective action against environmental degradation.

The ending of the film most clearly makes this point, depicting a hero unable to triumph without the support of the wider community. Toxie starts his journey into heroism alone, swooping in to rescue cops from violent gangs or restaurant patrons from armed robbers and sexual assault. As the film progresses, however, acting alone no longer suffices. The corrupt mayor, capitalising on Toxie's mistaken belief that he has killed an innocent woman during an incident in a dry-cleaner's store, calls in the National Guard to eliminate him. The mayor's success, however, is hampered by the citizens of Tromaville, who rally around their toxic hero and place themselves

³⁵ Murray and Heumann, *Monstrous Nature*, 112.

³⁶ Ian Conrich, “Communitarianism, Film Entrepreneurism, and the Crusade of Troma Entertainment,” in *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Christine Holmlund and Justin Wyatt (New York: Routledge, 2004), 114.

³⁷ Ibid.

between him and the guards' guns. Although Toxie is ultimately the one to kill the mayor, his ability to do so is predicated on the actions of the wider community.

Despite its ironic, comedic tone, then, *Toxic Avenger* rewards ecocritical interrogation with subtexts not unlike those of its more straight-laced counterparts. In a cultural context where dire warnings of doom may run the risk of alienating audiences not already on the side of environmentalism, Troma offers an alternative presentation strategy. Drawing on sources of inspiration common to earlier ecohorror texts, Kaufmann twists them into a different vision of what it might mean to be part of an environmentally sound society, and points to community as the locus of successful activism.

Before concluding, however, a brief look at another comedy ecohorror of the same period demonstrates that the subgenre's passage into the zeitgeist can neutralise the format just as easily as it can mobilise it; eco-comedy is not environmentalist simply by virtue of the texts upon which it draws. *Arachnophobia* (dir. Frank Marshall, 1990) adopts all of the trappings of the "revenge of nature" film, but, unlike *Toxic Avenger*, strips the structures of any hints of environmentalist meaning. Produced by Hollywood Pictures (a Walt Disney company) with a budget of \$22 million—compared to Toxie's \$0.5 million—and awkwardly billed by its marketing team as a "thrill-omedy",³⁸ it performed well with mainstream audiences and turned a respectable profit.³⁹

Arachnophobia charts the invasion of a small American town by an influx of deadly spiders, and their subsequent defeat by the town's newest resident, physician Ross Jennings (Jeff Daniels). The plot shares many similarities with *Kingdom of the Spiders*, explored in the previous chapter, but

³⁸ Owen Gleiberman, "Review: Arachnophobia," EW.com, July 27, 1990, <https://ew.com/article/1990/07/27/arachnophobia-2/>.

³⁹ "1990 Yearly Box Office Results," Box Office Mojo, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1990&p=.htm>.

with a number of key differences: in particular, the genesis of the killer spiders and the ending's suggestion of more widespread disaster. Where *Toxic Avenger* stays true to its source material's central concerns while reconfiguring its tropes, *Arachnophobia* appropriates all of the structures of earlier ecohorror while simultaneously neutering the subject matter.

Arachnophobia's spiders, while a natural threat, are crucially not deadly because of anthropogenic interference, merely by virtue of their existence. They have not been mutated by exposure to pesticides, nor angered by destruction of their natural habit; they have simply hitched a ride from the Amazon rainforest with an entomologist and his team. To that end, they lack even the blunt ecological messaging of *Kingdom of the Spiders*, suggesting more that the natural world is an inherently violent and terrifying enemy than that we may be responsible for its revolt.

The ending, similarly, superficially resembles that of *Kingdom of the Spiders* and its generic counterparts, yet aligns it more with the natural disaster films of the 1990s than nature's revenge of previous decades. Where previously ecohorror has tended to suggest a wider issue at the end of a text—if the environmental threat has been contained or defeated in one space, it is usually seen to be spreading to other locations—*Arachnophobia* once again depoliticises this structure. Having killed the spiders that invaded their home in Canaima, California, Jennings and his family move back to San Francisco. As expected, they are denied a simple, idyllic ending, and their domestic life is interrupted by a natural intrusion once again. This time, however, it is an earthquake—unnerving, but unrelated to their previous tribulations. Where interconnected chains of events are central to most environmentalist narratives, *Arachnophobia* ensures that no “message” disturbs the mainstream appeal of its subject matter. Murray and Heumann argue that “laughing about the environment and its degradation may not only stimulate awareness; that laughter might

also point out a path toward change”,⁴⁰ yet this is not a given. Comedy, while offering the potential for alternative engagement with traditionally serious subjects, is by no means necessarily radical, and parody can disarm a subject just as easily as it can reaffirm it.

***American Psycho's* “Toxic Consciousness”**

Parody, however, was not the only mode of ecohorror during this time, and environmental concerns take wholly different forms in horror literature and film during the 1980s and ‘90s. Turning to texts less overtly influenced by the tropes of 1960s and ‘70s ecohorror, Cynthia Deitering has argued that American writers of the 1980s demonstrate an increasing concern with toxic waste in their fiction, and that their “sustained and various representations of pollution” provide a window into culture’s changing relationship with nature during a “decade that began amid anxious speculation about long-term consequences of the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island and drew to a close amid congressional hearings on the greenhouse effect”.⁴¹ She begins by surveying North American fiction of the decade, finding evidence of a “toxic consciousness” in the work of Saul Bellow, John Cheever, John Gardner, Don DeLillo, Walker Percy, Paul Theroux, and Margaret Atwood, among others. In these texts, she argues, “toxic waste seems to function . . . both as cultural metaphor for a society’s most general fears about its collective future and as expression of an ontological rupture in its perception of the Real”.⁴² In short, she sees that the authors have begun to see a society defined to a large extent by its waste, and that an attendant ontological transformation accompanies this viewpoint.

⁴⁰ Murray and Heumann, *Monstrous Nature*, 105.

⁴¹ Cynthia Deitering, “The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 196.

⁴² Ibid.

This transformation, she explains, is evident in representations of the landscape not as a site of plentiful resources, but as “the already-used-up”.⁴³ Drawing on Heidegger’s assertion in “The Question Concerning Technology” (1953) that “what we call the Real is revealed as . . . the ‘standing reserve’ of industrial and consumer resources”,⁴⁴ Deitering suggests that “toxic consciousness” might be considered the next step in this way of seeing nature.

Heidegger, in his essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” contended that the Western cultural perception of nature and material objects was that of “standing reserve” whereby a tract of land was revealed and represented as a coal mining district, a mineral deposit; or a river was regarded and represented as a supplier of water power . . . What has happened recently . . . is a transmutation of Heidegger’s essence of technology in which what we have previously regarded and represented as the standing reserve of nature and material objects has been virtually used up. Thus, what we call the Real is not represented not as the standing-reserve but as the already-used-up. The tract of land is now represented as a possible site of contaminated waste, left over from coal mining operations. The river is now represented as a possible waste receptacle for the by-products of a nuclear plant . . . In other words, what is revealed now is the waste of the empire.⁴⁵

In other words, we have become increasingly conscious of that which is *not* left to draw upon, and this has impacted upon literary representation of nature in turn.

Aside from a passing mention of Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, genre fiction does not factor into Deitering’s analysis. I contend, however, that toxic consciousness is evident throughout 1980s horror as well, in particular in condemnations of contemporary consumerist lifestyles. Both Bret Easton Ellis’s novel *American Psycho* (1990) and John Carpenter’s film *They Live* (1988) partake in this way of viewing the world, and offer perspectives on 1980s environmentalism that are often skipped over in surveys of recent ecohorror.

⁴³ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

While it is not my contention that *American Psycho* is first and foremost an ecologically minded novel, I do argue that the aesthetic of waste haunts its depictions of affluent New York lifestyles—it is a novel that rewards examination at scales beyond the human. The novel follows twenty-six-year-old Patrick Bateman, an investment banker who enjoys expensive products, upscale restaurants, and the grisly murder of society’s downtrodden. He is the consumer consumed by his own lifestyle, who resorts to literally eating human flesh in an attempt to rouse some kind of real feeling in himself. “There is an idea of Patrick Bateman”, he states. “Some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze, and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable... *I simply am not there*”.⁴⁶

American Psycho’s depiction of a society ruled by consumer impulses and commodification of all aspects of life was widely panned upon its release, mainly for what critics viewed as its excessive indulgence in misogynistic violence. The Los Angeles chapter of the National Organisation for Women (NOW) called it little more than “a how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women”,⁴⁷ Norman Mailer called it “a monstrous book with a monstrous thesis” in *Vanity Fair*,⁴⁸ and Roger Rosenblatt in the *New York Times* “offered a piece . . . sensationally entitled ‘Snuff This Book! Will Bret Easton Ellis Get Away With Murder?’”⁴⁹ Most of the media firestorm erupted before anyone had seen the manuscript or read a word”, writes Julian Murphet,⁵⁰ who has also called *American Psycho* “a scandalous novel” in the vein of *Lady*

⁴⁶ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 2006), 376–77.

⁴⁷ Julian Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis’s American Psycho: A Reader’s Guide* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2002), 68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

Chatterley's Lover, *Ulysses*, *Lolita*, and *The Satanic Verses*.⁵¹ Leaked passages from the book, including one depicting the insertion of a rat into a woman's vagina, resulted in Simon & Schuster cancelling its publication a mere month before its intended publication date. Although Vintage subsequently took it on, likely anticipating the controversy to result in guaranteed sales, "the damage to the novel's reputation was severe".⁵²

Academic critics have subsequently taken a more favourable view of *American Psycho*⁵³ as a dark reflection of society's consumerist impulses, and some have also acknowledged its potential for ecocritical investigation, although these have tended to focus on the film over the novel. The first is Murray and Heumann's examination of the film, in which they argue that Bateman "negotiates a postcolonial frontier in which women become landscapes to exploit, annihilate, and cannibalize, just as he and his colleagues consume material culture and collide with those who provide it".⁵⁴ In a similar vein, Jennifer Brown contends in *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* (2012) that "[the] cannibal has become the reviled image of overindulgence, overspending, and overexploitation of resources",⁵⁵ and positions *American Psycho* as a narrative of "cyclical revenge": "the world that preached consume is itself consumed by the very products that it creates".⁵⁶ These cannibal-as-ultimate-consumer readings support the assertion of an underlying toxic consciousness in the novel, also present outside of the ultraviolent moments of literal human consumption.

⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

⁵² Ibid., 67.

⁵³ Despite the author's best efforts.

⁵⁴ Murray and Heumann, *Monstrous Nature*, 157.

⁵⁵ Jennifer Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* (New York: AIAA, 2012), 214.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 194.

If the first aspect of toxic consciousness is, as Deitering says, its function as metaphor for our “most general fears” about our society’s future, then *American Psycho* positions itself within such a consciousness from the very beginning. One of the novel’s epigraphs—“And as things fell apart / Nobody paid much attention”—comes from the Talking Heads song “(Nothing but) Flowers”. Released in 1988, it constitutes a scathing response to Joni Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi” (1970), itself an earnest lament about urbanisation and the eradication of nature:

Don’t it always seem to go
That you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone
They paved paradise
Put up a parking lot⁵⁷

In “Flowers”, released in 1988, Talking Heads frontman David Byrne comes out in defence of the creature comforts and material pleasures of consumer lifestyles. The song’s narrator seems to inhabit a world in the process of rewilding, where highways, shopping malls, and parking lots are being reclaimed by nature:

From the age of dinosaurs, cars have run on gasoline
Where? Where have they gone?
Now it’s nothing but flowers ...

If this is paradise
I wish I had a lawnmower
You’ve got it, you’ve got it ...

And as things fell apart
Nobody paid much attention
You’ve got it, you’ve got it ...

Don’t leave me stranded here
I can’t get used to this lifestyle⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Joni Mitchell, *Ladies of the Canyon* (Los Angeles: Reprise, 1970).

⁵⁸ Talking Heads, *Naked* (New York: Warner Bros., 1988).

In a wider context, one can envision Byrne's voice as an embodiment of the 1980s as a whole, speaking to Mitchell as a figurehead for the ideals of the previous decade. She is the wide-eyed environmentalist, eager for a more "natural" life ("Hey, farmer, farmer / Put away that DDT now"), while he embraces the progress of a consumer society and longs to revel in its pleasures ("I dream of cherry pies / Candy bars, and chocolate-chip cookies"). Indeed, it seems that Byrne's narrator is a *reformed* environmentalist—"I'd wish that we'd start over / But I guess I was wrong"—who can be seen, in a certain light, to epitomise the Reagan era:

As Kendall Philips notes, traditional values . . . were replaced [in the 1980s] by overwhelming desire for personal gain, and this gave sanction to an age of narcissism, and 'not only were the utopian, leftist dreams dead and buried, but former flower children were working as cut-throat venture capitalists. The era of peace and love had been largely replaced by a decade of power and greed.'⁵⁹

Although environmental issues may not explicitly form the core of *American Psycho*, that this shift in attitudes is how Ellis chooses to introduce the novel suggests that he is indeed participating in a kind of toxic consciousness.

The isolation of this particular quote also fits with the novel's treatment of superficiality and the paying of lip-service to serious societal issues. Taken at face value, and out of context, the lyric seems like a denunciation of 1980s culture and suggests that the novel is examining a world in the process of falling apart. It is the kind of quote that one might reuse, unthinkingly, based on that assumption; a snappy soundbite with cultural and intellectual weight. It carries echoes of Bateman's own pronouncements about the state of the world, which he lays out over dinner at an upscale restaurant in the film adaptation (dir. Mary Harron, 2000):

Well, we have to end apartheid for one. And slow down the nuclear arms race, stop terrorism and world hunger . . . Better and more affordable long-term care for the elderly, control and find a cure for the AIDS epidemic, clean up environmental damage from toxic

⁵⁹ Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*, 182.

waste and pollution . . . plus conserve natural resources and wilderness areas and reduce the influence of political action committees.

“Most importantly”, he finishes, “we have to promote general social concern and less materialism in young people”. This, of course, contrasts with chapter after chapter listing twenty-six-year-old Bateman’s choice of skincare products, electronic gadgetry, clothing brands, and dining choices, interspersed with the murders of homeless people and prostitutes.

The disjunction between the world as Bateman sees it and the actual state of reality has been the subject of many critical analyses, for *American Psycho* taunts readers with suggestions that its narrator may be unreliable, but refuses to offer any closure on this front. Bruno Zerweck, for example, has dismissed outright the claim that Bateman’s narrative is inconsistent:

There are no inconsistencies or contradictions in the narrative, whether textual or in relation to real-world or literary frames of reference. The narrator knows and openly tells of his deeds and motivations and makes no attempt to ‘hide’ his nature. There is no ‘detective framework’ involved and no unintentional self-incrimination takes place.⁶⁰

Most others, however, grant recognition to the ambiguity that underlies Bateman’s confession. Jennifer Philips rebuts Zerweck, pointing out, “There are inconsistencies in the narrative (such as the scene where a park bench follows Patrick Bateman home), the ‘detective framework’ is signified by the character of Detective Donald Kimball, and there are several instances of unintentional self-incrimination”.⁶¹ Sonia Baleo-Allué similarly argues that there are “many situations when it is hard to believe that everybody fails to notice that Bateman is a serial killer”:

He regularly takes his blood-stained clothes to the dry-cleaner’s, and when a friend asks him about the cause of the stains he says that they are cranberry juice, cranapple juice or ‘Hershey’s Syrup’ . . . [Even harder to believe] is the scene where he hires a cleaning lady after one of his horrific murders. The maid ‘waxes the floor, wipes blood smears off the

⁶⁰ Bruno Zerweck, “Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction,” *Style* 35, no. 1 (2001): 157.

⁶¹ Jennifer Philips, “Unreliable Narration in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*,” *Current Narratives* 1, no. 1 (January 2009): 4.

walls, throws away gore-soaked newspapers without a word'. Besides, Bateman discovers that Owen's flat, where he left the tortured corpses of two girls, has been cleaned and is being sold as if nothing had happened.⁶²

Almost all of Bateman's murder victims, in fact, are "characters who have no reality in the social world that Bateman inhabits".⁶³ In other words, they are the perfect made-up victims, as nobody in Bateman's social circle could even attest to their ever having existed. The narrative may never confirm whether or not Bateman actually committed all of the murders that he claims to have, but in raising the possibility it alerts readers to some necessary strategies for reading the novel: look beneath the surface, never take things at face value, and pay attention to contextual detail.

It is in doing this that we can read elements of toxic consciousness into *American Psycho*, as descriptions of New York City, Bateman's personal-grooming routine, and his choice of products conceal darker realities. The opening pages of the novel build upon this lust for consumer goods, while also introducing the accompanying spectre of waste. Bateman takes a cab through the city with a colleague, Timothy Price, who opines that, "I hate to complain—I really do—about the trash, the garbage, the disease, about how filthy this city really is and you and I know that it is a sty..."⁶⁴ The irony of his pronouncements lies not just in the position of privilege from which he speaks them—as a wealthy man who can take cabs from point to point and never actually has to interact with the filth and "disease" that he finds so distasteful—but in the description of Price that follows:

He continues talking as he opens his new Tumi calfskin attaché case he bought at D. F. Sanders. He places the Walkman in the case alongside a Panasonic wallet-size cordless

⁶² Sonia Baelo-Allué, *Bret Easton Ellis's Controversial Fiction: Writing between High and Low Culture* (London: A&C Black, 2011).

⁶³ Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho*, 44.

⁶⁴ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, 4.

portable folding Easa-phone (he used to own the NEC 9000 Porta portable) and he pulls out today's newspaper.⁶⁵

His case is new. His phone, we can assume from the mention of the older model, is also new. Underlying Bateman's fetishistic cataloguing of Price's latest purchases, and compounded by his complaints about "trash" and "garbage", is the obscured reality that much of this waste is caused by the relentless cycle of consumption perpetuated by this type of affluent, spendthrift lifestyle.

Bateman's description of his apartment similarly denies the unsustainability that underlies its contents. "In the early light of a May dawn this is what the living room of my apartment looks like", he tells the reader:

Over the white marble and granite gas-log fireplace hangs an original David Onica . . . The painting overlooks a long white down-filled sofa and a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba . . . A Toshiba VCR sits in a glass case beneath the TV set . . . A glass-top coffee table with oak legs by Turchin sits in front of the sofa with Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don't smoke.⁶⁶

The description continues for pages and pages, catalogue-like, listing all of the features and selling-points of his possessions as well their brand-names. The narrative, having already highlighted the toxicity of excessive consumption, thus participates in what Deitering describes as a redefining of the Real, from the "standing reserve" to the "already-used-up". Just as the tract of land was once a source of potential abundance but is "now represented as a possible site of contaminated waste", so have possessions not come to signify comfort and abundance but rather waste, pollution, and built-in obsolescence.

Several of the specific products that Bateman uses reinforce this notion of toxicity at the heart of consumption. After the list of his apartment's furnishings comes a list of Bateman's

⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 23–24.

preferred beauty products, just as long and in-depth in its sales language. Two snippets in particular stand out from an ecocritical perspective. The first, his Vidal Sassoon shampoo, which, we are told, “is especially good at getting rid of the coating of dried perspiration, salts, oils, airborne pollutants and dirt that can weigh down the hair and flatten it to the scalp which can make you look older”.⁶⁷ In the context of products-as-waste, products-to-combat-waste-created-by-other-products seem like an especially empty promise.⁶⁸ Next comes “Greune Natural Revitalizing Shampoo, the conditioner, and the Nutrient Complex”, which Bateman prefers to use “on weekends or before a date”: “These are formulas that contain D-panthenol, a vitamin-B-complex factor; polysorbate 80, a cleansing agent for the scalp; and natural herbs”.⁶⁹ Once again we see the same tensions at play, with the “natural herbs” offering a reassuring air of earth-friendliness, even though the *Open Chemistry Database* offers the following environmental precaution for polysorbate 80: “Do not let product enter drains”.⁷⁰

Approaching *American Psycho* from this perspective, then, uncovers a little-examined environmental facet to the text. Like *The Stepford Wives* from the previous decade, it may not be first and foremost an ecohorror text, but its treatment of the subject contributes to our understanding of how horror has responded to environmental issues.

“They’re Colorizing It”: *They Live* and Environmental Justice

⁶⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁸ Indeed, a 2018 study found that emission from household products, including personal care items like perfume and deodorant, contribute as much to urban pollution as gasoline or diesel. B. McDonald et al. “Volatile chemical products emerging as largest petrochemical source of urban organic emissions.” *Science*. Vol. 359, February 16, 2018, p. 760. doi:10.1126/science.aag0524.

⁶⁹ Ellis, *American Psycho*, 26.

⁷⁰ Pubchem, “Polysorbate 80,” accessed February 19, 2018, <https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/compound/5281955>.

They Live also employs toxicity as a metaphor for fears about humanity's collective future, although environmental representation is much more central to the narrative than it is in *American Psycho*. Like *American Psycho*, *They Live* is obsessed with surfaces and concealment, and with the toxicity (both literal and metaphorical) that underlies consumer society in the Reagan era. "Hiding underneath the supposed variation and free consumer choice of late-twentieth-century American capitalism", writes Gerry Canavan, "we find instead our true situation of stifling and oppressive anti-choice, a crushing sameness that forces us all to participate automatically in identical gestures of conformity".⁷¹ *American Psycho* hints at the waste and filth that sustains such lifestyles, but *They Live* makes it central to its plot.

Like Ellis, Carpenter turns his attention to the capitalist excesses of the 1980s, and also like Ellis locates monstrosity in the lifestyles of the hyper-wealthy. "[*They Live*] was my rage at the Reagan Revolution, and yuppies, and the greed of the 80s", Carpenter explains. "I couldn't take it".⁷² The film follows its protagonist, named Nada (meaning "Nothing", played by professional wrestler "Rowdy" Roddy Piper), freshly arrived in Los Angeles and looking for construction work, through his discovery of a pair of sunglasses that reveal a shocking truth: society's wealthy elite are actually hideous aliens masquerading as human beings, and our colourful world of media and advertising is just a glossy veneer for a series of black-and-white mind-control messages. Without the sunglasses, Nada sees an advertisement for a Caribbean holiday. With them, the billboard reads "MARRY AND REPRODUCE". A sign for a close-out sale in a shop window becomes "CONSUME". Magazine racks read "SUBMIT", "STAY ASLEEP", "NO INDEPENDENT THOUGHT". A dollar bill is revealed to say "THIS IS YOUR GOD". Now a fugitive as a result

⁷¹ Gerry Canavan, "Obey, Consume: Class Struggle as Revenge Fantasy in *They Live*," *Film International* 14, no. 3/4 (2017): 75.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 73.

of his ideological awakening, Nada discovers that there are others on Earth who can “see”, and attends a secret meeting of activists working to expose the aliens by destroying the source of their broadcast and revealing their true form to the population. Nada succeeds in doing so, but at the cost of his own life, and the film ends with humans across the globe learning the truth about the ruling class.

Where Ellis hints at the environmental impact of consumerist lifestyles, Carpenter makes unsustainability the core of his film’s plot: in *They Live*, the aliens have invaded Earth to seize control of its natural resources after depleting their home planet of its own. They view Earth as a kind of third-world country, and are happy to deplete its resources and cause global warming in the knowledge that they can move on to another planet when they are done. “We are like a natural resource to them”, speaks an illicit broadcast on TV. “Deplete the planet, move on to another. They want benign indifference. They want us drunk. We could be pests, we could be food, but all we really are is livestock”. In this instance, consumer greed is directly shown to result in the destruction of the planet, and as such, the film’s indictment of capitalism is intimately bound up with images of natural destruction, aligning it closely with the toxic consciousness of Carpenter’s literary contemporaries.

Of course, ecohorror has been explicitly linking consumer waste with natural destruction since at least the 1970s; shots of errant plastic waste and careless consumerism are commonplace across the “revenge of nature” subgenre. *They Live*, however, declines to participate in this mode of representation, and as such reflects a widespread tendency in the environmental movement to shift away from viewing nature as an entity separate from humankind, and towards a more holistic view of people as part of the broader ecosystem. In *They Live*, rather than nature taking its revenge upon human transgressors, we see *humans* fight back on behalf of our planet. Rather than othering nature, Carpenter positions the super-wealthy and the uncaring as literal aliens who care nothing

for the future of the Earth, and offers a vision of a self-sacrificing hero who can take meaningful action to expose their menace. The divide, therefore, is not between humans and the natural world, but between those who see the planet as home and those who see it as a resource to be exploited.

In a 2017 article entitled “OBEY, CONSUME”, Gerry Canavan envisions the film as a class-based revenge fantasy. “By transforming financial and cultural elites into uncanny alien monsters, who cannot be reasoned or negotiated with and who can thus only be killed, *They Live* radically shifts the terms of class struggle from a dispute among humans to a life-and-death battle between separate and incommensurate species”.⁷³ He posits that at the core of the film lies a longing for “moral clarity”, for a defined enemy at whom we can direct our rage and against whom we can fight for a better world.⁷⁴ Evan Calder Williams similarly called *They Live* the “wish-image of an absent clarity”:

For lingering behind the sense that, *can you imagine how awful it would be if the world was run by powerful aliens?*, is the real question: *wouldn't it be nice if it were run by powerful aliens, if we could find some inhuman driver at the wheel, if we knew who to blame all along?* Isn't that what we really want, to know once and for all that there is some conspiratorial reason and order behind the blind contingencies of the world order?⁷⁵

In other words, we may secretly long for the global elite to reveal themselves as literal monsters because then their actions might be more comprehensible; “we’d have something we could *literally* fight”.⁷⁶

He also asserts, however, that the film does not sustain the “binary logic” of such a desire, and ends up directing its rage at the human collaborators rather than the aliens themselves. “[By]

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid..

⁷⁵ Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), 7.

⁷⁶ Canavan, “Obey, Consume: Class Struggle as Revenge Fantasy in *They Live*,” 73.

the end the political and ethical centre of the film is not what to do with the aliens, but rather what to do with the human traitors, with the ones who have chosen to obey not as the result of subliminal programming but rather as the consequence of a freely made and informed choice”.⁷⁷ These human traitors are those who are not actual ghouls, but who have “sold out” and become complicit in exchange for a comfortable lifestyle. Selling out is most explicitly dramatised in the figure of the Drifter (George Flower), who appears first in the shantytown at the start of the film and later, much changed: well-dressed and clean-shaven, after joining the forces of the ruling invaders. He explains,

You still don’t get it. There ain’t no countries anymore. They’re running the whole show. They own the whole planet. They can do whatever they want. We can have it good for a change. If we help them, they’ll leave us alone to make some money. You can have a taste of the good life. It’s what everybody wants . . . We all sell out every day, might as well be on the winning team.

It is in this figure of the “traitor” rather than the alien that “we find *They Live*’s true reflection of the yuppie’, argues Canavan. They, for the most part are “not the decrepit billionaire masters of the world, but the young, upwardly mobile, upper-middle-class professionals who have sold out in their service”.⁷⁸

The image of the middle- and upper-classes depleting the planet for their own gain positions *They Live* as a kind of updated nature-fights-back narrative, one that resists the urge to pit humankind and nature against one another. In *They Live*, the fate of the planet’s resources and the fate of its people are one and the same, and those who would deny that are painted as traitors to the human race. As such, class revenge and nature’s revenge become intertwined, reflecting

⁷⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 78.

many aspects of the environmental justice movement that emerged in the United States during the 1980s.

Environmental justice is, according to the EPA, “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”.⁷⁹ As a movement, it arose over a number of years as vulnerable groups began to draw attention to the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on their lives. In 1968, sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, went on strike for fair pay and better working conditions—the “first time African Americans mobilised a national, broad-based group to oppose environmental injustices”.⁸⁰ In 1982, over 500 environmental and civil rights activists were arrested during a sit-in protesting a chemical landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, which prompted a government study entitled “Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities”.⁸¹ By 1994, the signing of Executive Order 12898 “mandated that ‘each Federal agency shall make achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low-income populations.’”⁸² If the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s expanded “environmentalism” as a term beyond simple wilderness preservation, the environmental justice movement of the 1980s and 90s reconceptualised it even further: in 1993,

⁷⁹ United States Environmental Protection Agency, “Environmental Justice,” epa.gov, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/widgets/ejscreenwidget.html>.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ronald D. Sandler and Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 28.

Lois Gibbs—founder of the Love Canal Homeowner’s Association in the 1970s and later the Centre for Health, Environment and Justice in 1980—writes that:

Over the past ten years the Movement for Environmental Justice has redefined the word environment. No longer does the media, the general public or our opponents see the environmental movement as one that is focused on open space, trees, and endangered species alone. They have finally got it! The Environmental Justice Movement is about people and the places they live, work and play.⁸³

It is important to note that environmental justice campaigners did not redefine the movement as a whole, but rather represented another fork in its branch. Many see environmental justice as a focus on the human at the expense of the wilderness—“quite explicitly put[ting] human, cultural, and economic concerns over environmental concerns”.⁸⁴ Kevin DeLuca argues that:

If the environmental movement adopts the human-centered perspective of the environmental justice movement, they will be unable to make the hard decisions that increase human suffering, that require putting other beings and ecosystems, not humans, first. Putting humans always first is a crucial cause of the environmental crisis we now face.⁸⁵

It is not, however, the place of this thesis to argue for one viewpoint over the other, but rather to note the influence of ever-more diverse aspects of the environmental movement on ecological representation in horror. *They Live*, while notably absent from existing discussions of ecohorror, represents a more nuanced view of contemporary ecological engagement than its ultraviolent B-movie aesthetic might suggest.

Home-Sick Again: Ecosickness and *Safe*

⁸³ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

It is within this context that Todd Haynes's *Safe* appeared in 1994, charting the story of wealthy, suburban housewife Carol White (played by a then-little-known Julianne Moore in her first leading role) as she succumbs to a mysterious "environmental illness" brought on, allegedly, by exposure to chemicals in her everyday life. Although it has been acknowledged as both a horror film and an ecologically minded film, the only current source to explicitly mention it as an "ecohorror" film is Bernice M. Murphy's *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, which naturally focuses on its depiction of suburban anxieties over ecological ones.⁸⁶ As in my previous chapters, however, what I hope to do is demonstrate the film's importance to any consideration of the lineage of ecohorror. It has little in common with 1970s "revenge of nature" narratives, and arrives too early to be categorised with the large-scale ecohorror of the twenty-first century, but it captures a number of concerns prominent within environmental discourse of the '90s and deserves a more prominent place in any consideration of the subgenre.

Like *They Live*, *Safe* is set in Los Angeles, the site of any number of dystopian landscapes of the 1980s and '90s: *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), *Predator 2* (1990) and Carpenter's own *Escape from L.A.* (1996). It was also, as mentioned in chapter one, the setting for Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* and for the city scenes in the latter half of *Them!*. L.A. may be overrepresented in cinema due to its significance to the film industry, but the city's environmental status makes it an apt choice of setting for the smog-laden futuristic visions of *Blade Runner* or the ecological unease of *Safe*. "For years", note Andrew A. Beveridge and David Halle, "Los Angeles had the reputation as the most environmentally problematic city in the country, with the worst air

⁸⁶ Bernice M. Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 4.

quality”.⁸⁷ “In the speed and scale of its rise as a metropolis, Los Angeles had few rivals in U.S. history”.⁸⁸ In 1970, *Time* had reported that, “The Apollo 10 astronauts could see Los Angeles as a cancerous smudge from 25,000 miles in outer space”.⁸⁹ Although regulation in the 1970s resulted in cleaner air and de-escalated the city’s “smog alert days”, on which the “children of Los Angeles [were] not allowed to run, skip, or jump inside or outside”,⁹⁰ the landscape had been irrevocably altered by increasing suburbanisation and industrialisation, as “between 1940 and 1970, new factories, roads, [and] airports . . . more than doubled its urbanized area”.⁹¹

To go into depth about *Blade Runner* is beyond the scope of this thesis, but its significance to fictional visions of Los Angeles merits a brief mention, even if belongs to the realm of science fiction and not horror. Talking about *Safe*, Haynes remarked that, “I looked at films that took the nation of L.A. as a futuristic spaceland where every trace of nature has been completely superseded by man really far”⁹²—a category within which *Blade Runner* perhaps represents the apotheosis. Buell argues that as part of the emerging cyberpunk genre, *Blade Runner* and its generic counterparts romanticise ecodystopia by using it as little more than a dramatic backdrop to tales of humankind’s future exploits. “If a previous generation of science fiction writers had magnified environmental

⁸⁷ Andrew A. Beveridge and David Halle, “New York and Los Angeles: The Uncertain Future,” in *New York and Los Angeles: The Uncertain Future*, ed. David Halle and Andrew A. Beveridge (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–32.

⁸⁸ Christopher C. Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 142.

⁸⁹ “Fighting to Save the Earth from Man,” *Time*, February 2, 1970, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,878179,00.html>.

⁹⁰ Victor B. Scheffer, *The Shaping of Environmentalism in America* (University of Washington Press, 2013), 6.

⁹¹ Sellers, *Crabgrass Crucible*, 148–9.

⁹² Collier Schorr, “Diary of a Sad Housewife: Collier Schorr Talks with Todd Haynes,” in *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, ed. Julia Leyda (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 43.

problems to apocalyptic dimensions”, argues Buell, “the new generation simply built on this achievement and took it further”:

Startlingly, the new generation accepted with enthusiasm what had been so problematic for its predecessors: the fact that people now lived utterly beyond environmental limits and in disequilibrium with nature. These writers enthusiastically depicted earth’s environmental and social systems as in meltdown and disarray—as, in effect, *in* apocalypse; they then transformed this apocalypse from the end of humanity to the positive and liberating beginning of what they called ‘posthumanity.’⁹³

It seems fitting, therefore, that the city should also form the backdrop to Haynes’s depiction of a life in environmental disarray.

The film comprises two distinct sections: the first documenting Carol’s stifling life as a “housew—homemaker” (her own words) and the development of her “Multiple Chemical Sensitivity” (MCS), and the second following her to a New Age retreat in the desert where she attempts to rid herself of her symptoms and find a cure. To begin with, Carol appears to lead a normal if unfulfilling life; she lives in a large house in the San Fernando Valley in Southern California with her husband Greg (Xander Berkeley) and her stepson Rory (Chauncey Leopardi), has household staff to take care of domestic duties, and fills her days with aerobics classes, lunches with friends, and plans for decorating the house. One day, however, she has a reaction to exhaust fumes while driving behind a truck, and although her doctor cannot identify any cause, her symptoms continue to escalate—hair products, pesticides, and even her husband’s cologne all appear to cause a range of dramatic physical responses. Determined to seek a solution and confirm that her illness is not psychosomatic, she responds to a flyer in the local health club which asks, “Are you allergic to the twentieth century?” It leads her to the Wrenwood retreat, an alternative health centre run by a guru-type figure named Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman). As a fellow MCS

⁹³ Buell, *From Apocalypse to Way of Life*, 236.

sufferer also living with AIDS, Dunning preaches self-love as the solution to all of his clients' illnesses. Despite following his teachings, Carol grows sicker and sicker, and at the end of the film we watch her sitting alone, isolated in a hypoallergenic pod building, still deteriorating, whispering "I love you" to herself in the mirror.

As a horror film, *Safe* is unusual, which perhaps helps to explain its general absence from considerations of the ecohorror subgenre. One interviewer, speaking to Todd Haynes, described it as "a low-impact version of the horror movie", while another called it "a horror film unlike any other horror film". Haynes himself has called it "a completely latent horror film where everyday life is the most frightening of all". This latency, coupled with its self-conscious positioning as an "unapologetically intellectual horror film",⁹⁴ puts the film at a remove from the genre at large, despite its intentional links. This is especially evident in the film's opening scenes, which take place from Carol's point of view, driving down a dark road lit by the headlights of her car. Rebecca Scherr notes how this "subtly weaves in some elements of the horror genre", specifically making reference to the tendency of horror films to begin with a shot from the killer's point of view—John Carpenter's *Halloween* perhaps being the most famous example.⁹⁵ That its horror content is mentioned again and again by critics and reviewers suggests *Safe* as an important text to approach through a horror-specific lens, and as such a valuable perspective on the genre's tackling of ecological issues as well.

The film's portrayal of MCS has been read from a variety of perspectives, tending to focus on issues of social justice: gender, sexuality, race, and class. As Nicole Seymour writes, "*Safe* . . .

⁹⁴ Murphy, *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, 100.

⁹⁵ Rebecca Scherr, "Thinking and Rethinking Whiteness: Todd Haynes's *Safe*," *American Studies in Scandinavia* 41, no. 2 (2009), 73.

links the (in)visibility of envirohealth concerns to dominant racial and class hierarchies, in addition to those of gender”.⁹⁶ Carol’s illness has been read as symptomatic of her entrapment in heterosexual norms, patriarchal structures, and white, middle-class ennui. Crucially, it is at the intersection of these concerns that the film most rewards critical engagement, for the film is, according to Haynes, most interested in “discover[ing] illness in the most unlikely place on the planet: in the safest, most protected, most comfortable, most sealed-off kind of life”.⁹⁷ Although Carol’s gender certainly feeds into her illness—as in *The Stepford Wives*, the male authority figures around her dismiss her concerns as hysterical—her class privilege is what allows her to retreat into her own “healing” fantasy-land, thus situating the text firmly within a field that was just emerging at the time of its release: environmental justice.

In the case of *Safe*, the promotion of environmental justice and a call for collective response to environmental hazards is central to any ecocritical reading of the text. For Haynes himself has said that:

I think what *Safe* is really about is the infiltration of New Age language into institutions. And about the failure of the Left; how it imploded into these notions of self and self-esteem . . . And it’s such a loss because what was once a critical perspective looking out, hoping to change the culture, is turning inward and losing all of its gumption and power.⁹⁸

The film, as Matthew Gandy notes, criticises “the decline of the American Left within which existing connections between modernity, science, and collective ideals of social progress have become unravelled”.⁹⁹ Haynes’s choice of ecological anxiety as a vehicle through which to express

⁹⁶ Nicole Seymour, “‘It’s Just Not Turning Up’: Cinematic Vision and Environmental Justice in Todd Haynes’s ‘Safe,’” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (2011): 28.

⁹⁷ Schorr, “Diary of a Sad Housewife: Collier Schorr Talks with Todd Haynes,” 45.

⁹⁸ Matthew Gandy, “Allergy and Allegory in Todd Haynes’s [Safe],” in *Screening the City*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (London: Verso, 2003), 241.

⁹⁹ Gandy, 241.

wider fears about the state of the Left in American society is testament to the ongoing relevance of environmental issues to wider discourse of the time, even if the prevailing mood forbade the explicit depictions of “crisis” that previous decades allowed for.

Yet, overall, “the film’s engagement with environment, and with attendant concepts such as ‘nature,’ has received relatively little attention”, with the focus instead placed on Carol’s condition as an AIDS analogue.¹⁰⁰ In the context of Haynes’s filmography it of course makes sense to read *Safe* in this light, especially when the film so explicitly melds MCS and AIDS in the character of Dunning, but to reduce it to a simple “MCS equals AIDS” reading is to do a disservice to the text’s complexity. AIDS as an issue of sexuality complements rather than converges with Haynes’s treatment of class, race, and gender to underscore the need for the marginalised to collectivise in a society increasingly focused on the individual.

In her 2011 article “‘It’s Just Not Turning Up’: Cinematic Vision and Environmental Crisis in Todd Haynes’s *Safe*”, Seymour deftly articulates the film’s depiction of the “disparate experiences of bodily risk” endured by lower-class people of colour,¹⁰¹ arguing that the film is not unsympathetic to Carol as a figure of gendered oppression, but that it repeatedly highlights her position of privilege as a wealthy, white person as well. For “every time Carol’s body comes into contact with chemicals or pollutants, we see another person who maintains even more direct and sustained contact with those elements”,¹⁰² and these other people are overwhelmingly non-white service workers. Carol has the privilege of visibility for her illness, even if the men around her (her doctor, her husband, her psychiatrist) are sceptical of her claims. Carol also has the money to

¹⁰⁰ Seymour, “It’s Just Not Turning Up,” 29.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰² Ibid., 37–8.

retreat to the desert in an effort to “cure” herself—noteworthy here is the difference in demographic between the audience at the meeting who respond to the “Are you allergic to the twentieth century?” flier and the residents of Wrenwood. The former is a group of different races and classes, but the vast majority of those who attend the retreat appear to be middle-class white people. The homogeneity of those with the ability to seek “treatment” underscores the inadequacy of their response to the threat; if the environment is making people ill, then attempting to isolate oneself from it turns the problem into “a private issue of incurred risk rather than a public issue of violated rights”.¹⁰³ Instead of seeking to right systemic injustices, Carol chooses to retreat into an individualistic regime of self-care. While she may not be a literal alien (although by the end of the film she certainly resembles one), she has taken the same side as the traitorous humans in *They Live*, prioritising her own wellbeing over that of the wider planet.

Conclusion

Despite its relatively low profile, then, ecohorror continued to develop as a subgenre during the 1980s and ‘90s. Its themes matured as environmental discourse did, and expanded as “environmentalism” began to encompass more and more aspects of modern life. Looking at texts like *The Toxic Avenger*, *American Psycho*, *They Live*, and *Safe* allows us to see that the subgenre did not simply go from “revenge of nature” to the nebulous catastrophes of contemporary horror, but rather passed through a number of stages—building on prominent themes from the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s—before assuming its current forms. The question from here is: how will it adapt, evolve, and mutate even further?

¹⁰³ Ibid., 40.

Conclusion: New Directions in Ecohorror

Returning to the present, we now have a greater idea of how contemporary trends in environmental representation have emerged from previous decades' treatment of ecohorror themes. The 1950s grappled with new scales of destruction, the '60s and '70s with increasingly visible ecological destruction, and the '80s and '90s with cultures of individualism and political backlash against the very idea of being an environmentalist. As environmentalist thought and discourse has evolved, so too has the representation of nature—and issues pertaining to its health—in horror fiction and film. Naturally, the scope of this project means that there will be texts, both fictional and critical, relevant to the subject at hand that have not made it into these pages. I hope that this can encourage further criticism, and not be seen as mere oversight, and to that end wish to briefly dedicate some time in this conclusion to laying out some avenues for further investigation.

It should be noted that the contemporary texts examined in the first chapter date no later than 2014, and that there remains the potential to look at even more recent developments in ecohorror. Although there have been few high-profile ecologically minded horror films of late, a sense of inevitable doom does pervade recent popular releases like *It Follows* (dir. David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *A Quiet Place* (dir. John Krasinski, 2018), *Hereditary* (dir. Ari Aster, 2018), and *It Comes At Night* (dir. Trey Edward Shults, 2017). All deal with a lurking, ever-present threat, and adopt a tone of deep unease. While none of these are “natural horror” *per se*, the wider trend for pessimistic outlooks and pervasive dread in horror is arguably open to a reading in light of current political, social, and environmental unrest across the United States.

Darren Aronofsky's *mother!* (2017) is one recent U.S. horror film that quite explicitly draws on images of natural despoliation and "Mother Earth" in its depiction of destructive male creative urges. In the surreal, dreamlike film, an unnamed poet and his wife/muse endure escalating horrors within the walls of their home, culminating in a crowd of the man's adoring fans murdering their child and the woman burning the house to the ground, ultimately sacrificing herself for her husband's creative renewal. Aronofsky has described it as "depicting the rape and torment of Mother Earth". Despite the film's musings on artistic genius, however, its representations of nature as a nurturing, maternal figure at the mercy of violent male urges are stuck in the 1970s, rooted in a tired, much-critiqued form of gender essentialism.

Although not a horror film, and precluded from inclusion in this thesis in its own right, Christopher Nolan's film *Interstellar* (2014) points to another potential avenue of environmental representation: a natural world beyond rescue. The environmental degradation of *Interstellar's* landscape prompts NASA to develop plans to secure a future for humanity on a world besides Earth, and to leave its home planet behind as a lost cause. Interestingly, the film never directly talks about climate change, perhaps wishing to avoid causing controversy and hoping to ensure its status as a crowd-pleasing blockbuster. Like *I Am Legend*, however, it makes use of Dust Bowl imagery to obliquely evoke man-made environmental disaster, and its shots of burning crops cannot but conjure the spectre of global warming, even if it is never directly named. That a clearly environmentally engaged film declines to tackle the issue directly suggests room for further study of climate-change denial and the desire to avoid accusations of didacticism in contemporary ecohorror and other eco-media.

On the flipside of this is the bombastic petro-dystopian landscape of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (dir. George Miller, 2015), which makes no efforts to disguise the significance of its protagonists' search for the "Green Place" amid the desert hellscape in which they live, or of the status of water

as a precious resource in their society. As part of an Australian rather than American film franchise, it did not fit within the remit of this thesis, but stands out as a major recent treatment of water scarcity and fossil-fuel worship in contemporary culture. The *Mad Max* series began in 1979 with *Mad Max*, which was followed by *Mad Max 2* in 1982, *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* in 1985, and *Fury Road* in 2015. Its resurrection suggests the ongoing resonance of anxieties about fossil-fuel dependence and energy crises in the Western world, and gestures towards another set of themes that may merit consideration by critics of ecohorror.

Literature, as discussed in previous chapters, is an under-examined aspect of the ecohorror genre, which has been largely dominated by film studies to date. Books like Scott Smith's *The Ruins* (2006) have been the subject of critical attention,¹ as has VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, but there remains a great deal of potential to fill this gap in our understanding of the area. As demonstrated in readings of *The Birds* and *The Stepford Wives*, returning to the source texts of popular films is one way to glean new perspectives on ecological representation. We may also to look at recent ecohorror publications like Benjamin Warner's *Thirst* (2016) as direct representations of environmental crisis at a time when horror film is relatively quiet on the subject, and should be alert to the potential to uncover environmental meaning in less overtly ecocritical works. The challenge in identifying texts that engage with the environment in an oblique manner is, of course, precisely *that they engage with the environment in an oblique manner*, and there are likely to be many that have been thus far overlooked.

There is also certainly space in the field for a sustained study of pulp ecohorror of the kind surveyed by Grady Hendrix in *Paperbacks from Hell*, which I have drawn upon at various points in this thesis. Valancourt Books are due to republish selected titles from his survey of mass-market

¹ Dawn Keetley, "Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?" in *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, ed. Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 18.

horror paperbacks, including *The Nest* by Gregory A. Douglas. *The Nest* features giant, mutant cockroaches poisoned by human waste—and, of course, out for revenge—and was originally published in 1980. Largely forgotten until now, it is due for re-release in April 2019, and has the potential to spark new examinations of lowbrow ecohorror publications.

Film and literature are by no means the only media in which ecohorror finds representation, and the burgeoning field of video-game studies holds many opportunities for exploration of the subject. *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) has echoes of *The Road* in its depiction of two characters—father-figure Joel and his young companion Ellie—journeying across a post-apocalyptic North American landscape. Their world has been plagued by zombies as humans have become infected with spores from the cordyceps fungus, an exaggeration of the real-world organism of the same name which invades the living tissues of insects and takes their minds hostage.² The *Fallout* series (Bethesda, 1997–2018) also features a post-apocalyptic United States, this time with a retro-futuristic aesthetic evoking 1950s cold war culture, brought about by international nuclear conflicts over non-renewable commodities. Both series address themes common throughout the history of ecohorror, and as major releases in the industry merit appraisal for their interaction with the broader subgenre.

Before concluding, there is one final point that merits addressing: what bearing does this type of criticism have upon the larger project of “saving the planet”? Since its inception as a field, ecocriticism has struggled with the question of just how much activism is implicit in the work that it does. Clark himself is suspicious of the grand claims of ecocritics to world-changing endeavours. He foregrounds a challenging pair of questions in the introduction to *Ecocriticism on the Edge*:

[H]ow far is much environmental criticism vulnerable to delusions that the sphere of cultural representations has more centrality and power than in fact it has? Worse, might

² Also the genesis of the zombies in British author M. R. Carey’s *The Girl with All the Gifts* (London: Orbit Books, 2014), which features an ending very similar to that of *I Am Legend*.

this exaggerated sense of significant agency in turn produce or perpetuate an illusion all too convenient for the destructive status quo, the belief that endorsing certain symbolic or the imaginary events may be far more crucial or decisive than it really is?³

How, he asks, do we engage with the subject as literary critics without becoming “absurd”?⁴ One perspective holds that, although we may not *directly* influence action, education about the environment will lead to more engaged citizens and a greater desire for collective action in the medium- to long-term. Karen Kilcup, for example, writes that, “Practicing environmental criticism may not mean that as individuals we can safeguard coral reefs or ensure environmental justice, but it might mean that we cultivate enough minds, and spark enough action, to help accomplish such goals together”. (qtd Estok 269) Others hold that culture is central to any environmentalist agenda, as it is through fiction that minds are engaged and inspiration fuelled. “According to [a number of] theorists, our involvement in fictional worlds is not a frivolous waste of time; it’s a crucial way in which we make sense of the world, ourselves, and each other”.

Patrick D. Murphy has noted the links between literature and activism in environmentalist history more generally. American direct-action group EarthFirst!, for example, were “deeply inspired” by *The Monkey Wrench Gang*,⁵ a 1975 novel by Edward Abbey concerning sabotage as a means of environmental protest in the Southwestern United States. At the same time, however, he observes, even the most fervent attempts to spread a particular message through literature can go awry; attempted activism does not necessarily translate to action on the part of its audience. In 1906 the Socialist Party of America commissioned Upton Sinclair to write a book, *The Jungle* (first

³ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 21.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Patrick D. Murphy, *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), 7.

published in their periodical, *An Appeal to Reason*), which would draw public attention to the meatpacking industry's mistreatment of its workers, who had to face "unsafe working and environmentally degrading conditions" daily.⁶ The novel was designed to particularly highlight the threats to workers' wellbeing, ultimately aiming to influence the passing of legislation that would improve their workplaces. Ultimately, however, "the legislation that was passed focused on food safety, which directly benefited the general public but only indirectly benefited the meatpacking workers".⁷ Although it had a direct impact as an activist piece, the particular influence it eventually had was out of the author's control. Even the most calculated attempts to deploy culture in the service of activism do not guarantee its reception.

Even prominent contemporary environmental thinkers disagree on the degree to which apocalyptic discourse is detrimental to climate change. In November 2018, David Attenborough came under scrutiny from environmental writer George Monbiot for suggesting that narratives about the planet need a positive focus. Too much proselytising, Attenborough argues in an interview promoting an upcoming television series, *Dynasties*, acts as a "turn-off" for viewers, who will be more engaged by a softer approach: "You want people to understand the wonder of nature. Some spin-off is that if they appreciate the wonder, then they care about it, and that's when it brings you to your other mission – which is to make people interested, then more likely to care and conserve, and become active in saving the planet".⁸ However, the state of the planet is,

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jonathan Watts, "David Attenborough: too much alarmism on environment a turn-off," *Guardian*, November 04, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/04/attenborough-dynasties-ecological-campaign>.

Monbiot responds, such that nothing less than a doomsday-crying fervour is appropriate. He takes to task the idea that it is through learning about the wonders of nature—not the horrors inflicted upon it—that people will come to care about the fate of our environment. “For many years, wildlife film-making has presented a pristine living world. It has created an impression of security and abundance, even in places afflicted by cascading ecological collapse. The cameras reassure us that there are vast tracts of wilderness in which wildlife continues to thrive. They cultivate complacency, not action”.⁹

To that end, it is difficult to say what eco-fiction and film “should” do. In the absence of any sustained study of whether environmental horror causes an increase or decrease in “green” activism or living among its audience, it is difficult to actively critique its cultural impact. Perhaps there is also space for a study of this nature, which may lay the groundwork for more concrete approaches to this question. Until then, however, we must be content with informed speculation, and willing to recognise our work as such. Like all good ecohorror, we must end with a degree of uncertainty. The texts examined in this thesis, whatever their impact may have been, have all responded to and been deeply concerned by environmental issues, but how they have ultimately shaped (or failed to) public sentiment and policy remains unclear—just like the fate of the environment itself.

⁹ George Monbiot, “David Attenborough has betrayed the living world he loves,” *Guardian*, November 07, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/07/david-attenborough-world-environment-bbc-films>.

Bibliography

- “1990 Yearly Box Office Results.” Box Office Mojo. Accessed February 17, 2019.
<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1990&p=.htm>.
- “A Wilderness ‘Horror Story’: World’s Wilderness Is Going, Going ... Nearly Gone, New Paper Says.” ScienceDaily. Accessed January 12, 2019.
<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/10/181031141507.htm>.
- “Bats (1999).” BFI. Accessed July 3, 2018. <http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/300>.
- “Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population 16 Years and over, Prior Years to Date.” Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey. U.S. Department of Labor. Accessed February 10, 2019. <https://www.bls.gov/web/empstat/cpseea01.htm>.
- “Fighting to Save the Earth from Man.” *Time*, February 2, 1970.
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,878179,00.html>.
- “Health Insurance Historical Tables.” U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed February 10, 2019.
<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/health-insurance/historical-series/hic.html>.
- “Melting Arctic Sea Ice Accelerates Methane Emissions.” ScienceDaily. Accessed December 29, 2018. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/09/150917091306.htm>.
- “Wake Up, World Leaders. The Alarm Is Deafening.” *The New York Times*, November 09, 2018.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/opinion/climate-change-ipcc-report.html>.
- “*Prophecy*.” *New Yorker* 55, no. 20 (July 2, 1979): 66.
- “Terrifying Climate Change Warning: 12 Years until We’re Doomed.” New York Post, October 8, 2018. <https://www.foxnews.com/science/terrifying-climate-change-warning-12-years-until-were-doomed>.
- “The Birds Official Teaser Trailer #1 - Alfred Hitchcock Movie (1963) HD - YouTube.” Accessed January 3, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lCxR7dlavwg>.
- “With Climate Change Comes Loss and ‘Ecological Grief.’” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (blog), January 11, 2019. <https://thebulletin.org/2019/01/with-climate-change-comes-loss-and-ecological-grief/>.
- Allitt, Patrick. *A Climate of Crisis: America in the Age of Environmentalism*. New York: Penguin, 2014.
- Armbruster, Karla M., and Kathleen R. Wallace., eds. *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.
- Armstrong, Stephen B. *Pictures about Extremes: The Films of John Frankenheimer*. Jefferson: StephMcFarland, 2007.
- Baelo-Allué, Sonia. *Bret Easton Ellis’s Controversial Fiction: Writing between High and Low Culture*. London: A&C Black, 2011.
- Ballard, J. G. *Myths of the Future*. London: Vintage, 1982.
- Barone, Matt. “Interview: ‘Take Shelter’ Writer-Director Jeff Nichols Talks Michael Shannon’s Softer Side And Nature’s Wrath.” Complex, September 30, 2011.

- <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2011/09/interview-take-shelter-writer-director-jeff-nichols>.
- Behrendt, Stephen C. "One Man's Dust Bowl: Recounting 1936 with Don Hartwell of Inavale, Nebraska." *Great Plains Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (2015): 229–247.
- Bellanca, Mary Ellen. "The Monstrosity of Predation in Daphne Du Maurier's 'The Birds.'" *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2011): 26–46.
- Bellin, Joshua David. "Us or Them!: *Silent Spring* and The 'Big Bug' Films of the 1950s." *Extrapolation* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 145–68.
- Benchley, Peter. *Jaws*. London: Pan, 2012.
- Berger, John. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Bérubé, Michael, and Jennifer Ruth. *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom: Three Necessary Arguments*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Beveridge, Andrew A., and David Halle. "New York and Los Angeles: The Uncertain Future." In *New York and Los Angeles: The Uncertain Future*, edited by David Halle and Andrew A. Beveridge, 1–32. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Birmingham, Stephen. *The Golden Dream: Suburbia in the 1970s*. New York: Open Road Media, 2016.
- Biskind, Peter. "Jaws: Between the Teeth." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 9 (December 1975): 1–26.
- . *Seeing Is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*. New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2000.
- Bracke, Astrid, and Marguerite Corporaal. "Ecocriticism and English Studies: An Introduction." *English Studies* 91, no. 7 (November 2010): 709–712.
- Bradbury, Ray. "The Fog Horn." In *Golden Apples of the Sun*, 1–6. New York: Doubleday, 1953.
- Branch, Michael, Sue Ellen Campbell, Neil Evernden, Annette Kolodny, Ursula K. Le Guin, Glen Love, David Mazel, et al. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Brereton, Pat. *Hollywood Utopia*. Bristol: Intellect, 2012.
- Brin, David. "Introduction to *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank." In *Alas, Babylon* by Pat Frank. New York: Perennial, 2005.
- Brown, Jennifer. *Cannibalism in Literature and Film*. New York: AIAA, 2012.
- Brulle, Robert. *Agency, Democracy and Nature: The U.S. Environmental Movement from a Crucial Theory Perspective*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000.
- Bruns, John. "'The Proper Geography': Hitchcock's Adaptation of Du Maurier's 'The Birds.'" *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 57–66.
- Buell, Frederick. *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Four Decades of Environmental Crisis in the U.S.* New York: Routledge, 2005.

- Buell, Lawrence. "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends." *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, no. 2 (2011): 87–115.
- . *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996.
- Buhs, Joshua Blu. "The Fire Ant Wars: Nature and Science in the Pesticide Controversies of the Late Twentieth Century." In *Science and the American Century: Readings from "Isis,"* edited by Sally Gregory Kohlstedt and David Kaiser, 2013.
- . *The Fire Ant Wars: Nature, Science and Public Policy in Twentieth-Century America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Canavan, Gerry. "Obey, Consume: Class Struggle as Revenge Fantasy in *They Live*." *Film International* 14, no. 3/4 (2017): 72–84.
- Carey, M. R. *The Girl with All the Gifts*. London: Orbit Books, 2014.
- Carrington, Damian. "The Anthropocene Epoch: Scientists Declare Dawn of Human-Influenced Age." *The Guardian*, August 29, 2016, sec. Science.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/aug/29/declare-anthropocene-epoch-experts-urge-geological-congress-human-impact-earth>.
- Carson, Rachel. *The Edge of the Sea*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- . *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.
- Carver, Raymond. "Elephant," June 2, 1986.
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1986/06/09/elephant-2>.
- Chafe, William H. *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Champlin, Charles. *John Frankenheimer: A Conversation*. Riverwood Press, 1995.
- Changnon, Stanley A., and David Changnon. "Record-High Losses for Weather Disasters in the United States During the 1990s: How Excessive and Why?" *Natural Hazards* 18, no. 3 (October 1, 1998): 287–300.
- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Collins, Robert M. *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America*. Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Conrich, Ian. "Communitarianism, Film Entrepreneurism, and the Crusade of Troma Entertainment." In *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, edited by Christine Holmlund and Justin Wyatt, 107–122. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Crutzen, Paul J., and Eugene F. Stoermer. "The 'Anthropocene.'" *International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) Newsletter*, no. 41 (May 2000): 17.
- D.G., U.G., L.R., and A.A. "Film Guide." *Cinéaste* 9, no. 4 (1979): 68–68.
- Daniel, Pete. *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.

- DeGroot, Gerard. *The Bomb: A Life*. London: Pimlico, 2005.
- Deitering, Cynthia. "The Postnatural Novel: Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, 196–203. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Dickey, James. *Deliverance*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1970.
- Dickstein, Morris. *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Douglas, Gregory A. *The Nest*. New York: Kensington Publishing Corporation, 1980.
- Dowling, David. "How the Creator of Jaws Became the Shark's Greatest Defender." Narratively, 15 August, 2014. <https://narratively.com/how-the-creator-of-jaws-became-the-sharks-greatest-defender/>.
- Doyle, Briohny. "Prognosis End-Time: Madness and Prophecy in *Melancholia* and *Take Shelter*." *Other Modernity* 9, 2013, 19–37.
- Du Maurier, Daphne. *The Birds and Other Stories*. London: Virago Press Ltd, 1990.
- Dunaway, Finis. "Cultures of Nature: Twentieth Century." In *A Companion to American Environmental History*, edited by Douglas Cazaux Sackman, 266–284. Chichester: Blackwell, 2010.
- Ebert, Roger. "Alligator Movie Review & Film Summary (1980)." Roger Ebert.com. Accessed July 3, 2018. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/alligator-1980>.
- Elliott, J. *Popular Feminist Fiction as American Allegory: Representing National Time*. New York: Springer, 2008.
- Ellis, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2006.
- Estok, Simon C. "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 203–225.
- Eustachewich, Lia. "Terrifying Climate Change Warning: 12 Years until We're Doomed." Fox News, October 8, 2018. <https://www.foxnews.com/science/terrifying-climate-change-warning-12-years-until-were-doomed>.
- Evans, Rebecca. "James Tiptree Jr.: Rereading Essentialism and Ecofeminism in the 1970s." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 43, no. 3/4 (Fall/Winter 2015): 223–39.
- Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.
- Finger, Roland. "Biting Back: America, Nature, and Feminism in Teeth." In *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, edited by Anil Narine, 134–145. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater, 2017.
- Foy, Joseph J. "It Came From Planet Earth: Eco-Horror and the Politics of Postenvironmentalism in *The Happening*." In *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent Through Popular Culture*, edited by Kate Mulgrew, 167–190. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010.

- Gaard, Greta. "Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 23, no. 3 (2002): 117–46.
- Gandy, Matthew. "Allergy and Allegory in Todd Haynes's [Safe]." In *Screening the City*, edited by Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, 239–261. London: Verso, 2003.
- Garrard, Greg. "Environment." In *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*, edited by William Hughes, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, 217–219, 2012.
- Glieberman, Owen. "Review: Arachnophobia." EW.com, July 27, 1990.
<https://ew.com/article/1990/07/27/arachnophobia-2/>.
- Gregersdotter, Katarina, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén. "A History of Animal Horror Cinema." In *Animal Horror Cinema*, edited by Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén, 19–36. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- . "Introduction." In *Animal Horror Cinema*, edited by Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén, 1–18. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Habash, Gabe. "Just How Much Does a Pulitzer Prize Help a Book's Sales?" Publishers Weekly, 19 April, 2012. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/awards-and-prizes/article/51573-just-how-much-does-a-pulitzer-prize-help-a-book-s-sales.html>.
- Hailes, Julia, and John Elkington. *The Green Consumer Guide*. New York: Gollancz, 1988.
- Hamilton Lytle, Mark. *The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson, Silent Spring, and the Rise of the Environmental Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Haq, Gary, and Alistair Paul. *Environmentalism since 1945*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Haraway Reader*. London: Psychology Press, 2004.
- . "The Promises of Monsters." In *Cultural Studies*, edited by Lawrence Grossberg et al., 295–337. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Harrison, Harry. *Make Room! Make Room!* New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Heath, Stephen. "Jaws, Ideology, and Film Theory." In *Movies and Methods*, edited by Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Hendershot, Cynthia. *Paranoia, The Bomb and 1950s Science Fiction Films*. Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1999.
- Hendrix, Grady. *Paperbacks from Hell: The Twisted History of '70s and '80s Horror Fiction*. Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2017.
- Herbert, Frank. *Dune*. New York: Chilton, 1965.
- Herbert, James. *The Fog*. London: New English Library, 1975.
- . *The Rats*. London: New English Library, 1974.
- Herzog, Arthur. *Orca*. New York: Pocket Books, 1977.
- . *The Swarm*. New York: Signet, 1975.
- Hicks, Charles. "The Perverse Mother: Maternal Masochism in Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*." *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (May 2017): 296–311.

- Hillard, Tom J. "“Deep Into That Darkness Peering”: An Essay on Gothic Nature.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* 16, no. 4 (Fall 2009): 685–95.
- Hoffman, Andrew J. *From Heresy to Dogma: An Institutional History of Corporate Environmentalism*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "The Progress of Theory and the Study of American Gothic." In *A Companion to American Gothic*, edited by Charles L. Crow, 3–13. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013.
- Howden, Nicholas, and John Mather. *History of Hydrogeology*. Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2012.
- Huebner, Andrew J. "Lost in Space: Technology and Turbulence in Futuristic Cinema of the 1950s." *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 40, no. 2 (2010): 6–26.
- Hughes, William, David Punter, and Andrew Smith, eds. *The Encyclopedia of the Gothic*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Inness, Sherrie A. *Disco Divas: Women and Popular Culture in the 1970s*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." *Social Text* 1, no. 1 (1979): 130–48.
- Jancovich, Mark. *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996.
- Johnson, Dennis W. *The Laws That Shaped America: Fifteen Acts of Congress and Their Lasting Impact*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
- Johnston, Jessica, and Cornelia Sears, "The Stepford Wives and the Technoscientific Imaginary." *Extrapolation* 52, no. 1 (2011): 75–93.
- Jones, Darryl. *Horror: A Thematic History in Fiction and Film*. London: Arnold Publishers, 2002.
- Justice, Christopher. "Cooling the Geopolitical to Warm the Ecological: How Human-Induced Warming Phenomena Transformed Modern Horror." In *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, edited by Anil Narine, 207–30. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Kaufman, Lloyd, and James Gunn. *All I Need To Know About FILMMAKING I Learned From THE TOXIC AVENGER: The Shocking True Story of Troma Studios*. New York: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2010.
- Kaufman, Will. *American Culture in the 1970s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- Kaplan, E. A. "Trauma Studies Moving Forward: Interdisciplinary Perspectives," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 27 no. 2 (Spring 2013): 53–65
- Kavka, Misha. "The Gothic On Screen." In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, 209–228. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Kawin, Bruce F. *Horror and the Horror Film*. London: Anthem Press, 2012.
- Keane, Stephen. *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catrastrophe*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Keetley Dawn. "Six Theses on Plant Horror; or, Why Are Plants Horrifying?" In *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, 1–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

- Kehe, Jason. "The WIRED Book Club Talks With Sci-Fi Writer Jeff VanderMeer." *Wired*, November 10, 2016. <https://www.wired.com/2016/11/wired-book-club-jeff-vandermeer-interview/>.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Khader, Jamil. "Will the Real Robert Neville Please, Come Out? Vampirism, the Ethics of Queer Monstrosity, and Capitalism in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*?" *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 4 (2013): 532–57.
- Kidd, Kenneth B., and Sideny I. Dobrin. "Introduction: Into the Wild." In *Wild Things: Children's Culture and Ecocriticism*, edited by Kenneth B. Kidd and Sideny I. Dobrin, 1–15. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004.
- Killingsworth, J. M., and J. S. Palmer. "Millennial Ecology." In *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America*, edited by Carl G. Herndl. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- King, Stephen. Afterword to *I Am Legend* by Richard Matheson, 161–162. London: Gollancz, 2010.
- Kings, A. E. "Intersectionality and the Changing Face of Ecofeminism." *Ethics & the Environment* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 63–87.
- Kirby, David A. "Cinematic Science." In *Handbook of Public Communication of Science and Technology*, edited by Massimiano Bucchi and Brian Trench, 41–56. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Kirk, Andrew. "The New Alchemy: Technology, Consumerism, and Environmental Advocacy." In *The Columbia History of Post-World War II America*, edited by Mark C. Carnes. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Koehler, Robert. "Take Shelter: Jeff Nichols' Age of Anxiety." Accessed December 15, 2018. <http://cinema-scope.com/cinema-scope-magazine/interviews-take-shelter-jeff-nichols-age-of-anxiety/>.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984.
- Kunsa, Ashley. "Maps of the World in Its Becoming: Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (2009): 57–74.
- Kunze, Peter C. "Winnie-the-Conservationist: Tuck Everlasting, Ecofeminism, and Children's Literature." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 38, no. 1 (May 2014): 30–44.
- Krugovoy Silver, Anna. "The Cyborg Mystique: *The Stepford Wives* and Second-Wave Feminism." *Arizona Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 109–26.
- Leiserowitz, A., E. Maibach, C. Roser-Renouf, G. Feinberg, and P. Howe. "Climate Change in the American Mind: Americans' Global Warming Beliefs and Attitudes in September, 2012." New Haven, CT: Yale University and George Mason University, 2012. <http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication/article/Climate-Beliefs-September-2012/>.
- Levin, Ira. *Rosemary's Baby*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2017.

- . *The Stepford Wives*. London: Constable and Robinson, 2011.
- Lindley, David. *Uncertainty*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008.
- Lloyd-Smith, Allan. *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Löfgren, Orvar. *On Holiday: A History of Vacationing*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Lovelock, James. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Macaulay, Scott. "The Storm Within: Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter*." *Filmmaker Magazine* (blog). Accessed December 15, 2018. <https://filmmakermagazine.com/35072-the-storm-within-jeff-nichols-take-shelter/>.
- Martinez, J. Michael. *American Environmentalism: Philosophy, History, and Public Policy*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Masson-Delmotte, V, P Zhai, H. O. Portner, and D Roberts. "IPCC, 2018: Summary for Policymakers." In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the Impacts of Global Warming of 1.5°C above Pre-Industrial Levels and Related Global Greenhouse Gas Emission Pathways, in the Context of Strengthening the Global Response to the Threat of Climate Change, Sustainable Development, and Efforts to Eradicate Poverty." Geneva, Switzerland: World Meteorological Organization, 2018. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/summary-for-policy-makers/>.
- Masucci, Matthew. "Angry Eden: Hyperobjects, Plant Entelechy, and the Horror of Eco-Colonization in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*." In *Dark Nature: Anti-Pastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture*, ed. Richard J. Schneider, 171–84. Minneapolis: Lexington Books, 2016.
- Matheson, Richard. *I Am Legend*. London: Gollancz, 2010.
- . *Richard Matheson: Collected Stories: Vol. 1*. Colorado Springs: Gauntlet Press, 2003.
- . *The Shrinking Man*. London: Gollancz, 2002.
- Mayer, Jed. "A Darker Shade of Green: William Morris, Richard Jeffries, and Posthumanist Ecologies." *The Journal of William Morris Studies* 19, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 79–92.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006.
- McCarthy, Todd, and Todd McCarthy. "Mimic." *Variety* (blog), August 18, 1997. <https://variety.com/1997/film/reviews/mimic-2-1117340066/>.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Merchant, Brian. "The Evolution of Eco-Horror, from Godzilla to Global Warming." Motherboard (Vice). Accessed February 7, 2016. <http://motherboard.vice.com/blog/the-evolution-of-eco-horror-from-godzilla-to-global-warming>.
- Miller, Richard L. *The U.S. Atlas of Nuclear Fallout Vol. I: Total Fallout*. Texas: Two Sixty Press, 2001.
- Miller, Stephen Paul. *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

- Monbiot, George. "David Attenborough has betrayed the living world he loves." *The Guardian*, November 07, 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/07/david-attenborough-world-environment-bbc-films>.
- Morton, Timothy. *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- . *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Murphet, Julian. *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader's Guide*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2002.
- Murphy, Bernice M. *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture: Backwoods Horror and Terror in the Wilderness*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- . *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Murphy, Patrick D. *Persuasive Aesthetic Ecocritical Praxis: Climate Change, Subsistence, and Questionable Futures*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015.
- Murphy, Priscilla Coit. *What a Book Can Do: The Publication and Reception of Silent Spring*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005.
- Murray, Robin L., and Joseph K. Heumann. *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016.
- Naess, Arne. "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary." In *The Deep Ecology Movement: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Alan Dregson and Yuichi Inoue, 3–10. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1995.
- Narine, Anil, ed. *Eco-Trauma Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2014.
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Newman, Kim. *Nightmare Movies: Horror on Screen since the 1960s*. London: Bloomsbury, 2011.
- Norgaard, Kari Marie. *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.
- O'Brien, Adam. *Transactions with the World: Ecocriticism and the Environmental Sensibility of New Hollywood*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Against Nature." *Antaeus: On Nature* 57 (Autumn 1986): 236–44.
- Paasonen, Susanna. *Figures of Fantasy: Internet, Women, and Cyberdiscourse*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Parker, Elizabeth. "'Just a Piece of Wood': Jan Švankmajer's Otesanek and the EcoGothic." In *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film*, edited by Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga, 215–226. New York: Springer, 2016.
- . "Eco-Horror." In *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears*, Vol. I, 56–60. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2017.
- Philbrick, Nathaniel. *Sea of Glory: America's Voyage of Discovery, The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838–1842*. New York: 2004.

- Philips, Dana. "‘He Ought Not Have Done It’: McCarthy and Apocalypse." In *Cormac McCarthy: All the Pretty Horses, No Country for Old Men, The Road*, edited by Sara Spurgeon. London: A&C Black, 2011.
- Philips, Deborah. *Fairground Attractions: A Genealogy of the Pleasure Ground*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.
- Philips, Jennifer. "Unreliable Narration in Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*." *Current Narratives* 1, no. 1 (January 2009): 60–68.
- Piepenburg, Erik. "With ‘The Bay,’ Barry Levinson Makes Eco-Horror." *The New York Times*, October 24, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/28/movies/with-the-bay-barry-levinson-makes-eco-horror.html>.
- Plato, *The Republic*. London: Penguin, 2007.
- Podeschi, Christopher W. "The Nature of Future Myths: Environmental Discourse in Science Fiction Film, 1950-1999." *Sociological Spectrum* 22, no. 3 (July 2002): 251–97.
- Porter, Jessica. "What Was the Dust Bowl? Assessing Contemporary Popular Knowledge." *Population & Environment* 35, no. 4 (June 2014): 391–416.
- Prendergast, Finola. "‘Some Things Come Unbidden’: An Interview with Jeff VanderMeer «Post45.” Accessed December 1, 2018. <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2018/07/some-things-come-unbidden-an-interview-with-jeff-vandermeer/>.
- Pubchem. "Polysorbate 80." Accessed February 19, 2018. <https://pubchem.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/compound/5281955>.
- Punter, David, ed. *A New Companion to the Gothic*. London: Blackwell, 2015.
- Raubichek, Walter, and Walter Srebnick. *Scripting Hitchcock: Psycho, The Birds, and Marnie*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.
- Reyes, Xavier Aldana, ed. *Horror: A Literary History*. London: British Library Publishing, 2016.
- Richards, Rashna Wadia. *Cinematic Flashes: Cinephilia and Classical Hollywood*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Richardson, Sarah. "The Land Blew Away." *American History* 50, no. 4 (October 2015): 58–61.
- Ro, Jihyun. "‘Take Shelter’ Is an Engrossing Thriller." *The Harvard Crimson*, November 25, 2011. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2011/10/25/take-shelter-review1/>.
- Roberts, David. "The 6 Things You Most Need to Know about Trump’s New Climate Plan." *Vox*, August 24, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2018/8/24/17772268/trump-climate-power-plants-affordable-clean-energy-clean-power-plan>.
- Robey, Tim. "‘Take Shelter,’ Review," November 24, 2011, sec. Culture. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmreviews/8913914/Take-Shelter-review.html>.
- Rogin, Michael. *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

- Rome, Adam. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Rooney, David. "Take Shelter: Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*. Accessed December 17, 2018. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/take-shelter-film-review-75360>.
- Rosendale, Steven, ed. *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2002.
- Rozelle, Lee. *Ecosublime: Environmental Awe and Terror from New World to Oddworld*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006.
- Rust, Stephen A., and Carter Soles. "Ecohorror Special Cluster: 'Living in Fear, Living in Dread, Pretty Soon We'll All Be Dead.'" *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (December 2014): 509–12.
- Sandler, Ronald D., and Phaedra C. Pezzullo. *Environmental Justice and Environmentalism: The Social Justice Challenge to the Environmental Movement*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007.
- Scheffer, Victor B. *The Shaping of Environmentalism in America*. University of Washington Press, 2013.
- Schell, Jennifer. "Polluting and Perverting Nature: The Vengeful Animals of Frogs." In *Animal Horror Cinema*, edited by Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hållén, 58–76. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Scherr, Rebecca. "Thinking and Rethinking Whiteness: Todd Haynes's *Safe*." *American Studies in Scandinavia* 41, no. 2 (2009): 61–78.
- Schorr, Collier. "Diary of a Sad Housewife: Collier Schorr Talks with Todd Haynes." In *Todd Haynes: Interviews*, edited by Julia Leyda, 42–48. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2014.
- Scranton, Roy. "Opinion | Raising My Child in a Doomed World." *The New York Times*, July 19, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/16/opinion/climate-change-parenting.html>.
- Sellers, Christopher C. *Crabgrass Crucible: Suburban Nature and the Rise of Environmentalism in Twentieth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.
- Server, Lee. *Encyclopedia of Pulp Fiction Writers*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2014.
- Seymour, Nicole. *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- . "'It's Just Not Turning Up': Cinematic Vision and Environmental Justice in Todd Haynes's *Safe*." *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 4 (2011): 26–47.
- Shoot, Brittany. "A New Climate Change Report Says Ocean Warming Is Far Worse Than Expected." *Fortune*, January 11, 2019. <http://fortune.com/2019/01/10/climate-change-warming-oceans-science-study/>.
- Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*. New York: Doubleday, 1906.
- Singer, Matt. "'Take Shelter' Director Jeff Nichols Clears the Air." IFC, September 29, 2011. <https://www.ifc.com/2011/09/jeff-nichols-take-shelter-interview>.
- Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2001.

- . “A-Bombs, B-Pictures, and C-Cups.” In *It Came from the 1950s!: Popular Culture, Popular Anxieties*, edited by Darryl Jones, Elizabeth McCarthy, and Bernice M. Murphy, 17–32. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Smith, Andrew, and William Hughes. “Introduction.” In *EcoGothic*, edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.
- Smith, Eleanor. “The Poetics of Size: Rendering Apocalyptic Scale in Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.” *Colloquy: Text, Theory, Critique*, no. 35/36 (December 13, 2018): 82–98.
- Smith, Guy N. “Night of the Crabs.” London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976.
- Smith, Nigel M., and Nigel M. Smith. “‘Take Shelter’ Director Jeff Nichols on How to Make an Indie Epic.” *IndieWire* (blog), September 28, 2011. <https://www.indiewire.com/2011/09/interview-take-shelter-director-jeff-nichols-on-how-to-make-an-indie-epic-51933/>.
- Soles, Carter. “‘And No Birds Sing’: Discourses of Environmental Apocalypse in *The Birds* and *Night of the Living Dead*.” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 526–537.
- Sperling, Alison. “Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach* Trilogy.” *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 28, January 2016, 230–55.
- Spooner, Catherine, and Emma McEvoy. “Introduction.” In *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*, edited by Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy, 1–4. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Spooner, Catherine. *Contemporary Gothic*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.
- Stare, Fredrick J. “Some Comments on *Silent Spring*.” *Nutrition Reviews* 21, no. 1 (January 1963): 1–4.
- Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: The Viking Press, 1939.
- Sturgeon, Noel. *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action*. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Tidwell, Christy. “Monstrous Natures Within: Posthuman and New Materialist Ecohorror in Mira Grant’s *Parasite*.” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 3 (December 1, 2014): 538–49.
- Travis, Anthony S. “*Silent Spring* at 50: Earth, Water, and Air.” *Ambix* 59, no. 2 (July 2012): 83–84.
- Troy, Gil. *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980’s*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Tschinkel, Walter R. *The Fire Ants*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2013.
- Tsutsui, William M. “Looking Straight at Them! Understanding the Big Bug Movies of the 1950s.” *Environmental History* 12, no. 2 (April 2007): 237–53.
- Tudor, Andrew. *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991.

- Tyburski, Susan J. "A Gothic Apocalypse: Encountering the Monstrous in American Cinema." In *Animal Horror Cinema*, edited by Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hällén, 147–59. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Ulstein, Gry. "Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach*." *Concentric : Literary and Cultural Studies* 43, no. 1 (March 2017): 71–96.
- United States Department of Agriculture. "Recent Motion Pictures of the U.S. Department of Agriculture," *Agriculture Handbook*, no. 14. Washington: USDA, 1961. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011392512>.
- United States Environmental Protection Agency. "Environmental Justice." epa.gov. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/widgets/ejscreenwidget.html>.
- United States. *Recent Motion Pictures of the U.S. Department of Agriculture*. Agriculture Handbook (United States. Dept. of Agriculture); No. 14. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1961. <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011392512>.
- Valerius, Karyn. "'Rosemary's Baby,' Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects." *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 116–35.
- VanderMeer, Jeff, and Ann VanderMeer. "Introduction." In *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, edited by Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer. New York: Tor Books, 2012.
- VanderMeer, Jeff. *Acceptance: A Novel*. New York: FSG Originals, 2014.
- . *Annihilation: A Novel*. New York: FSG Originals, 2014.
- . *Authority: A Novel*. New York: FSG Originals, 2014.
- Veirs, Scott, Val Veirs, and Jason D. Wood. "Ship Noise Extends to Frequencies Used for Echolocation by Endangered Killer Whales." *PeerJ* 4 (February 2, 2016): e1657.
- Walker, Alissa. "Climate Change Is Taking Our Cities Away." *Curbed*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.curbed.com/2019/1/10/18113246/climate-change-cities-paradise-wildfire-miami>.
- Walker, Tim. "Monday US Briefing: 12 Years to Prevent Environmental Catastrophe, IPCC Warns." *The Guardian*, October 8, 2018. Accessed December 10, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/oct/08/monday-us-briefing-12-years-to-prevent-environmental-catastrophe-ipcc-warns>.
- Wallace-Wells, David. "The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition." *Intelligencer*, July 14, 2017. <http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html>.
- Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto*. London: Penguin, 2002.
- Warner, Alan. "Review: The Road by Cormac McCarthy." *The Guardian*, November 4, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/nov/04/featuresreviews.guardianreview4>.
- Warren, Karen J, ed. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, and Nature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

- Washington, Haydn, and John Cook. *Climate Change Denial: Heads in the Sand*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Watts, Jonathan. "David Attenborough: too much alarmism on environment a turn-off," *The Guardian*, November 04, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/04/attenborough-dynasties-ecological-campaign>.
- Weart, Spencer R. *The Rise of Nuclear Fear*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012.
- Williams, Evan Calder. *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*. Washington: Zero Books, 2011.
- Wood, Robin. "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s." In *Horror, the Film Reader*, edited by Mark Jancovich, 25–32. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Woolley, Agnes. "'There's a Storm Coming!': Reading the Threat of Climate Change in Jeff Nichols's *Take Shelter*." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, no. 1 (June 1, 2014): 174–91.
- Worland, Rick. *Horror Film: An Introduction*. Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2006.
- Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Yacowar, Maurice. "The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre." In *Film Genre Reader III*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 277–95. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
- Yamashiro, Shin. *American Sea Literature: Seascapes, Beach Narratives, and Underwater Explorations*. 2014 edition. New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2014.
- Zerweck, Brunco. "Historicizing Unreliable Narration: Unreliability and Cultural Discourse in Narrative Fiction." *Style* 35, no. 1 (2001): 151–178.
- Zibrak, Arielle. "Intolerance, A Survival Guide: Heteronormative Culture Formation in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 68, no. 3 (October 3, 2012): 103–28.

Filmography

- A Quiet Place*. Directed by John Krasinski. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2018.
- Alligator*. Directed by Lewis Teague. USA: Group 1 Films, 1980.
- Alligator II: The Mutation*. Directed by John Hess. USA: N/A, 1991.
- American Psycho*. Directed by Mary Harron. USA: Lionsgate, 2000.
- An Inconvenient Truth*. Directed by Davis Guggenheim. USA: Paramount, 2006.
- Arachnophobia*. Directed by Frank Marshall. USA: Buena Vista, 1990.
- Armageddon*. Directed by Michael Bay. USA: Buena Vista, 1998.
- Bats*. Directed by Louis Morneau. USA: Destination Films, 1999.
- Blade Runner*. Directed by Ridley Scott. USA: Warner Bros., 1982.
- Chasing Ice*. Directed by Jeff Orlowski. USA: Submarine Deluxe, 2012.
- Cloverfield*. Directed by Matt Reeves. USA: Paramount, 2008.
- Dante's Peak*. Directed by Roger Donaldson. USA: Universal, 1997.
- Deep Blue Sea*. Directed by Renny Harlin. USA: Warner Bros., 1999.
- Deep Impact*. Directed by Mimi Leder. USA: Paramount, 1998.
- Earthquake*. Directed by Mark Robson. USA: Universal, 1974.
- Escape from L.A.* Directed by John Carpenter. USA: Paramount, 1996.
- Food of the Gods II*. Directed by Damian Lee. USA: Carolco Pictures, 1989.
- Godzilla*. Directed by Ishirou Honda. Japan: Toho, 1954.
- Grizzly*. Directed by Wukkuan Girdler and David Sheldon. USA: Film Ventures International, 1976.
- Hereditary*. Directed by Ari Aster. USA: A24, 2018.
- I Am Legend*. Directed by Francis Lawrence. USA: Warner Bros., 2007.
- The Omega Man*. Directed by Boris Sagal. USA: Warner Bros., 1971.
- The Last Man on Earth*. Directed by Ubaldo B. Ragona. USA: American International Pictures, 1964.
- Idiocracy*. Directed by Mike Judge. USA: 20th Century Fox, 2006.
- Interstellar*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. USA: Paramount, 2014.

It Comes at Night. Directed by Trey Edward Shults. USA: A24, 2017.

It Follows. Directed by David Robert Mitchell. USA: RADiUS-TWC, 2014.

Jaws. Directed by Steven Spielberg. USA: Universal, 1975.

Jaws 3-D. Directed by Joe Alves. USA: Alan Landsburd Productions, 1983.

Jaws: The Revenge. Directed by Joseph Sargent. USA: Universal, 1987.

Jennifer's Body. Directed by Karyn Kusama. USA: 20th Century Fox, 2009.

Kingdom of the Spiders. Directed by John Cardos. USA: Dimension Pictures, 1977.

Lake Placid. Directed by Steve Miner. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1999.

Mad Max. Directed by George Miller. Australia: Roadshow, 1979.

Mad Max 2. Directed by George Miller. Australia: Warner Bros., 1981.

Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome. Directed by George Miller. Australia: Warner Bros., 1985.

Mad Max: Fury Road. George Miller. Australia/USA: Warner Bros., 2015.

Mimic. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. USA: Miramax, 1997.

Mother! Directed by Darren Aronofsky. USA: Paramount, 2017.

Night of the Lepus. Directed by William F. Claxton. USA: MGM, 1972.

Night of the Living Dead. Directed by George A. Romero. USA: The Walter Reade Organization, 1968.

Nightwing. Directed by Arthur Hiller. USA: Columbia, 1979.

Peak. Directed by Hannes Lang. Germany: Deckert, 2013.

Phase IV. Directed by Saul Bass. USA: Paramount, 1974.

Piranha II: The Spawning. Directed by James Cameron. USA: Columbia, 1982.

Predator 2. Directed by Stephen Hopkins. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1990.

Prophecy. Directed by John Frankenheimer. USA: Paramount, 1979.

Ravenous. Directed by Antonia Bird. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1999.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski. USA: Paramount, 1968.

Safe. Directed by Todd Haynes. USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 1995.

Slugs. Directed by Juan Piquer Simon. USA/Spain: New World Pictures, 1988.

Soylent Green. Directed by Richard Fleischer. USA: MGM, 1973.

Squirm. Directed by Jeff Lieberman. USA: American International Pictures, 1976.

Take Shelter. Directed by Jeff Nichols. USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 2011.

Teeth. Directed by Mitchell Lichtenstein. USA: Roadside Attractions, 2008.

The Terminator. Directed by James Cameron. USA: Orion Pictures, 1984.

The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms. Directed by Eugène Lourié. USA: Warner Bros., 1953.

The Birds. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Universal, 1963.

The Birds II: Land's End. Directed by Rick Rosenthal. USA: N/A, 1994.

The Blair Witch Project. Directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez. USA: Artisan Entertainment, 1999.

The Incredible Shrinking Man. Directed by Jack Arnold. USA: Universal, 1957.

The Last Shark. Directed by Enzo G. Castelliari. Italy: Film Ventures International, 1981.

The Lost World. Directed by Harry O. Hoyt. USA: First National Pictures, 1925.

The Road. Directed by John Hillcoat. USA: Dimension Films, 2009.

The Stepford Wives. Directed by Bryan Forbes. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1975.

The Toxic Avenger. Directed by Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz. Troma Studies: 1984.

Them! Directed by Gordon Douglas. USA: Warner Home Video, 2013.

They Live. Directed by *Trouble Every Day*. Directed by Claire Denis. France: Rézo Films, 2001.

Twister. Directed by Jan de Bont. USA: Warner Bros., 1996.

Volcano. Directed by Mick Jackson. USA: 20th Century Fox, 1997.

Willard. Directed by Daniel Mann. USA: Cinerama Releasing Corporation, 1971.

Discography

Mitchell, Joni. *Ladies of the Canyon*. Los Angeles: Reprise, 1970.

Talking Heads. *Naked*. New York: Warner Bros., 1988.