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MONSTROUS NATURE

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MONSTROUS NATURE

ENVIRONMENT AND HORROR ON THE BIG SCREEN

Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann

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INTRODUCTION

Film, Environment, Horror

Perhaps the most iconic movie monster from the 1950s forward is Godzilla, a giant reptile that stars in dozens of movies from Toho Studios in Japan. As a creature of its age, beginning with its 1954 debut, Godzilla springs to life from the radiation left by nuclear testing and functions as a condemnation of the U.S. atomic attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. As Kyohei Yamane-hakase (Takashi Shimura) warns in the original film, "if we continue conducting nuclear tests, it's possible that another Godzilla might appear somewhere in the world again." As a monstrous result of humanity's destruction of the environment, Godzilla serves as a mixture of Maurice Yacowar's disaster categories, embodying a traditional natural monster but also illustrating Yacowar's natural attack subgenre. Godzilla also presents a cautionary symbol of the dangerous consequences of mistreating the natural world—monstrous nature on the attack.

Gareth Edwards's remake of *Godzilla* (2014) initially reinforces this view of nature run amok when Sandra Brody (Juliette Binoche), the wife of scientist Joe Brody (Bryan Cranston), is killed by a Japanese nuclear reactor breach. As Brody exclaims, "You're not fooling anybody when you say that what happened was a 'natural disaster.' You're lying! It was not an earthquake; it wasn't a typhoon! Because what's really happening is that you're hiding something out there! And it is going to send us back to the Stone Age! God help us all." For Brody the disaster was caused by a monster, not a natural catastrophe.

But later the attacks become something more: natural monsters seeking survival for themselves and their offspring as "MUTOs," Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organisms that thrive on radiation. Godzilla enters the narrative

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Godzilla (1956): Monstrous nature attacks Tokyo.

to save the Earth from these monsters. Unlike the original natural monster, Godzilla returns from the ocean bottom to destroy the MUTOs and restore the balance of nature, according to Dr. Ichiro Serizawa (Ken Watanabe). As Serizawa declares, instead of attempting to destroy both Godzilla and the MUTOs, the navy should "let them fight." For Serizawa "the arrogance of men is thinking nature is in their control and not the other way around." Horror films such as *Godzilla* provide a space in which to explore the complexities of a monstrous nature that humanity both creates and embodies.

Explorations of the monster and its representation in literature and media typically highlight ways to define the literary fiend. In *Monster Theory* Jeffrey J. Cohen argues, for example, "that the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis" (1996, x). In this same volume Ruth Waterhouse suggests that the monster can be most easily understood by reading its constructions "backward from the

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present" (x), so—for example—Grendel is filtered through later texts such as *Dracula.* By highlighting literary history, Waterhouse also points to some of the mythic roots of the monster, from Greek and Roman mythology to Christianity. Modern monsters also stem from the Gothic, according to Maria Beville's 2013 book, *The Unnamable Monster in Literature and Film.* According to Beville, studies of the monster should highlight this unnamability, emphasizing the fiend as "thing" instead of a classification that "serve [s] a social function by embodying all that is horrible in human imagination" (2).

More focused readings of the horror film, however, showcase other roots of the monster: human and nonhuman nature. Since both class struggles and evolution are addressed in the horror film, the genre is ripe for explicitly environmental readings. Film critics Paul Wells and Noel Carroll address these environmental underpinnings in differing ways. Wells takes an interdisciplinary approach to horror, asserting that, more than any other genre, horror film "has interrogated the deep-seated effects of change and responded to the newly determined grand narratives of social, scientific, and philosophical thought" (2000, 1). Specifically, Wells suggests the horror genre film responds to the philosophy of Karl Marx as articulated in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and the theories of evolution espoused by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). For Wells horror films draw on the class struggles of Marxist theory by "explor[ing] modes of social 'revolution' in which naturalized ideas about bourgeois orthodoxy are transgressed" (4), as in *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), while also examining the repercussions of humanity's desire to challenge natural selection and "'artificially' impose itself upon the conditions of material existence, while nature slowly but surely, organically and often invisibly, changes the world" (5). Horror thus responds to and addresses elements of both human and nonhuman nature—class struggles and evolution.

In his seminal *Philosophy of Horror*, Noel Carroll also highlights the genre's connection with a disrupted natural world when he declares, "In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (1990, 16). For Carroll "horror involves essential reference to an entity, a monster, which then serves as a particular object of the emotion of art-horror" (41). Methods of creating these monsters integrate the natural world in multiple ways from creatures born out of fission between

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a nonhuman animal and a human to various forms of evolutionary change induced by a "mad scientist" figure or exposure to toxins of some sort. Yet even though both Wells and Carroll emphasize horror's roots in the natural world, readings highlighting the consequences of this connection are scarce.

We assert that the horror film and its offshoots often can be defined in relation to a monstrous nature that evolved either deliberately or by accident and incites fear in humanity as both character and audience. This interconnection between fear and the natural world opens up possibilities for ecocritical readings often missing from research on monstrous nature, the environment, and the horror film. As William M. Tsutsui explains in "Looking Straight at *THEM!* Understanding the Bug Movies of the 1950s," "Conceptions of nature in science fiction and monster films, and the broader cultural influence of these mass-culture depictions, are topics that environmental historians should explore in more depth" (2007, 252). Stacy Alaimo reinforces this point, asserting, "Ecocriticism, for the most part, has ignored monstrous nature, directing its attention toward texts that portray nature more favorably" (2001, 279). This project offers an opportunity to fill that gap in the research on the monstrous nature film.

Illustrating Monstrous Nature

Explorations of how trees transform into "monsters" seeking revenge against the human world that exploits them highlight the power of monstrous nature. In films as diverse as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), trees have fought back against humans, becoming "monstrous nature." In *The Wizard of Oz*, trees become animated when their apples are stolen (and a wicked witch intervenes). And in *The Two Towers*, trees called Ents seek vengeance against Saruman (Christopher Lee) and his army when their leader, Treebeard (John Rhys-Davies), sees a section of Fangorn Forest that Saruman has decimated to feed his iron forges.

Like the original *Godzilla,* monstrous nature films such as *Severed* (2005), *The Ruins* (2008), *Splinter* (2008), and *The Happening* (2008) highlight how trees might fight back against their human oppressors in the fantastic context of horror and science fiction. But the messages they convey also connect explicitly with current environmental issues. In *Severed* genetic testing in a logging camp meant to accelerate tree growth and increase

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timber output also proves deadly to humans when splinters from GMO logs transform humans into zombies who feed on other loggers. Although the "outbreak" seems isolated, its presence in the film serves as a warning against both genetic modification and overlogging of forests, environmental disasters condemned in recent news articles. The third annual International March against Monsanto on May 23, 2015, showcases a growing anti-GMO movement. And the Greenpeace website highlights protests against illegal logging in the Amazon rainforest ("Logging: The Amazon's Silent Crisis"). *The Ruins* also cautions against infiltrating rainforests when forest vines trap and kill American tourists trespassing on sacred Mayan land. In *Splinter* "splinters" like those in *Severed* parasitically invade human carriers and turn them into monsters, a cataclysmic result that underpins the possible consequences of climate change—the emergence and evolution of deadly parasites.

M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* takes this cautionary tale even further, explicitly connecting the behavior of trees to humanity's contribution to the disappearance of bees. Philadelphia high school science teacher Elliot Moore (Mark Wahlberg) underlines this connection during a class discussion prompted by a quote from Einstein scrawled on the blackboard: "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then man would only have four years of life left." Moore's class focuses on the disappearance of bees, drawing on current theories addressing Colony Collapse Disorder explored in documentaries such as *Vanishing of the Bees* (2009). The film expands on this premise, asking what if a monstrous nature fought back? In *The Happening* the answer comes almost immediately after Moore's lecture on bees: as if reacting to our annihilation of the natural world, something from the trees in Central Park causes men and women to kill themselves.

These juxtaposed scenes suggest that humans have become a threat and must be defeated. As Moore's high school principal (Alan Ruck) explains, "All right, there appears to be an event happening. Central Park was just hit by what seems to be a terrorist attack. They're not clear on the scale yet. It's some kind of airborne chemical toxin that's been released in and around the park. They said to watch for warning signs. The first stage is confused speech. The second stage is physical disorientation, loss of direction. The third stage . . . is fatal."

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According to an unnamed nursery owner (Frank Collison), "Plants have the ability to target specific threats. Tobacco plants when attacked by heliothis caterpillars will send out a chemical attracting wasps to kill just those caterpillars. We don't know how plants obtain these abilities, they just evolve very rapidly." When Alma Moore (Zooey Deschanel) asks, "Which species is doing it, if you think it's true," the nursery owner designates trees as the source of the human purge, explaining, "Plants have the ability to communicate with other species of plants. Trees can communicate with bushes, and bushes with grass, and everything in between." In *The Happening* trees and the plants with which they communicate transform into monstrous nature to attack the human species seemingly bent on their destruction.

Ecology and Horror Studies

By exploring monstrous nature, this work fills a gap in both film studies and ecocriticism, adding an ecocritical lens often missing from works exploring the horror film. Scholarship on the horror film examines horror in relation to myth, as does Richard D. Hand and Jay McRoy's edited volume, *Monstrous Adaptations: Generic and Thematic Mutations in Horror Film* (2007). Works such as George Ochoa's *Deformed and Destructive Beings* (2011) explore the purpose of horror films. Other works take feminist approaches to the horror film, such as Carol J. Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992) and Linda Bradley's *Film, Horror, and the Body Fantastic* (1995). Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990) combines his philosophical approach with theories of horror as a genre. Other works explore the horror film through cultural lenses. See, for example, Ian Conrich's edited volume *Horror Zone: The Cultural Experience of Contemporary Horror Cinema* (2010) and Robert G. Weiner and John Cline's edited work *Cinema Inferno: Celluloid Explosions from the Cultural Margins* (2010).

Other recent work in eco-horror informs our focus on monstrous nature. Although the volume concentrates primarily on print media, Bernice M. Murphy's *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2013) explores some horror films. She asserts, for example, that the cabin has become an American replacement for the Gothic haunted castle in horror film and literature. Chapter 1, "The Cabin in the Woods: Order versus Chaos in the New World," suggests that this American Gothic cabin "has never lost its potency" (16).

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Jeffery J. Cohen's "Grey" from his collection *Prismatic Ecology* (2014) explores the "gray" of the zombie in literature, television, and films. Organized according to the color spectrum, Cohen's collection seeks to expand definitions of environmentalism beyond the hallmark green ecology to include the brown, gray, and black found in literature, media, and the world.

Although Paul Wells describes revenge-of-nature horror films as "based on the idea that the everyday things that humankind take for granted in nature . . . will one day cease to operate in the anticipated manner, and inexplicably rise to take its revenge on the exploitation and insensitivity of human beings" (2000, 115), few scholars examine horror films through an ecocritical lens. Our work seeks to begin addressing this by exploring nature horror in relation to multiple perspectives on monstrous nature.

Our work aligns most clearly with Stacy Alaimo's "Discomforting Creature: Monstrous Natures in Recent Films" and parts of Stephen Rust and his colleagues' edited volume, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Rust, Monani, and Cubitt 2013), especially Stephen Rust's "Hollywood and Climate Change," Carter Soles's "Sympathy for the Devil: The Cannibalistic Hillbilly in 1970s Rural Slasher Films," and Sean Cubitt's "Everybody Knows This is Nowhere: Data Visualization and Ecocriticism." Sean Cubitt's *EcoMedia* (2005) also explores the depictions of nature in mainstream action films such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Perfect Storm* (2000). In their introduction to a special issue of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* focused on horror literature and media, Rust and Carter Soles argue for "a more expansive definition of ecohorror" (2014, 509), which includes "analyses of texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world" (509). Although most of the articles in this issue examine literary works, Rust analyzes *The Wall* (1982) as postmodern horror film, and Soles examines environmental apocalypse in *The Birds* (1963) and *Night of the Living Dead* (2002).

With its focus on monstrous nature, our work extends definitions of eco-horror and the monster beyond those found in recent studies. It also narrows such readings exclusively to monstrous nature movies. This book primarily explores the roots and ramifications of what Lee Gambin calls natural or ecological horror. Like Gambin our focus on nature run amok includes films outside Noel Carroll's "art horror" category. Gambin, for example, highlights natural attack films such as *Cujo* (1983), in which a St.

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Bernard viciously attacks people not because he's possessed by a supernatural demon but because he's rabid. We extend genre definitions further by analyzing nature that is transformed into a monster in documentary and drama films outside traditional horror film parameters.

Monstrous Nature is organized in relation to four recurring environmental themes in films that construct nature as a monster: anthropomorphism, human ecology, evolution, and gendered landscapes. By applying ecocritical approaches that emphasize the multiple ways nature is constructed as monstrous or the natural world constructs monsters, we seek to build on the work of horror scholars who view genre film through a variety of theoretical approaches: theological, sociological, psychoanalytic, feminist, cultural, and genre studies.

Monstrous Nature primarily grows out of the groundbreaking work of Noel Carroll and Paul Wells, who at least begin to broach the monster's connection with the natural world. Our focus on anthropomorphism, human ecology, evolution, and gendered landscapes not only highlights the multiple ways in which nature is constructed as monster in traditional horror films and beyond; it also demonstrates what connects these seemingly divergent approaches: a human cause and a biotic solution. Humanity may contribute to the malevolent elements of nature on the big screen. But these films also suggest that embracing interdependent relationships with nonhuman nature may save us all. The structure of our text highlights the increasingly more complex ways in which nature becomes monstrous, first in relation to its connection with humans ("monstrous anthropomorphism"), next as human in a monstrous environment (a "human ecology"), then as a hybrid monster responding to either a comic or evolutionary narrative, and last as a gendered monster.

Monstrous Anthropomorphism

Our first two chapters apply multiple perspectives on anthropomorphism to documentary and feature films constructing insects as monsters or benefactors because they so closely resemble humanity. Whether the comparison between insects and humans is positive or negative, these films suggest that the real monsters are the humans who change the cockroaches rather than the bugs themselves.

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Chapter 1, "*The Hellstrom Chronicle* and *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo*: Anthropomorphizing Nature for Humans," explores the approaches to anthropomorphism applied in *The Hellstrom Chronicle* (1971) and *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* (2009), two insect documentaries that vilify and/or glorify the insects on display by underlining similarities between the behaviors, cultures, emotions, and even appearances of humans and insects. The films construct insects as either monsters (as in *The Hellstrom Chronicle*) or model "persons" (as in *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo*) to promote an environmental message that either warns humans about their mistreatment of the natural world or encourages insect preservation through the protection of the natural world.

Chapter 2, "As Beautiful as a Butterfly"? Monstrous Cockroach Nature and the Horror Film," examines how altered and enhanced roaches on the big screen are anthropomorphized as either fiends or potential friends. They are presented as horrific monsters that must be destroyed, perhaps because they too closely resemble the malevolent side of humanity in *Damnation Alley* (1977) and *The Nest* (1988). *Mimic* (1997) and *Bug* (1975), on the other hand, examine the destructive repercussions of genetic engineering meant to alter cockroaches for human benefit, a more positive result that corresponds with the level of anthropomorphizing on the screen. *Cronos* (1993) more explicitly highlights the symbolic value of the cockroach as a seemingly immortal survivor. All these films, however, demonstrate a similar perspective on the cockroach, suggesting that manipulating nature, even for beneficial results, ultimately leads to destructive ends.

Human Ecology and Nature as Monster

Chapters 3 and 4 highlight readings of horror in film in relation to human ecology. The drive to reconnect with the Earth as home highlights the interdependent relationship between human and nonhuman nature illustrated by the films in this section. In the horror setting, this relationship may produce monsters instead of monstrous eco-trauma. This connection originated with the work of Ellen Swallow Richards, who viewed humans as part of nature and considered urban problems such as air and water pollution as products of human activity imposed on the environment and, subsequently, best resolved by humans.

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Chapter 3, "The Earth Bites Back: Vampires and the Ecological Roots of Home," explores how two recent European comic vampire films, *Strigoi* (2009) and *The Pack* (2010), illuminate the interconnected relationship between blood, soil, and vampirism, highlighting the environmental underpinnings of the vampire myth in relation to a shattered ecology or home. Destroying that human ecology may lead to what clinical psychologist Tina Amorok calls an "eco-trauma of Being" (2007, 29). But in both *Strigoi* and *The Pack*, vampires rather than eco-trauma are the product of this devastated home, a soil desecrated by the blood of war or exploitation of human and nonhuman nature. In *Strigoi* and *The Pack*, a mistreated Earth bites back.

Chapter 4, "Through an Eco-lens of Childhood: Roberto Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero* and Guillermo del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone*," examines how these two films powerfully demonstrate the monstrous metamorphosis an environment destroyed by war causes children. The eco-horrors illustrated in the films shatter both human and nonhuman nature and fracture childhood landscapes, reinforcing the lasting environmental effects of warfare and the relevance of human approaches to ecology. In *Germany Year Zero* (1948) Rossellini amplifies the effects an eco-horror caused by total war and occupation has on innocence, especially the innocence of children whose external and internal landscapes have become broken. *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) explores these eco-horrors in an orphanage during the Spanish Civil War. *Germany Year Zero* and *The Devil's Backbone* translate a destructive human ecology into a fractured and horrific landscape of childhood.

Evolution and Monstrous Nature

Although most of the films explored in the three chapters in this section tell stories that present a pessimistic picture of humanity's future, they all provide a site in which we can try out new, sometimes destructive, evolutionary narratives. These stories seem to ask, what might happen if we continued down a dangerous path that includes nuclear warfare, ineffective toxic waste disposal, or unchecked chemical and biological experimentation? They also ask evolutionary questions about who we are, where we're going, and which story of ourselves we choose to construct: a tragic or comic evolutionary narrative. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 attempt to answer these questions.

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Chapter 5, "Zombie Evolution: A New World with or without Humans," explores how *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *Warm Bodies* (2013) explicitly address evolutionary narratives of survival and reproduction and ultimately endorse interdependent relationships between humans and the zombies they may become. Even though June Pulliam's "Our Zombies, Ourselves: Exiting the Foucauldian Universe in George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead*" (2009) argues that zombies, not humans, form class-consciousness and can reorganize society in their own interests, we assert that *Land of the Dead* and *Warm Bodies* teach us that the most successful evolutionary narratives stress cooperation between species instead of war.

Chapter 6, "Laughter and the Eco-horror Film: The Troma Solution," asserts that two Troma Studios series, *The Toxic Avenger* (1984–2000) and *The Class of Nuke 'Em High* (1986–2013), demonstrate how laughing about the environment and its degradation may not only stimulate awareness; that laughter might also point out a path toward change. In spite of their sometimes overpowering campy humor and horrifying violence, these Troma films show the consequences of disturbing a pristine ecosystem and offer a viable solution to greedy humans' exploitation of the natural world.

Chapter 7, "Parasite Evolution in the Eco-horror Film: When the Host Becomes the Monster," highlights the evolution of parasites in films such as the *Frontline* documentary *Poisoned Waters* (2009), Barry Levinson's "found footage" horror movie response in *The Bay* (2012), and Shane Carruth's *Upstream Color* (2013). With some emphasis on a history of parasite films and their culmination in the vision and philosophy of David Cronenberg, this chapter examines the repercussions that humanity and the nonhuman environment face when we choose tragic evolutionary narratives rather than interdependence. In order to preserve the Chesapeake Bay as a source of recreation and sustenance, both *The Bay* and *Poisoned Waters* argue that we must address the environmental disasters and infectious monsters that our own destructive behaviors have created.

Gendered Landscapes and Monstrous Bodies

Our last two chapters apply an ecofeminist lens to horror films that bring gendered bodies to the fore. The films in this section seek to demonstrate

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the need for "a partnership ethic" like that historian Carolyn Merchant describes, in which "the needs of both humans and nonhumans would be dynamically balanced" (2013, 206). Chapters 8 and 9 highlight films that explore gendered bodies in relation to nonhuman nature.

Chapter 8, "Gendering the Cannibal: Bodies and Landscapes in Feminist Cannibal Movies," explores cannibal horror films in relation to both frontiers and gendered bodies. Although *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *Motel Hell* (1980), and *The Lone Ranger* (2013) make similar statements about our desecration of the natural world, *Blood Diner* (1987), *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. At their best these films turn cannibal horror on its head, exploring bodies and landscapes from an explicitly ecofeminist or a feminist ecocritical perspective that condemns exploitation of women's bodies as frontiers.

Chapter 9, "*American Mary* and Body Modification: Nature and the Art of Change," examines Jen Soska and Sylvia Soska's feminist body horror film *American Mary* (2012) and masculine human-weapon films such as *RoboCop* (2013) and *Elysium* (2013) as body-modification films replicating the natural world they seem to transcend. When characters in *American Mary*, *RoboCop*, or *Elysium* modify their bodies to express their individuality and survive, they don't separate themselves from nature; instead they align themselves with the animal world. When either animals or humans change their appearance, they gain an evolutionary advantage that assures their reproductive and biological persistence.

Our conclusion synthesizes these four approaches by applying our four monstrous representations of nature on the big screen addressed in this work to climate-change films, part of the so-called cli-fi movement. Films such as *The Last Winter* (2006), *Half-Life* (2008), *The Thaw* (2009), *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Noah* (2014), and *Interstellar* (2014) draw on elements of a variety of genres (science fiction, animation, ecoterrorism, action-adventure, to name a few). But all these films center on themes that are connected explicitly with

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The Happening: Trees' first attack immobilizes victims.

warnings against the negative consequences of rapid climate change. For us, exploring film in relation to a monstrous nature expands and refigures definitions of horror in productive ways. Such an exploration also demonstrates that the only viable solution to such "natural attacks" is to seek a middle ground that sustains both human and nonhuman nature.

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