


Please cite the Published Version

Fitzpatrick, Teresa  (2023) The rise in ecohorror and ecogothic criticism. In: The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century. Lexington Books Horror Studies . Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, pp. 259-274. ISBN 9781793643407 (ebook); 9781793643391 (hardback)

Publisher: Rowman and Littlefield

Version: Accepted Version

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Additional Information: This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter which appeared in final form in Bacon, S. (Ed.), The Evolution of Horror in the Twenty-First Century (2023), Rowman and Littlefield. Minor corrections were made to the chapter during the production process which may not be reflected on this version. All rights reserved. Please contact the publisher for permission to copy, distribute or reprint.

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The Rise in Ecohorror and Ecogothic Criticism

Teresa Fitzpatrick

A NEW (GOTHIC) DAWN

Despite centuries of gloomy atmospheres and eerie settings that resonate with the ecophobic imagination (Estok 2009), Gothic critical enquiry of nature only began to emerge with the development of an ecogothic. Andrew Smith and William Hughes first defined this new term in their introduction to their ground-breaking collection as a theoretical framework that “explor[es] the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism” (2013, 3), a framework that “acknowledges a number of theoretical paradigms that help to critically reinvigorate debate about the class, gender and national identities that inhere within representations of the landscape” (4). While the essays themselves lean heavily towards the Gothic, they nevertheless, begin to interrogate the ecophobic tendencies within the genre. David Del Principe subsequently defined ecogothic in his introduction of *Gothic Studies* as a framework akin to ecofeminism wherein “the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid” can be considered “through a more inclusive lens . . . as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity” (2014, 1). Following on from this theorists have increasingly widened and defined the nature of the ecogothic with Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2018) recentering the term ecogothic to “expose the darker aspects of the human cultural relationship with the North American natural world” (16), while Sue Edney explores gothic gardens using “the distinctive combination of ecocriticism with Gothic and the uncanny, alongside the ‘material turn’ in cultural theory” (2020, 7), and Elizabeth Parker, turning her focus to forests, sees the ecogothic as a way to examine “our darker, more

complicated cultural representations of the nonhuman world” (2020, 36) and asserting that unlike ecohorror, ecogothic encompasses a nature “independent of human presence” (Ibid.). As the term moves from vague ecocritical perspectives of Gothic landscapes and/or bodies and confidence in the use of combined theories grows, distinctive critical frameworks such as ecofeminist Gothic and material ecogothic are emerging to interrogate the human–nonhuman interconnectedness.

In contrast to ecogothic, then, ecohorror encapsulates “revenge-of-nature” narratives that imply the centrality of human protagonists as both agitator and victim, vital in evoking the “feelings of loathing, repugnance, aversion, dread, and outright terror” associated with horror (Rust and Soles 2014, 509). Yet, the same authors recognize the need for “[a] more expansive definition of ecohorror” to include “texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world, or in which horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crises, or blur human/nonhuman distinctions” (Rust and Soles 2014, 509–10). Ecohorror as a mode as well as a genre broadens the scope considerably, and with ecophobia playing an equally crucial role in ecohorror, there are inevitable overlaps with ecogothic. However, as Tidwell and Soles note, “ecohorror is not defined solely by human fear *of* nonhuman nature but is also frequently concerned with human fear *for* nonhuman nature” (2021, 5, emphasis in original). While ecohorror and ecogothic share a concern with the human-nonhuman dynamic, ecohorror has a focus on the uneasy relationship between human and nonhuman, where the natural world is viewed as monstrous/monstrously wronged with humanity at its center.

BATTLING THE ELEMENTS: NATURAL DISASTER, ECO-APOCALYPSE

Often categorized as eco-disaster or cli-fi films (Murray and Heumann 2016, 191–92) wherein nature’s revenge takes the form of a natural albeit exaggeratedly dramatized catastrophe or weather event, ecohorror readings can help reveal social and cultural misanthropy of their moment. While the eco-disaster scenarios found in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Into the Storm* (2014), and *San Andreas* (2015) highlight the inevitable environmental repercussions in the age of the Anthropocene with global freezing, erratic tornadoes, and earthquakes of unimaginable magnitude, the wanton destruction of these events succeed more in exposing the rupture in the human relationships of the characters as the social and familial breakdowns are resolved in combatting the elements. The horror produced by such spectacular natural phenomena serve to underline the message that things must change to save

not only the planet from environmental degradation, but the fabric of society perceived as disintegrating in terms of conservative ideals. Adopting an ecohorror approach to such texts focuses on this apparent mirroring of nature and culture, shattering the illusion of separateness in demonstrating how “natural” phenomena is rather the consequence of human negligence, in much the same way as the estranged familial relations. Examining a very real natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina, material ecofeminist Nancy Tuana argues that the concept of “viscous porosity” reveals that “there is no sharp ontological divide” between “social practices and natural phenomena” but rather “a complex interaction” through material agents, both human and nonhuman (2008, 192–93). Just like the fictional disasters, the social and natural boundaries are porous as human actions contribute to, and are determined by, the environmental event, bound up in a way that is hard to distinguish whether humanity or nature is in control. This entanglement of human and nonhuman agency underlining the horror of destruction faced by the human characters is, nevertheless, viscous in the sense that there “remains an emphasis on resistance to changing form” (Tuana 2008, 194). In the aftermath of destruction, estranged and ruptured familial relations may be restored as they pick up the pieces and continue, but whether the event has provoked the required change in attitudes towards nature remains elusive—in both the fictional and very real scenario. Through an ecohorror lens these natural disaster narratives query whether the catastrophe is a natural or man-made phenomena, destabilizing human–nonhuman, nature–culture boundaries, viewing these events as an apparent self-destructive response to predominantly Western hubris in the face of any number of (class, racial, gender, sexual) paradigms.

Bernice M. Murphy (2013) has suggested that American ecohorror has become “much more nebulous, and . . . downright apocalyptic” (193), and which is exemplified in films like *The Last Winter* (2006) and *The Happening* (2008) that allude to a clear disruption of human-nature relationships and where the human is a deliberate target of inexplicable natural phenomena. In both these films, nature’s agency is demonstrated not through a severe weather event but an “invisible monster” (Weinstock 2020, 358–73) released by nature intent on inducing mass suicide in retaliation for human encroachment and environmental degradation. In Larry Fessenden’s *The Last Winter* (2006) the Alaskan wilderness apparently strikes back at the group of environmental scientists and oil company workers evaluating the feasibility of extracting the dwindling fossil fuel, when one by one the group succumb to a pattern of self-annihilation. Blaming a poisonous gas released by the melting permafrost for the hallucinations of ghostly caribou and the disturbing deaths, the narrative offers a sense of material agency in determining nature is sentient in its intentionality.

Human victims are not wiped out *en masse*, but singularly targeted with increasing fervor to remove humanity from the area. This is a revenge of nature past as the ghosts of the fossil fuels in the form of phantom reindeer are the apparent active agent, disrupting the boundaries of human/nonhuman, life/death, past/present, in defending the natural world by provoking the characters' deaths. Similarly, M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008) presents nature as an active agent in controlling ironic self-destructive human behavior, reversing the perspective of ecological destruction as swathes of humans are compelled to acts of suicide. Perceived initially to be a chemical terrorist attack in Central Park prompting mass evacuation from New York City, it emerges as the protagonists flee further into the rural zones that the cause of the madness is a plant neurotoxin. As the knowledgeable hero explains, what should originally be a way to ward off pests has evolved to combat nature's biggest threat: humanity. In both these films, the boundaries between human and nature collapse revealing the susceptibility of the human body to environmental agency. In her concept of trans-corporeality charting toxins from pesticide through food to manifest in the human body, Stacy Alaimo argues "the material interconnections of human corporeality with the more-than-human world" shows that the two "can by no means be considered as separate" (2010, 2). As these two films highlight specifically, the invisible monster lurks not necessarily as a separate powerful act of nature but as a material entity that transgresses the boundaries of the human body, requiring its audience and characters to reconsider their place within the natural world.

CREATURE FEATURES: MONSTROUS MAMMALS, FIENDISH FISH, INSIDIOUS INSECTS

Although the 1960s and 1970s are the decades renowned for animal attack horror with the success of *The Birds* (1963), *Jaws* (1975), and *Grizzly* (1976) tapping into the primordial fear of claws and teeth, the popularity of animal horror has not waned in the twenty-first century. Reminding the human tourist that they are invaders in their commodification of nature, films like *Prey* (2007), *The Grey* (2011), and *Backcountry* (2014) pit humans against the nonhuman in the latter's own territory, continuing to underline the fallacy of human control over nature. While bears and canines remain territorial defenders against the persistent human visitor, their bloody rampages underline several ecocritical paradigms not least of which is the unsettling notion of humans as food. Unlike other animal prey that have evolved some form of defense mechanism (hard shells, agility, speed, camouflage), humans have relied on their position as a superior intelligence. Yet, unlike their predecessors where there is an all-out human retaliation to obliterate the monster and

re-establish human control, post-2000 animal attack movies, for all their body horror, suggest a survival narrative coupled with new-found respect for wild nature. Despite the monstrous animal attacks, these films “also frequently prompt sympathy for the creatures” (Tidwell and Soles 2021, 6) suggesting the attacks are to some extent a justified response to human treatment of the natural world and the shrinking of animal territory in favor of urbanization and agriculture.

An inherent part of animal attack narratives, as noted by Brittany Roberts is that they, “remind us not only that we too are edible animals attractive to predators but also that there are Other beings and agencies whom we cannot control” (2021, 180). Fear of animal agency is key in the CBS television series *Zoo* (2015–17), an invasion narrative depicting a global animal rebellion. Based on the novel by James Patterson and Michael Ledwidge (2012), the show portrays the human as prey when both wild and domestic animals are mutated by a pandemic that enables them to coordinate their attack on humans. In the novel, their new-found self-awareness is illustrated by the narration by a chimpanzee character while in the series this is achieved through close-ups of the animal eye showing a distinctive human resemblance. This blurring of human–nonhuman boundaries is most obvious when companion and wild animals plan murder. Arguably the most unsettling moments in the show are when the companion animals turn on their owners through a seemingly planned coordinated attack redolent of very human actions.

Although large predators have been the focus of much horror scholarship and animal studies, creepy crawly horror has received less attention, perhaps because these have often tended toward comedy horror. Ecohorror criticism is beginning to re-examine entomophobic and body horror of the twentieth century and would do well to encompass the more recent comedy horror films within these analyses. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik (2005) assert how Gothic writing engages with the comic in various ways, offering an opening for ecohorror to explore the ridiculous side to insect body horror in *Eight Legged Freaks* (2002), *Slither* (2006), *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (2008), and *Stung* (2015), where the human–insect hierarchy is overturned to comic effect even as they emphasize disgust in bodily transgression. In the twenty-first century such films are more likely to be categorized as science fiction, with *Deadly Swarm* (2003), *Parasite* (2004), *Larva* (2005), *The Hive* (2008), and *From Beneath* (2012) underlining our latent fear of creatures so alien to ourselves yet so important to our ecosystems. The mob attacks of these tiny critters are clearly nature-revenge narratives; a species rebellion for all those times humans have stepped on, swatted, crushed, or sprayed one of their brethren, inviting ecohorror criticism into the sphere of science/speculative fiction. What makes insect horror unsettling is that these beings remain outside human control, “resist[ing] anthropomorphism, and are usually presented as

little more than biological machines” (Jancovich 1996, 27). Like vegetation and reptiles, insectoid monsters lack empathy for the human and inevitably highlight our vulnerability through bodily invasion, warranting further eco-horror criticism.

Perhaps one of the most popular ecophobic settings in Australian and American ecohorror is the water and the monsters that lurk beneath the surface. *Rogue* (2007), *Black Water* (2007), and the slightly earlier *Lake Placid* (1999) draw on fears of the primeval reptile to whom the fleshy human invader is but another tasty snack. Having survived a crocodilian attack worthy of any ecohorror narrative, Australian ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood argues that “[i]n the West, the human is set apart from nature as radically other” and much of the horror stems from the dominant presumption that “[h]umans may themselves be foremost among predators, but they themselves must not be food for worms, and especially they must not be prey for crocodiles” (1995, 34). These liminal creatures—crocodiles inhabit both water and land—in fictional accounts confront us not just with human encroachment on natural zones but can also offer ways of interrogating colonial, gender, and sexual oppression through their monstrous reduction of the human body as food. The shark in films like *Open Water* (2003), *The Reef* (2010), and *The Shallows* (2016) operates in a very similar manner. The gory body horror of such attacks, an ecohorror lens suggests, also forces us to rethink our place within the natural world and face our own vulnerability.

Alongside the wealth of animal studies and horror scholarship on animal-attack narratives, our hesitant relationship with large bodies of water and the uncanny predatory monsters lurking beneath has sparked a growing subset of ecohorror scholarship and ecogothic explorations of the sea dubbed “Nautical Gothic” (Alder 2017). The establishment in 2020 of the global interdisciplinary Haunted Shores Research Network to include liminal coastal zones, and the theorization of Nautical Horror by Antonio Alcalá González (2021) to explore the monstrous cephalopod attest a growing interest in these nonhuman watery environments. Much broader than animal attack narratives, this scholarship explores the unsettling relationships of humanity and an environment that remains largely uncharted, with creatures that are radically different to the human form and often greatly misunderstood. The marginality of coastal spaces forms discursive sites for a range of issues, both ecological and social. Developing a nautical ecogothic approach navigates a gap in scholarship, Alder argues, since for example “[s]ymbolically, ships are liminal spaces, between life and death, inside and outside, while the sea can hide terrors beneath a continually shifting yet apparently timeless surface” (2017, 4). Human–nonhuman relations and interactions are explored through a thalassophobia that can be seen as offering historic context to broader long-standing ecophobia in Western philosophical and cultural ideology. We

may not be especially welcome in the natural domains of the forest, jungle, desert, or tundra, ecohorror demonstrates, but we certainly no longer belong to (or have the natural capacity to survive in) the sea. Yet, “[e]ven though the long evolutionary arc that ties humans to their aquatic ancestors may evoke modes of kinship with the seas” (Alaimo 2014, 188), nautical ecohorror readings cast these kinships as “monstrous and horrifying encounter[s] with the nonhuman” (Alcalá González 2021, 161). Such encounters with monstrous sea creatures as giant cephalopods, argues Alcalá González “evidence the inferior position of humans when we are pitted against both the threatening creatures that emerge from the depths and the vastness of the oceanic waters that challenge the ability of human minds to comprehend size and volume” (2021, 162). This emerging body of scholarship offers a broadening of the sea monster attack narratives beyond the creature itself to considerations of kinship and human-nonhuman interactions in challenging anthropocentric claims of superiority and supremacy in our inconsiderate pillaging of natural sea resources.

PLANT HORROR: VICIOUS VEGETABLES, FATAL FLOWERS, MONSTROUS MUSHROOMS

Critical plant studies have moved the focus onto an equally alien, ambiguous relationship: the botanical. Like other nonhuman kinship, this too is riddled with uncertainty, with Western Enlightenment rationality “haunt[ing] our relation to plants” (Marder 2016, 120). Their rootedness to place has historically been associated with stagnancy, and underdeveloped thinking in Western philosophy, while cultural associations of femininity with flowers and reproduction alongside the wild, chaotic female gender with prolific vegetal growth have been perpetuated in literature and art for centuries. Today ironically echoing Estok’s ecophobia, Marder states, “[w]e escape into the plant world, from which we have been fleeing for millennia now” (2016, 120). While murderous intent and primeval intelligence is not immediately associated with the vegetal world, there is a growing focus on what Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga term “Plant Horror” (2016). Stories of vampiric orchids and man-eating trees were prolific in the late-nineteenth century, inspired by evolutionary biology as tropes engaging with anxieties pertaining to rising feminism, sexuality, class, and race, unsettling pervasive Western thinking by inverting the human–nonhuman power dynamic and blurring species, category, and social boundaries as they (attempt to) consume the human (Fitzpatrick 2020). Perhaps the distasteful notion of Earthbound plant intelligence explains why twentieth-century cinematic adaptations of iconic plant monsters in *The Day of the Triffids* (Sekely [1962]) and *Little Shop*

of *Horrors* (Oz [1986]) take their cue from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel [1956]) and depict their vegetal menaces as extraterrestrial. An other-worldly plant alien offers a sense of rationale for what seems an impossible scenario. Yet, plants are already an “absolute alterity” (Keetley 2016, 6), as the horror invoked by this type of nature-revenge narrative stems from the realisation that our material bodies are already an inevitable source of plant food. Besides confronting such inevitability, plant horror also reminds us of the “implacable indifference” (Keetley 2016, 9) of plants toward humans. While the decomposed human body as plant food may be disturbing enough, when plants intentionally seek out humans as food or forcibly incorporate them into their own vegetal futures the levels of abjection increase dramatically, in part through highlighting the true place of humanity in plant-human interconnectedness, vegetal kinships and plant-becomings.

New ecohorror anthologies explore this very corporeal interaction between plants and humans. The *Growing Concerns* collection (Hurst 2014) in particular, includes tales of corporeal ecohorror where plant and human boundaries are materially and conceptually challenged as they gruesomely merge to offer uncanny perceptions of plant-becoming. In these tales, a murdered skeleton transcorporeally reanimates for revenge with the help of vampiric vines; the body parts of a missing child and their searching father are reappropriated among the unusual human-plant hybrids of a strange death-garden; and other protagonists experience becoming-plant in more subtle posthuman mergings. The ecological epithet “at one with nature” takes an extreme uncanny turn when human and plant entanglements are depicted as a very physical transcorporeality, confronting material realities of eventual plant-becoming. As Karen Houle has argued, plant and human lives are inexorably linked; we “live by grace of the oxygen produced by said plants, and are built from the very carbons of them, and run our entire global economy off the backs of that carbon, [yet] we are unable to think let alone live the novel and profound truths of these vegetal relations” (2011, 92). These tales of plant-becoming serve to highlight the very real entanglements in memorable ways that demonstrate our persistent ecophobia: being part of the food chain rather than at its apex. Visceral plant-becomings also challenge cultural and social assumptions (gender, race, and sexual identities) when focusing on the transcorporeal transgressions of dualistic boundaries, proposing a web of becoming-other ripe for thematic analysis. However horrific the physical trans-corporeal becomings may be depicted in these tales, the protagonists (gardeners, scientists, environmentalists, nature-lovers *extraordinaire*) facilitating the plant-becomings within their monstrous vegetal progeny view the outcomes in a positive light, challenging predominant Western thinking and making it difficult to discern whether plant or human is the villain.

While plant horror has literary leanings, thanks to computer-generated imaging the sentient plant can step off the pages and provide a visual, although gory and unsettling, reversal of human hierarchical assumptions. Carter Smith's *The Ruins* (2008) depicts the plant-human interaction through a gruesome physicality that recasts plants "as agentive . . . even *antagonistic* subjects . . . blur[ring] boundaries between vegetable and animal, human and non-human" (Roberts 2020, 56, original emphasis). When a group of eco-tourists ascend the vegetation-covered ruins of a Mayan temple, an indigenous tribe refuses to allow them to descend on threat of death if/when they try. The carnivorous vines that cover the ruins revoke their benign vegetal stereotyping in becoming active agents. These vines take invasion to a new level when they penetrate the flesh of the characters one by one, having lured the group into sustaining physical injuries by mimicking first a cell phone and then human voices, thereby hindering the group's escape. The group of backpackers are hesitant to believe that the vines are responsible for luring them with mimesis of modern-day technology. The scenario attests to what James H. Wandersee and Elisabeth E. Schussler refer to as "plant blindness" (1999)—a failure to see plants as individual beings in our daily lives relegating them to mere backdrop. Even when Stacy (Laura Ramsey) asserts that she can feel the vine inside her and they try to pull out the tendril that has entered her wound, disbelief remains until sometime later when it can be seen wriggling beneath the skin and flesh. A plant's very rootedness (unless it is a triffid) means they are unable to chase the human from its territory hence, they employ some of their real-world behaviors hyperbolically. Humans, in their hubristic plant blindness, are lured to their demise by perfume, attractive color and floral displays, or the fascinating visual (and in the case of the vines, aural) mimicry. Like an insect to a Venus flytrap, humans place themselves within the plant's sphere wherein they disable their human prey or at least slow them down, levelling the playing field. The vine's gruesome live consumption and infestation of the humans offers a very corporeal reflection of the consumption of indigenous nature by Western capitalist consumerism, even as it emphasizes the fragility of the human body and its ultimate return to the earth as plant food. Yet, more disconcerting perhaps is the vine's ability to vocalize, albeit through imitation. The capacity to communicate and hence, learn, not only signifies sentient intelligence supposedly unique to humans (and to some extent animals) provokes the question: if plants could talk, what would they say?

The answer is speculated comically in Roger Corman's *Little Shop of Horror* (1962) with the iconic "pot plant" Audrey Junior, but vegetal communication and response to the Anthropocene underlies much of the twenty-first century ecohorror through a posthuman narrative where plant and human transcorporeally merge, offering moments of ecological awareness

in becoming-plant. While other plant horrors offer plant-becomings and transcorporeal mergings that highlight the vulnerability of the human form in its material decomposition, novels like A. J. Colucci's *Seeders* (2014), Jeff VanderMeer's *Area X: Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), and M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014), including the film adaptations of these last two, *Annihilation* (Garland, dir. 2018) and *The Girl with All the Gifts* (McCarthy, dir. 2016), depict transcorporeal mergings that create eco-posthumans who understand the desires and fears of the vegetal world. In these narratives, human and plant enter a (sometimes reluctant) symbiotic relationship that is facilitated by a fungus. Although not strictly a plant, but within the botanical sphere, there is a preoccupation within these ecohorror texts with the fungal body.

This connection between two separate kingdoms is hardly surprising as plant and fungi already have a symbiotic association, predominantly the mycorrhizal network that scientists have nicknamed the Wood Wide Web (Wohlleben 2015) in recognition of its role in facilitating communication between plants through their roots and the vital role of fungi within plant ecology (Sheldrake 2021). In both *Seeders* and *The Girl with All the Gifts*, a known species of fungus has been scientifically altered with devastating consequences for the human population. The protagonists of *Seeders* become infected by ergot on the remote island home of Dr. George Brookes, an ostracized experimental plant scientist who has mysteriously committed suicide. Once infected by the fungus which spreads through the body to the brain, black mushrooms erupting through the skin, the characters can hear the island plants, becoming controlled by the plants' instructions. As eco-posthumans connected to the natural world and compelled to do the vegetal world's bidding, they must collect infected plant seedlings for mass distribution across the globe in a potentially insidious nature-revenge narrative that nevertheless carries a distinctive environmental message. The postapocalyptic scenario of *The Girl with All the Gifts* similarly involves out-of-control fungal infection of a real-life fungus, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis* or the zombie-ant fungus, which infects the human brain with uncontrollable cannibalism. The plot is a standard zombie apocalypse narrative with a small group of normal humans fighting for survival against a world overrun, but the group includes and focuses on the main protagonist, Melanie (Sennia Nanua), a second-generation "hungry" who has developed restraint through education and love for her teacher. Despite her attempts to protect the band of "normals" on their way to another base camp, she eventually realizes the futility of resisting change and instigates a final global wave of infection, paving the way for a new posthuman that might take better care of the planet.

While both texts propose infection through close contact with the fungus or fungal-infected, *Annihilation* highlights the almost imperceptible

reproductive aspect of fungus: the spores. When a team of women are sent into an environmental anomaly dubbed “Area X” or “The Shimmer” to investigate and search for previous expedition survivors, the spores of a mysterious fungus provoke a series of metabolic changes that create not only weird hybrid animal and plant life, but transcorporeally transformation the humans that have invaded the area, merging them with the environment. In novel and film, the main protagonist, a biologist/botanist discovers several human bodies that have been converted into a colorful array of strange cryptogams: mushrooms, lichens, mosses, and molds. While in the novel the biologist’s positive attitude to this strange but pristine environment is mirrored by a positive inner transformation (she glows), in the film it is Josie (Tessa Thompson) who willingly succumbs to the spores and refraction of her DNA as a post-human of the Shimmer, turning her gradually into a flowering plant as these bud and flower through her skin. Being neither animal or vegetal, edible or poisonous, desired or loathed, fungal spores and mushrooms are disturbing in their ambiguity. Associated with decay, growing mostly underground, facilitating the decomposition of all matter, the fascination and trepidation around this unusual growth, which can survive on anything, makes it an ideal trope for exploring duality in ecohorror and ecogothic criticism. Although Anthony Camara has explored “the role fungi play” in “*fin de siècle* debates between vitalism and materialism” (2014, 9) in the writing of Arthur Machen, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) uses the environmental benefits of fungal ecology and their collaborative networks to explore the extent of capitalist destructive reach, literary scholarship on fungus to date has been slim. With an increasing body of ecohorror narratives underlining anxieties about global pandemics and ecological crises through depictions of fungal spores and trans-corporeal posthuman becomings, this is another area of enquiry that is beginning to have traction within ecogothic criticism. The most recent fungal ecohorror, *The Spore* (Cunningham [2021]), *In the Earth* (Wheatley [2021]), and *Gaia* (Bouwer [2021]) align infection with spores as mutated fungi invade the human body, spreading under the skin to eventually erupt in spectacular fungal growth. While these mushrooms extruding the body are unsettling, the monstrosity and horror come from the fact that the human remains alive during this species invasion; one that reduces the human to its mere materiality, repositioning the human as part of, rather than superior to, nature.

BRAVE NEW WORLD: COSMIC ECOHORROR

In his ecohorror reading of “Lovecraft’s weird depictions of encroaching forests and dangerously active vegetation,” Fredrik Blanc argues how Lovecraft’s “natural world can become monstrous, whether as the prime

infector or . . . infected” (2022, 159), as landscape, plant and fungus combine in configurations of corruption and decay in narratives that “epitomize the general fear of nature’s ultimate otherness and agency” (168). This ecophobic view of nature as infectious embodies twenty-first-century anxieties around global health issues and underscores notions of climate crisis as “beyond humanity’s control and the cosmic indifference of an untameable universe” (Blanc 2022, 158). Cosmic horror is closely linked to Lovecraft’s penchant for exploring our fear of the unknown and humanity’s insignificance within the cosmos. As Bethany Doane outlines, a cosmic ecohorror borrows from weird fiction to take a different approach to nature-revenge, whereby nature itself does not exact revenge but offers a “specific ecology” wherein a “geographical space affects history, memory, thought, and perceptions” of human/nonhuman entanglements “at a ‘cosmic’ scale of deep time” (2020, 46). Hence, cosmic ecohorror interrogates “a web of ontological inseparability” (Doane 2020, 47) in positing the issue of species extinction framed by the outside irruption of a cosmic indifference fielded through nature. *Knowing* (2009), *The Endless* (2017), *Annihilation* (2018), and *Color Out of Space* (2019) all engage with the unknowable universe challenging perceptions of time and space, as human, nonhuman and inhuman become entangled in ways that produce uncertainty about the future and disrupt preconceived ideologies and species boundaries. While the later narratives focus on a specific site that becomes distorted by a cosmic anomaly that forces the protagonists to recognize human inability to control a persistently random and unpredictable nature or cosmos, *Knowing* set the Earth’s inevitable destruction as the consequence of the Anthropocene. Ecological and extinction anxieties are frequently foreshadowed in the nature-loving Caleb’s nightmares of the forest and wildlife surrounding his home in flames. Cosmic intervention gives humanity a second chance though when an elusive life-form begins to migrate samples of the planet’s species, including children Caleb and Abby, echoing the religious stories of Noah’s Ark and Eden.

Lovecraft’s preoccupation with the tentacle, not just for his primeval monsters, but in his descriptions of malignant and monstrous nature, offers a key feature in other cosmic ecohorror narratives that challenge ideas of natural order. *Spring* (2014), *The Lighthouse* (2019), and *Sacrifice* (2020) involve human entanglement with primordial cephalopods as unspeakable and indescribable creatures from beyond the known realm. These ancient beings suggest a pre-evolutionary kinship that unsettles human boundaries through their interstitial nature even as they question human ecology. This multilimbed horror persistently appears not just in Nautical Gothic, but in plant and fungal horror too. Roots, tendrils, and mycorrhizal hyphae are all invariably referred to as tentacles within literary texts and closely resemble this cephalopodic limb in visual narratives. Exploring how the tentacle trope

depicts nature reaching out and entangling the human ultimately to enmesh human and nonhuman stipulates the need for “tentacular thinking,” argues Shelley Saguaro (2020) and is what Dawn Keetley refers to as “*tentacular ecohorror*” (2021, 24, original emphasis). For both Saguaro and Keetley the transformative encounters with nature that witness the entanglement of plant and human resembles a multilimbed embroilment—one that not only underlines the vulnerability of the human body but that offers a progressive mode of ecological thinking.

THE FUTURE OF ECOHORROR

Ecogothic and ecohorror scholarship is growing steadily and is not restricted to contemporary narratives. It has offered academics an alternative avenue with which to explore older material as well using critical frames that interrogate the interstices of fear and nature across a range of thematic narratives. While this chapter has primarily focused on ecohorror cinema and literature, there is scope to apply this transdisciplinary mode of enquiry to manga, graphic novels, poetry, and video games which equally exhibit an ecohorror mode. As this chapter has outlined, ecocritical studies in animal horror are expanding as human–nonhuman relationships recenter our ecophobic traditions, while plant studies continue to explore gothic/horror scholarship (including *Weird and Science Fiction*), illustrating how plant life “transforms our attitudes . . . questioning and shifting many traditional parameters” (Bishop 2020, 4–5) with fungal horror of growing interest. As concerns about ocean health hit the news headlines, nautical gothic/horror is on the rise, with insect horror and cosmic ecohorror emerging as critical frames with which to embrace the tentacular and further explore human anxieties over symbiotic and possible plant-human futures.

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