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Book Review: Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen*, Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 270 pp. Hardcover \$50.00. ISBN: 978-0-8032-8569-9

Through gory plots, monstrous characters, and violent actions, horror cinema tackles multiple socio-political and cultural issues. In their book *Monstrous Nature: Environment and Horror on the Big Screen*, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann propose examining a very distinct subgenre of the horror film that either explicitly or implicitly comments on the issue of the environment. Ecological decline, the fear of extinction or mutation, climate change and its drastic ramifications, as well as numerous other problems that have started to worry humanity considerably since the middle of the 20th century have been largely explored from eco-cultural and cinematic perspectives. Murray and Heumann bring together the vast number of films created since that time to reveal the overt tendency of horror cinema to challenge the viewer with multiple scenarios of ecological changes and their consequences.

Murray and Heumann accentuate the power of the horror film to seriously engage with the intricate issue of the environment: “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” (xiv). The scholars identify four main themes that horror cinema employs to deal with the monstrosity of nature, and divide the book, accordingly, into four sections.

The authors open the first section, “Anthropomorphism and the ‘Big Bug’ Movie,” with an analysis of *The Hellstrom Chronicle* (1971) and *Beetle Queen Conquers Tokyo* (2009). According to Murray and Heumann, the two documentaries provide a unique view on insects by means of “compare[ing] the[ir] characteristics and behaviors [...] to those of human beings” (4). In doing so, these cinematic examples “construct them [insects] as either monsters [...] or model persons [...] to promote an environmental message that either warns humans about their mistreatment of the natural world or encourages insect preservation” (4). The scholars then turn to the

images of cockroaches in the horror film only to reinforce their previous contentions, but also to add that both the monstrosity of humans and the monstrosity of insects, in principle, represent a similar type of evil. By the examples of *Damnation Alley* (1977), *The Nest* (1988), *Cronos* (1993), *Bug* (1995), and *Mimic* (1997), the authors underscore the fact that “manipulating nature, even for beneficial results, ultimately leads to destructive ends” (xix).

In the second section, “Human Ecology and the Horror Film,” Murray and Heumann engage with the question of “human ecology” (xix). Examining the vampire characters from *Strigoi* (2009) and *The Pack* (2010), the scholars highlight the problem of “environmental exploitation and a destructive nature” (42), thus reconsidering the image of a vampire as a monster that avenges human carelessness towards nature in general and, it seems, soil in particular. The authors’ analysis of *Germany Year Zero* (1948) and *The Devil’s Backbone* (2001) that follows the detailed overview of vampire films uncovers “the environmental consequences of war” (59). The scholars’ primary aim here is to draw attention not only to the issue of ecological decline but also to the pernicious influence of that decline on children.

In “Evolution and Monstrous Nature,” Murray and Heumann ask “who we are, where we’re going, and which story of ourselves we choose to construct: a tragic or comic evolutionary narrative” (xx). Beginning with a close analysis of *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *Warm Bodies* (2013), the scholars explore the ways in which the two films “stress interdependence over human ecology, emphasizing a biotic community over human-centered worldviews” (81). In this chapter, the authors closely engage with such issues as existence, transformation, survival, and reproduction to define the ways in which recent horror films see the place of humanity in the inevitably changing environment. Murray and Heumann then describe two possible reactions to these changes. First, it is laughing at ecological decline, which, as scholars claim, “intensifies an environmental message while minimizing didactic and pedantic proselytizing that a more serious approach might foster” (107). Second, it is turning the problem of eco-decline into a tragedy. The films and series that the authors analyze in these two chapters include *The Toxic Avenger* (1984–2000), *The Class of Nuke ’Em High* (1986–2013), *Poisoned Waters* (2009), *The Bay* (2012), and *Upstream Color* (2013).

In the final section, “Gendered Landscapes and Monstrous Bodies,” Murray and Heumann address the issue of environmental decline through the prism of ecofeminism. The scholars provide a meticulous analysis of *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) to contend that it “turn[s] cannibal horror on its head, exploring bodies and landscapes from an explicitly ecofeminist perspective that condemns exploitation of women’s bodies as frontiers” (147). The chapter examines other cannibal films, including *Ravenous* (1999), *American Psycho* (2000), and *Trouble Every Day* (2001), to expand the discussion, investigating such notions as “colonizer/colonized, masculine/feminine, nature/culture, and wendigo or wetiko/sustainability” (156). The section concludes with an analysis of *American Mary* (2012), *RoboCop* (2013), and *Elysium* (2013) to accentuate the “evolutionary advantages” that one gains when transforming his/her body (189).

Monstrous Nature thoroughly “explores the roots and ramifications of [...] natural and ecological horror” (xvii). It “extends definitions of eco-horror and the monster beyond those found in recent studies” (xvii). The book is an outstanding academic achievement that not only provides an accurate classification of eco-horror films but also skillfully deconstructs cinematic representations of human and nonhuman to explain the reasons for environmental decline, provide possible scenarios for humans and other living species in case of an ecological catastrophe, and, perhaps most importantly, demonstrate how the horror genre raises eco-awareness among its viewers. *Monstrous Nature* is an excellent source for scholars and students in environmental studies, cultural studies, and film studies. It is also an interesting read for anyone who enjoys watching horror films and/or strives to understand the ways in which cinema deals with the problem of environmental decline.