

Sweet-and-Sour Soup for the Psyche

Horror's Ecophobic Leanings

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Abstract Excess signals uncontrolled natural agency and thus provides a key ingredient in horror and ecohorror. Because excess ultimately threatens our agency over matter and meaning, nature comes to threaten the fall and dissolution of humanity, offer an erasure of what it means to be human, and exert a muffling of the very agency that defines our sense of our exceptionalism. Yet horror and ecohorror also enthrall. They do so precisely because they provide a perversely traumatophilic/traumatophobic sensation, a paradoxical presence of opposites that somehow, like sweet-and-sour soup for the psyche, tastes good. We watch or read ecohorror for the attraction and repulsion its various traumas offer. Horror and the disgusting captivate us, reminding us at the same time of our corporeality and its fragility. Slime is central here. Slime is the horror of boundary transgressions, of indefinability, of unstopability, of corporeal and natural agency. Reactions to slime reveal not only a fear of nature but a fear of women, and understanding theoretical connections between sexism and ecophobia is a critical step toward ending both. Central here is understanding how the balancing between attraction and repulsion, traumatophilia and traumatophobia, produces compelling spectacle that is entertaining but stimulates no activist engagement.

Keywords ecohorror, ecophobia, slime, ecogothic, trauma

Horror—indeed a capacious genre, as the call for papers for this special issue notes—intersects and overlaps with the ecophobic imagination in sometimes obvious and sometimes almost imperceptible ways. The often ecophobic excesses that define horror frequently find expression in images of nature (or aspects of nature) gone wild, and this has spurred the growth of subsets within the horror genre. Ecohorror is one of these, and “plant horror” is a yet more focused subset. Even within the broader genre of horror proper, however, ecophobia is an often-implied prerequisite, as the genre’s slimic imagination suggests. Far from challenging ecophobia, horror depends on and reiterates it, and given the increasing global climate crises, theorizing about ecophobia where it occurs is necessary and important work.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE NOTES

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In *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, I write about ecophobia as follows:

The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment. While its genetic origins have functioned, in part, to preserve our species (for instance, the fight or flight response), the ecophobic condition has also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests. Often a product of behaviours serviceable in the past but destructive in the present, it is also sometimes a product of the perceived requirements of our seemingly exponential growth. . . . Ecophobia exists globally on both macro and micro levels, and its manifestation is at times directly apparent and obvious but is also often deeply obscured by the clutter of habit and ignorance.¹

On the other end of the spectrum is the idea of biophilia, which Erich Fromm defines as a “passionate love of all that is alive.”² E. O. Wilson takes up Fromm’s discussion of biophilia and defines it as “the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes,” “the urge to affiliate with other forms of life,” and “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life.”³ It is precisely the lack of connection, however, and the sense of being subject to nature and its perceived unruly, excessive, and unpredictable agency that define ecophobia.

The excesses fundamental to horror take many forms, often in ways that are ecophobic. Excess is complicated, fundamental not only to horror but to the disgust that leads to it. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, while hardly horror, is useful to the discussion here for the way in which it conceptualizes the dangerous and disgusting *as* nature, itself characterized by excess and subsequent disorder in the play. Hamlet’s description of his world is of

an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely. (1.2.135–37)⁴

In a play that sees human disorder in environmental terms, permanence is ugly and “brevity is the soul of wit” (2.2.90) and beauty. Excess is ugly. The “violet in the youth of primy nature / Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting” (1.3.7–8) is acceptable, good, and beautiful; gardens rankly overgrown in this play poison “the whole ear of Denmark” (1.5.36), and the “fat weed / That roots itself in ease” (1.5.32–33) in this garden is Claudius, whose “offence is rank, it smells to heaven” (3.3.36). Even the sweet “rose of May” (4.5.157), Ophelia, becomes a site/sight of floral excess, bedecked with “fantastic garlands . . . / Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples” (4.7.167–68). Ophelia, “a document in madness” (4.5.176), is other, and environmental excess in *Hamlet* is a finger pointing directly at this variety of otherness. The metaphors Hamlet uses are very telling. Whenever he talks about difference, his thoughts eventually devolve upon some form of rot. For instance, evil resides in excess, and people are bad only


By their o'ergrowth of some complexion,

 Or by some habit, that too much o'erleavens
 The form of plausible manners . . . these men

 Shall in the general censure take corruption
 From that particular fault.
 (I.4.27–36)

The problem is *not* “one defect” or “particular fault,” since nobody is perfect; the problem is the “o'ergrowth” of such a “complexion.” Excess (and eventually rot), then, is the problem, and it is defined through naturalistic imagery.⁵ What is particularly interesting here are the ways in which Jack Halberstam's comments about “gothic monstrosity” relate with *Hamlet's* excesses and how excess ultimately threatens our agency.

Halberstam suggests that “gothic, in a way, refers to an ornamental excess (think of Gothic architecture—gargoyles and crazy loops and spirals), a rhetorical extravagance that produces, quite simply, too much.” For Halberstam, “Part of the experience of horror comes from the realization that meaning itself runs riot.”⁶ Halberstam's wording here could not be more apt, as it conveys perfectly the notion that horror resides in part (large part, I would argue) in its exercise of control over what we consider subject only to our will—namely, agency over matter and meaning. Once havens of royalty and joy, such sites as Angkor Wat “become overrun with greenery as those buildings fall into ruin.”⁷ They become sites of pleasure and fear, memento mori, reminders that nature ultimately will take over, that everything humanity has ever made will fall into ruins, and that we ourselves will return to the nature from which we have sought so hard in history to differentiate ourselves and from which to show our exceptionality, ~~ultimately in vain~~. The horror comes from the agency of nature.

Ecohorror is a subset of horror, and nature is the villain proper. Such demonizing of the natural world  be blunt, ~~is~~ ecophobic. The source of alterity (and the subsequent horror it produces) is in nature. It is reasonable to address the suppositions behind this kind of demonizing representation. Similarly, if the source of horror in a narrative were from a different identifiable source (and only from that source), then it would be reasonable to examine the presuppositions of *that* narrative about that source. For instance, if all the villains in horror films were, say, Jewish or Chinese or African American, then there would clearly be a problem. We call this problem racism. There are no racial or national *subsets* of horror—no Sinohorror, no Afrohorror, no Judeohorror⁸ (and even typing out the letters of such words is unsettling), yet there *is* an ecohorror. If there were a Sinohorror, Afrohorror, or Judeohorror, then surely it would be appropriate to recognize racism as fundamental to the genre, and indeed it would be socially negligent not to do so. Such a genre would find favor only among racist fringe groups and—one would hope—would never have a mainstream audience. Yet ecohorror is a thriving business, and it is built on a fear of the agency of nature. We call this fear ecophobia.

Within ecohorror, Dawn Keetley has identified a subset which she has termed “plant horror.” She describes it as follows: “Plant horror marks humans’ dread of the “wildness” of vegetal nature—its untameability, its pointless excess, its uncontrollable growth. Plants embody an inscrutable silence, an implacable strangeness, which human culture has, from the beginning, set out to tame. Not an easy task, perhaps, since vegetation constitutes over ninety-nine percent of the earth’s biomass.” She speaks of fear “vegetation [that] weaves violently in and out of the body” and offers six useful theses explaining why plants can evoke horror.⁹ Each of these touches and intersects with matters that are deeply relevant to theorizing about ecophobia: matters such as control, agency, and predictability. The field of ecogothic studies itself (in which theorizing about horror is integral), owes its origins to theorizing about ecophobia. Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils acknowledge in their introduction to *Ecogothic in Nineteenth Century American Literature* that my 2009 “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia” is the source point of ecogothic studies and that “efforts to characterize the term ‘ecogothic’ arguably began with [that article].” Keetley and Sivils argue that “at the broadest level, the ecogothic inevitably intersects with ecophobia, not only because ecophobic representations of nature will be infused, like the gothic, with fear and dread but also because ecophobia is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world. And control, or the lack thereof, is central to the gothic.”¹⁰ Elizabeth Parker explains that calls for the theorizing of ecophobia indeed are at the base of the ecogothic: “It is in response to such claims that the ‘ecoGothic’ has emerged.”¹¹ Parker and Michelle Poland make a similar claim in their astonishing and insightful “Gothic Nature: An Introduction”: “The seed was planted for sustained studies of Gothic Nature (at least in the critical forms we recognise today) when Simon Estok (2009) proposed his influential thesis on ‘ecophobia,’ a now widely recognised term.”¹² The importance of the intersection between ecophobia and the ecogothic grows proportionally to the perceived changes in nature’s agency as climate and other environmental issues become increasingly pronounced in the Anthropocene. Losing control of the body is always a frightening—indeed, potentially horrifying—prospect, but the new and unpredictable agencies of nature in the Anthropocene enable paradigmatically different scenarios for horror. Thus it is uncontroversial to suggest that as the ecogothic revels in ecophobia, so too does ecohorror. It also seems uncontroversial to recognize that ecophobic narratives reiterate rather than challenge bigotry against nature.


From the dearth of scholarship about ecohorror, Joseph J. Foy’s work stands out. Foy argues that “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, ecohorror attempts to raise mass consciousness about the very real threats that will face humanity if we are not more environmentally cautious.” For Foy, there are several ways in which “eco-horror films serve as a reminder of the nightmarish future that awaits, and they may advance the type of dialogue that can truly change the cultural conversation”: they revitalize “past warnings in an urgent, contemporary context”;



their “use of actual environmental issues as the basis of the eco-horror narrative provides a critical look into the current state of global ecology. Together, these combine to raise awareness and begin a dialogue that, when critically examined, can help transform the current political dialogue about domestic and global environmental policy”; and they inspire audiences to look at “figures . . . [about] the deaths resulting from climate change.”¹³ What is missing here are empirical data to support any of these three suppositions. If ecohorror is simply a subset of the broader horror genre, then how ~~does it~~ warrant Foy's suppositions? Could we not, for instance, make the same claims about any horror film? Could we not propose that the film *Psycho* prompts us into action about gender violence, mother/son relations, the nature of psychopathology, and so on; that *Psycho* revitalizes discussions about psychiatric and psychological disorders (discussions of which have a very long history) in an urgent, contemporary context; that the representation of actual psychosocial issues in the film provides a critical look into the current state of mental welfare in America; and that it compels us to look at how many people die at the hands of mentally troubled people? Foy tries hard to reconceptualize the horror of ecohorror as somehow exceptional, as politically engaged and ethically astute, but is it? Certainly it may be, as may be any horror narrative, but there is nothing about ecohorror that makes it intrinsically so. We watch or read ecohorror for the same reasons that we watch or read any horror—namely, for the attraction and repulsion its various traumas offer.

Trauma is certainly a heterogeneous category, and while the diversity of its forms determines how readers access its representations, we may sketch out a few broad premises. We can say, for instance, that individual traumas are a clearly different category from what Laurie Vickroy identifies as “historical or group traumas,” even though they may have similar racial, sexual, class, and ethnic parameters and implications.¹⁴ We can also observe that it is the group traumas that structure the body of ecohorror. As with the roots of ecohorror (of which ecophobia is the main), unpredictability (to a certain degree) is the prime mover of the growing corpus of artistic representations of trauma. Indeed, since the dawn of our millennium, unpredictability has become the new norm for an increasingly anxious global community and how it sees both social conflict and environmental events. News over the past two decades has been uniformly about the trauma of environmental catastrophes (present and impending) and terror. What E. Ann Kaplan identifies as “pre-trauma” might itself be understood as terror proper. Kaplan defines *pretrauma* as a condition in which “people unconsciously suffer from an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future.”¹⁵ This anxiety about an impending catastrophe in some forms of trauma grows simply out of a fear of pain and suffering, but eco-trauma and ecohorror, infused as they are with assurances of an imminent and eminently menacing nature, threaten a fall, a dissolution of what it means to be human, an erasure of the agency that is the very core of our sense of our own exceptionalism. For climate fiction, or cli-fi (and for Anthropocene fiction in general), traumatic unpredictability is the given that attends loss of agency—except that these representations *are* predictable insofar as they offer repulsion *and* attraction. Ecohorror provides a perversely traumatophilic/traumatophobic sensation,

a paradoxical presence of opposites that somehow, like sweet-and-sour soup for the psyche, tastes good. And it must be both flavors, in the right measure, or it isn't palatable. The metaphor of palatability, however, is perhaps not a good one here, in view of the relationship of disgust with horror, of which we have had some foretaste with the character of Hamlet.¹⁶

Disgust is central to horror. One of the reasons is that disgusting things seem to have a will of their own. When matter takes on its own agency and meaning, horror has arrived. Julia Kristeva has much to say about material agency in her influential *Powers of Horror*. For Kristeva, the core of horror is in the threat of being engulfed by abject matter. The abject "is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us." The abject "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," the abject is a threat to our very survival.¹⁷ Shielding ourselves from mortal threats, policing the boundaries that maintain our integrity, keeping ourselves from infection and rot, we try to isolate ourselves from harm with the understanding that there are threatening agencies outside ourselves and that some (perhaps many) of those threatening agencies may even belong to matter that we have discarded, from what Kristeva calls "the horror within." These discards offer the threats of abjection, as Kristeva explains, threats to the "collapse of the border between inside and outside" posed by "urine, blood, sperm, excrement," and slime.¹⁸ The reason that they pose such threats is that they are agential.

Among the many threats of abjection, slime has been one of the most popular in horror films, from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* to *Alien*, yet there is a surprising sparsity of actual theorizing about slime in discussions of horror, ecohorror, gothic, and the ecogothic. Jennifer Schell briefly addresses the topic in her 2006 article "Fiendish Fumaroles and Malevolent Mudpots: The Ecogothic Aspects of Owen Wister's Yellowstone Stories" but does not offer any theoretical analysis of slime. Anthony Camara's "Abominable Transformations: Becoming-Fungus in Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*" is primarily thematic. More recently, I have addressed the ecophobic dimensions of slime in "The Environmental Imagination in the Slime of the Ancient Mariner."  As it oozes into the discussions, slime is clearly relevant to horror and awaits important theorizing.

Early theorizing of slime begins with Jean-Paul Sartre, who  one of the few serious investigations of the topic  goes straight to the heart of slime's ambivalence. For Sartre, slime is matter "whose materiality must on principle remain non-meaningful." Slime is an utterly ambivalent site, both a matter of fascination to children and matter to which they "show repulsion." Sartre explains that "sliminess proper, considered in its isolated state will appear to us harmful in practice."²⁰ Slime is a threat to boundaries, and "the slimy appears as already the outline of a fusion of the world with myself."²¹ Sartre's understanding is that "immediately the slimy reveals itself as essentially ambiguous," and "nothing testifies more clearly to its ambiguous character as a 'substance between two states' than the slowness with which the slimy melts into itself."²² It is a dangerous transcorporeal matter that threatens the very boundaries that it traverses. Kelly Hurley elaborates usefully here:

Nothing illustrates the Thing-ness of matter so admirably as slime. Nor can anything illustrate the Thing-ness of the human body so well as its sliminess, or propensity to become-slime. Slimy substances—excreta, sexual fluids, saliva, mucus—seep from the borders of the body, calling attention to the body's gross materiality. [T. H.] Huxley's description of protoplasm indicates that sliminess is the very essence of the body, and is not just exiled to its borders. Within an evolutionist narrative, human existence has its remote origins in the "primordial slime" from which all life was said to arise.²³

Slime, what Sartre playfully called "the agony of water," seeps from but is not exiled to borders, slips beyond our command but is at the source of all life, and perhaps, like Frankenstein's wretch, will be with us on our wedding night (gay or straight); it is a matter of profound disgust and horror but "does not have the permanence within change that water has but on the contrary represents an accomplished break in a change of state. This fixed instability in the slimy discourages possession."²⁴ It is beyond possession or control but is one of "the realities of gross corporeality" that Hurley describes, a reality enmeshed not only with a fear of nature but with a fear of women, women's bodies, and female sexuality (the monster in *Alien* dripping slime from her mouth like a common mutt is female, as is her opponent, Lieutenant Ripley).²⁵

Imaging a world threatening the dissolution of the human, what, in a different context, Hurley investigates as "the ruination of the human subject," horror resists control.²⁶ This resistance takes various forms—surprise and shock, unpreventability and unstopability, amorality and violence, irrationality and causelessness. Predictability defuses horror, but horror is not ignorance of the fact that bad things *will happen*; it is ignorance about *what* and *how* those things will be. Horror is our inability to predict and control. The philosopher Eugene Thacker argues this precisely and with clear reference to environmental matters: "a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction." The lack of agency over the natural world is at the core of horror, he maintains: "To confront an absolute limit to our ability to adequately understand the world at all . . . has been a central motif of the horror genre for some time."²⁷ He goes on to "propose that horror be understood not as dealing with human fear in a human world (the world-for-us), but . . . as being about the limits of the human as it confronts a world that is not just a World, and not just the Earth, but also a Planet (the world-without-us). This means that horror is not simply about fear, but instead about the enigmatic thought of the unknown."²⁸ It is an unknown over which we have no control and in which we have no presence, no meaning, no agency, no capacity to predict, no trace of the exceptionalism that we consider our special privilege. Don't we, therefore, have reason to be fearful? Ecohorror presumes a fear and loathing of precisely such imagined volitional environments that threaten to lay bare our lives, and my argument throughout has been that horror, although it need not blatantly invoke ecophobia in ways that are immediately visible, often does so, and the underlying mechanisms, as I've shown, are sufficiently complex to require theoretical explanation.

Ecohorror is all about excesses and the threats they pose. Cli-fi and media coverage (primarily news) of environmental crises dabble in horror and trauma and dwell in the spaces of unpredictability and fear that such representations produce in the very moment that these representations articulate and require an ambivalence or balancing between attraction and repulsion, traumatophilia and traumatophobia, conditions that are rooted in perceptions of the environment as threatening. Ecophobia and horror are central here, inseparable from each other and from producing affective responses. For Heather Houser, affect involves two issues: “how objects and events rise to attention in our personal worlds and how attachments, detachments, and commitments form from that attention.”²⁹ Horror does raise objects and events to attention, but this does not ensure ameliorative responses (presumably, the attachments, detachments, and commitments of which Houser speaks). And “ay, there’s the rub” (to borrow again from the mouth of Hamlet), since these are precisely the responses that cli-fi and sensational news must seek. It is not, however, in the nature of the horror genre to produce activist responses; rather, it entertains, as the call for papers for this special issue succinctly notes, by “offering trauma as a compelling spectacle to be consumed or even enjoyed”—and in an age of climate change, it is compellingly important to understand how it does so.³⁰

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Notes

- 1 Estok, *Ecophobia Hypothesis*, 1.
- 2 Fromm, *Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, 365.
- 3 Wilson, *Biophilia*, 1, 85; Wilson, *Diversity of Life*, 350.
- 4 Shakespeare, *Riverside Shakespeare*. All citations of *Hamlet* refer to this edition.
- 5 This paragraph appears in slightly different form in Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, 86.
- 6 Halberstam, “Parasites and Perverts,” 149.
- 7 Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror,” 4. I have plucked this quotation slightly out of context: the context of Dawn Keetley’s discussion is the Green Man engravings that were popular in European cathedrals and churches from the twelfth through the sixteenth century.
- 8 Race, however, is certainly present in horror, but in much more insidious ways than environment is present in ecohorror. Halberstam shows that “racism and anti-Semitism . . . [are] hallmark[s] of nineteenth-century Gothic literature” (“Parasites and Perverts,” 160). Halberstam offers detailed and nuanced discussions of how, “within Gothic, the difference between representing racism and representing race is extremely tricky to negotiate” (151).
- 9 Keetley, “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror,” 1, 4. The six theses are as follows: (1) plants embody an absolute alterity; (2) plants lurk in our blind spot; (3) plants menace with their wild, purposeless growth; (4) the human harbors an uncanny constitutive vegetal; (5) plants will get their revenge; (6) plant horror marks an absolute alterity of the known (6–25).
- 10 Keetley and Sivils, “Introduction,” 2, 3; Estok, “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness.”
- 11 Parker, “Just a Piece of Wood,” 217.

- 12 Parker and Poland, "Gothic Nature," 10.
 13 Foy, "It Came from Planet Earth," 167, 182, 168,
 171, 176.
 14 Vickroy, *Reading Trauma Narratives*, 1.
 15 Kaplan, *Climate Trauma*, xix.
 16 The word *disgust* comes from the Old French
 word *desgouter* (*des* + *gouter*), meaning "distaste."
 17 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
 18 Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 53.
 19 Schell, "Fiendish Fumaroles and Malevolent
 Mudpots"; Camara, "Abominable
 Transformations"; Estok, "Environmental
 Imagination."
 20 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 605.
 21 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 606.
 22 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 607.
 23 Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 34.
 24 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 607. Noël Carroll
 argues that there is a "tendency in horror novels
 and stories to describe monsters in terms of
 and to associate them with filth, decay,
 deterioration, slime and so on. The monster in
 horror fiction, that is, is not only lethal but—
 and this is of utmost significance—also
 disgusting" (*Philosophy of Horror*, 22).
 25 Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 3. Greta Gaard usefully
 discusses this fear of sexuality (erotophobia)
 in relation to sexism, heterosexism, and
 homophobia ("Toward a Queer Ecofeminism")
 as well as in relation to ecophobia: "Erctophobia
 is . . . a component of ecophobia" ("New
 Directions for Ecofeminism," 650); "ecophobia
 and erotophobia are intertwined concepts"
 ("Green, Pink, and Lavender," 1). I discuss the
 sexualized nature of the female-on-female
 hostilities of the *Alien* franchise more fully in
 Estok, "Ecophobia, the Agony of Water, and
 Misogyny."
 26 Hurley, *Gothic Body*, 3.
 27 Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 1.
 28 Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 8–9. It
 seems that Thacker is alluding to Alan
 Weisman's 2007 book *The World without Us*,
 which imagines what would happen to the
 world if we suddenly disappeared. Though no
 doubt a well-intentioned critique of
 overpopulation, despoilation, and outright
 failures to understand the planet, Weisman's
 book clearly and actively participates in an
 implicitly ecophobic vision of nature. Nature
 will finally conquer humanity, reclaim
 everything, and remain long after we are gone.
 What Weisman presents is a scary, almost
 villainous nature, and this is clearly ecophobic,
 his intentions notwithstanding.
 29 Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S.*
Fiction, 23.
 30 ELN, call for papers.

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