

At the Mercy of Gaia Deep Ecological Unrest and America's fall as Nature's Nation in *Kingdom of the Spiders*

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Abstract

This paper looks at the animal horror genre as a way to discuss current notions of ecology in relation to a specific American idea of being "Nature's Nation". The central work for the discussion is the movie *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) by John Cardos, which depicts how a small Arizona town is taken over by a "swarm" of tarantulas. Without any obvious explanation the spiders slowly but steadily invade the town and start killing both other animals and humans until they have completely covered the town in their web. The paper connects the movie to a long tradition of fiction describing how nature turns on humans and reverses the power relation between man and nature that is fundamental to modernity. Moreover, the paper connects the movie to Maurice Maeterlinck's ideas of swarm communities as manifested by ants and termites to argue that these communities are ecologically superior to the communities of man-made civilisation. Finally, the paper discusses *Kingdom of the Spiders* and animal horror in general in relation to recent ideas of non-human ecologies and critiques of anthropocentrism and makes the point that these works of fiction serve as both dramatic and philosophical visions of a world without humans.

Keywords: Gaia, dark ecology, animal horror, Maurice Maeterlinck, nature's nation.

“Whatever it is, we have disturbed it.”

- Foreman Mike Carr, *Ants!*

Introduction

The area is scattered with tarantula mounds. Like buildings in a large city, they spread out across the entire landscape. It is hard to tell the exact number. There are maybe 20, maybe 30, maybe more. Or perhaps the mounds are all connected, forming one big construction under the earth? Who knows? These strange configurations cover too vast an area in the dry and mountainous desert landscape of Verde Valley in Arizona to allow human perception an overview. The mounds vary in height and length and look like something ants or termites could have built. The tarantulas exit and enter the mounds through holes in the facades following some obscure plan. They inhabit the landscape like it was the most natural thing and form a kind of pattern whose logic escapes conventional notions of planning in modern civilisation. Yet, their strangeness is a source of undeniable fascination. Rather than expressing a state of exception and chaos they seem to be part of the highly planned infrastructure of an ancient civilisation. The tarantulas move around this infrastructure like individuals in an abstruse collectivity that humans cannot understand, let alone decipher. As such the mounds are also a source of a ground-shaking insecurity. A source of fear and of angst. Although the mounds are accessible to humans it is impossible to see and know, what is going on inside them. Facing them, humans can only speculate about the subterranean corridors and chambers that form their base. And the conclusion seems inevitable: It is a civilisation whose energy of life and logic of planning is beyond – perhaps even superior to – human civilisation. One thing is certain, the tarantulas do not recognise nor do they pay any attention to humans. They move around, doing what they are supposed to do according to an obscure million-year old masterplan. The masterplan does not include humans.

The scene described above unfolds in John Cardos' film *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977). In the film neither the arachnologist Diane Ashley (Tiffany Bolling) nor the local veterinarian Robert Hansen (William Shatner) can explain the strange occurrence. What they do understand however is that they are facing something rather unusual and highly unsettling. The spider mounds cannot simply be ignored or removed by spraying the area with a strong dose of insecticide. That latter is nonetheless what the mayor suggests as a desperate measure to secure that the annual country fair will happen as planned and allow the city's businessmen to make an important profit. But the presence of the tarantulas is more than a question of pest animals. Much more.

The scene constitutes a turning point in the plot of the film. The relation of strength between human ability to control the forces of nature is turned upside down. The persons involved are overtaken by a fundamental fear of being the potential prey of a dark and dim nature that does not behave like itself. It operates

beyond ideological and political rhetoric and instead expresses a kind of ecological will power that manifest itself in an instinctual sense of hunting and territorialisation. It is indeed a frightening moment and when the humans in the film realise what is going on they panic. They follow an urge to act, notwithstanding that the actions are counterintuitive, discard the democratic procedures of society and ignore long-term considerations for the common good. The social coherence of the little town in Verde Valley comes undone in the encounter with this ungovernable and merciless force whose origin and objective is completely unknown to the inhabitants. It is the beginning of the end of human society in the hitherto peaceful area of Arizona's desert.

Far removed from the events in Verde Valley, the focus of the present article is to try to come to grasp with this strange force and its national as well as planetary implications through a number of speculative proposals.



Frame capture from *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977). No one is safe when the spiders invade Verde Valley. In their brutal territorialisation of the peaceful little town, the spiders do not consider who they kill, they just kill.

Animal Horror and the End of Humans

Kingdom of the Spiders belong to the so-called animal horror genre. It is a very prolific and diverse genre that is often stigmatised as pulp or exploitation. In this article, we will however argue that the genre in exemplary fashion articulates a serious challenge to human understandings of and engagements with nature. The challenge takes the form of a speculative staging of apocalyptic processes in the “deep ecology”.¹ The notion of deep ecology is based on an understanding of nature as an intricate network of relations between all the organic entities living on Earth. Animal horror takes on the widespread, yet also contested belief associated with the notion that the network is harmonious. On the one hand, the genre shows how human activities continuously interfere with the network and seems to cause some

kind of imbalance or aggressive reaction, on the other hand it suggests that the network never was harmonious in the first place but is constituted by chaotic and violent processes. In both cases the result is a fatal fight between man and animals. Moreover, a fight that man seems destined to lose as the result of some kind of cosmic reason or logic that predates civilisation. By way of the animals the deep ecology demonstrates powers of a scale that man cannot comprehend, control or trump, let alone exploit as a resource. Rather than a harmonious network or a natural resource that can be exploited to the fulfilment of human civilisation deep ecology is presented as a radical force that dethrones the belief that humans are the sovereign species on the planet.² It is the fundamentally incomprehensible and horrifying nature of this force that the films of the genre articulate with an extraordinary visual and conceptual wit.

The article looks at animal horror in general but will particularly focus on those films, like *Kingdom of the Spiders*, in which various kinds of spiders and insects “attack” human civilisation and impair its physical as well as intellectual infrastructure. This focus is motivated by the idea that spiders and insects to a greater extent than other kinds of animals represent something radically different from the human-centred perception of nature that civilisation is based upon. Spiders and insects embody a deep ecological consciousness and life form, developed over millions and millions of years inhabiting the planet and adapting to its ecology. This process has taken place independent of and without any consideration of humans. Spiders and insects were here long before mankind and will most likely survive us. They are the original and true inhabitants of the planet. The perspective they present us with is not simply pre-human but essentially non-human and point to the notion of man as a cosmic banality that is emphasised throughout this article.³ In terms of notions of Being, spiders and insects open up towards a dizzying horizon, whose temporal extension exceeds the approximately two hundred thousand years that humans have walked the Earth. They are the only living beings compatible with the multiple transformations that the planet has gone through the past 4,5 billion of years.

Animal horror including *Kingdom of the Spiders* is predominantly a genre that is developed and thrives in the US film industry and film culture of independent movie makers. The article will take this circumstance as a cue to connect the deep ecological apocalypse of the genre with a particular American history and its associated notion of nature.⁴ It is a history that originates with the birth of the new nation in the middle of the 18th century and extends all the way up to the social, economical and political crisis – including environmental issues and a massive energy problem – that the mature nation experienced in the 1970s.⁵ Throughout those two hundred years it tells the story of how the United States of America fell from the dream world of being “Nature’s Nation” to the realization that it was rather the embodiment of a destructive control and exploitation of nature. As a self-conscious genre animal horror experiences a hay-day at the end of this history – in the 1970s – and a main point of the article is to argue that the genre articulates a unique and eminent

critique of this destructive society as well as of the historical perception of the US as a nation predestined to flourish in harmony with nature as the creation of the almighty God. Films like *Kingdom of the Spiders* inverses this romantic perception and draws the conclusion that Americans – as the pinnacle of modern Man – no longer or rather never did own a God given privilege to inhabit the vast amount of land on the North American Continent that stretches from the Atlantic Coast in the East to Pacific Coast in the West. In fact, the genre not only dismisses any hope of recreating a balanced and exceptional relation between Americans and the American landscape, it also points to the total extinction of humans – not just Americans – from the face of the planet.

The Birth and Mutation of Nature's Nation

The US is a mythological nation and one of the foundational myths is the notion that it is destined to be “Nature's Nation”.⁶ The notion has Christian religious roots and is based on the belief in an almighty God who has manifested his greatness by creating the extraordinary American nature, from Niagara Falls over the Great Plains to California. Already nourished by the nation's founding fathers in the 18th century, the notion expresses the conviction that this specific nature was created for a special nation of hitherto unseen if not in fact sublime greatness. However, to these early American citizens that came over from Europe it was not simply a question of nature reflecting the greatness of the nation but of nature as an unequivocal, almost self-evident proof of the destiny of the nation to be one under God, like no other nation before it.

The notion of Nature's Nation influenced not only American self-perception and identity but also its political make-up. The principles written down in The Constitution of the United States (1787/1788) were influenced by principles of nature, which meant that they essentially were written by God. Of these principles, democratic ideals of liberty and equality in the open wilderness of opportunities for the new American people were of the highest importance.⁷ It was these principles that distinguished the political constitution of the new American nation from earlier empires such as ancient Greece and Rome and not least the British Empire with its social and economical hierarchies. The USA was conceived as a natural appearance, created by and for the landscape.

Moreover, according to this myth the nation was marked by a political innocence, in the sense that it existed beyond the time and space of political history.⁸ If anything it existed in a kind of eternity guided by the will of God and as such the nation could do no wrong as long as it followed its destiny.⁹

As fascinating and pure as the notion of the USA as nature's nation was to those who believed in the myth behind it, the notion turns out to be a highly problematic one. Hence, throughout the 19th century it becomes increasingly clear that it is

haunted by a fundamental schism between a spiritual understanding of the notion and an understanding of the notion shaped by processes of civilisation.

Since the first frontier men began their journey westward in the beginning of the 19th century, the development of the American identity have been partly characterised by a spiritual quest.¹⁰ It is a quest that finds its objective in nature. Beyond the religious institutions of the old world it freely explores what it means to be American and as such to be deeply connected to the Creator in all his incomprehensible and yet perfect greatness. The American nature contains a transcendental truth, which defies any conceptual formalisation. It needs to be experienced to be realised. A large number of Americans interprets this quite literally and starting at the end of the 18th century, they leave civilisation to live a life in absolute harmony with nature.¹¹ This life is both primitive and modern in its conception: Primitive because it appreciates the simple life and modern because it reflects an enlightened awareness of the progress of civilisation. One of the primary protagonists of this quest is Henry David Thoreau and his detailed and contemplative accounts of the lively nature around Walden Pond. In the passing of the seasons, the freezing lake and the melting of the ice, the rich and diverse subtlety of the fauna and the vitality of the wild-life, Thoreau finds a meaning that is greater and deeper than anything civilisation can ever create.

In parallel to the spiritual quest, more material and mercantile aspirations also emerged, even with the frontier movement. Like the spiritual quest, these aspirations had their source of inspiration in nature. However, they interpreted the notion of “Nature’s nation” quite differently. The American nation was chosen by God and destined to improve, cultivate and commodify nature. Accordingly, nature was not a completed creation, but “a land of opportunities” and to take advantage of these opportunities was the ultimate goal of the American people.¹² In essence, the aspirations amounted to a utilitarian quest that placed the white American frontier man, his interests and needs, at the centre or rather at the top of the order of nature.¹³ The contrast to the spiritual quest was stark and in the case of Thoreau and other of his contemporaries led to the realization that nature and civilisation constituted two incompatible phenomena. Nature bred intuitive understanding, while civilisation promoted calculative profit thinking. The disparity revealed a schism that a hundred years later in the 20th century would prove to be the beginning of the fall of the notion of the US as nature’s nation.

The utilitarian quest was fulfilled in the decades following the Second World War. Industry and science made extraordinary advancements culminating with the landing on the moon – the conquest of another frontier and the territorialisation of outer space nature – in 1969. The US demonstrated its role as the leading civilisation in the modern world. However, it also became increasingly obvious that the progress of this great nation happened at the expense of the very same nature that constituted the origin and entitlement of the nation. Public protest rose as the media more and more frequently reported on civilisation’s disastrous engagements with

nature. The mythology surrounding the notion of nature's nation was in other words confronted with a reality that was far from ideal and the fear that Thoreau expressed a century ago seems all too real, in fact it was worse than he imagined. Nature's Nation appears to be a rather ambiguous notion. Success and sin, progress and destruction tragically turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s this tragedy generates a strong and wide-ranging environmental movement in the US. The means of the movement are both peaceful and militant but the goal is the same: To restore the nation's authentic pact with nature.

As mentioned earlier animal horror becomes highly popular at exactly this time and accordingly it seems obvious to read the genre as a disillusioned depiction of a nation caught in the act of destroying its privileged relationship with nature and furthermore its political *raison d'être*. However, contrary to the hippies and eco-activist Edward Abbey the genre advocates no romantic ideas of reconnecting with nature. Instead, it demonstrates how the deep ecology led by an army of animals seems determined to destroy the American nation in an indifferent chaos.

The Rebellion of the Animals

Animal horror has existed at least since the 1950s and although its defining era is the 1970s it is a genre that has been continuously revisited up until today where it remains a popular formula among both filmmakers and audience. In addition to the numerous new animal horror films that have been produced in every decade since the 1950s, the *Jaws* series spans 12 years (1975–1987) while the *Piranha* series spans 34 years (1978–2012) and the on-going *The Planet of the Apes* series so far is into its 47th year (1968-).¹⁴ As such, the genre constitutes a major narrative in modern American film that in terms of a continuous discussion of the significance of landscape – including animal life – in the shaping of a specific American identity and nation is comparable to the Western genre. But whereas most Western movies support the myth of Nature's Nation by emphasising a special relation between the landscape and the people who live there, animal horror disclosed the myth as myth by showing that the landscape in reality belongs to nobody but the animals.¹⁵

The notion of animal horror as it is defined in this article refers to films that are organized around animals – from insects to the large mammals – that in an intensified form becomes a threat to US citizens and society. It can be small creeps like the millions of worms that arise from the muddy grounds “supporting” the small town of Fly Creek in Jeff Lieberman's *Squirm* (1976) and the flying African cockroaches that invades the American East Coast in Ellroy Elkayem's *They Nest* (2000) but it can also be large killers such as the gigantic crocodile that haunts Chicago's sewerage in Lewis Teague's *Alligator* (1980). In any case, the genre shows how the USA – from rural areas over large cities to the entire nation – is challenged by animal forces that does not recognize nor care about the myth of Nature's Nation.

In this context animal horror does not cover movies based on imaginary monsters like the ones featured in invasion movies that derive from the tradition from H.G. Wells' classic *War of the Worlds* (1897) and Jack Finney's equally famed novel *The Body Snatchers* (1955). In these movies monsters come to Earth from outer space in order to execute a hostile takeover of humanity. Neither does the notion include mythical, yet earthly creatures from forgotten regions of the World, such as Skull Island in Edgar Wallace's *King Kong* (1933) or Odo Island, where Ishiro Honda's *kaiju* roams in *Godzilla* (1955). What the notion of animal horror refers to in this article are essentially creatures from *Kingdom Animalia*, animals that are at once strangely familiar and frighteningly strange. These animals have been mastered and domesticated through stories and cultural products, yet they remain wild at heart and at close encounter they are as bestial as ever. The genre stages and dramatizes this untamed nature of the animals and casts them as the protagonists in a violent rise of the deep ecology.

Animal horror primarily unfolds in US movies and the genre is essentially a sub-genre of the disaster movie where an increasingly severe state of emergency is taking place and human life, as we know it becomes a fight for survival. In animal horror movies the state of emergency is characterised by the fact that humans are confronted with an uncanny enemy that they thought they had domesticated as part of the progression of civilisation. In that sense the movies of the genre expose a classic narrative inversion, where humans as the controlling agent in the world falls from their position at the top in the food chain only to suddenly find themselves becoming prey to the animals that they normally control. The infrastructure that humans have created as a shield of protection is coming undone and they are now exposed and vulnerable creatures with minimal chances for survival.¹⁶

With this inversion of Darwinian logic and the history of civilisation, the genre fosters some of the most frightening visions of the presence of humans on the planet and their place in the greater cosmos. The visions are based on a sensibility for everything alive and a conception of humans as an accidental and passing feature in the process of creation.

In that sense, animal horror is driven by a critical awareness of ignorant and arrogant interaction with deep ecology by humans. The agenda of the genre is to dramatically accentuate the consequences of this lack of respect for the deep ecology, whether it is the pollution from industrial complexes, modern society's composition in general or the authorities' lack of action when it comes to sustainable solutions that considers the vulnerability of this ecological system. It is an agenda that is often articulated as an explicit part of the narrative, as in William Girdler's *Day of the Animals* (1977), where the disappearance of the ozone layer heats up the habitat of the animals in a wild-life park in Northern California and causes eagles, bears, pumas, wolves and deer to attack the visitors in a last act of desperation before they eventually die from the climate changes. What was meant to be a romantic hike into a piece of "authentic" US nature for the little group of people in the film

is tainted by the effects of the consumerist lives they live outside the park and turns into a bloody nightmare of raging animals seemingly led by the same bald headed eagle featured on dollar bills and the seal of the American President. The movie shows that going “back to nature” is no longer a possibility for Americans as their civilisation has left its corrosive mark on the landscape. The romantic scenery of Walden Pond has been distorted and Americans are no longer welcome let alone safe in the nature that they once thought was made for them.

Typically, the critique of human interaction with the deep ecology of the planet is delivered without meditating facts or empirical detail. Rather, the critique is presented in images and stories that in a deeply disquieting manner dramatize the state of emergency and destruction of the human life world. As such, animal horror presents a catalogue of nightmarish visions and scenes from an on-going process of transformation in the deep ecology, which manifests itself on many fronts and which the genre describes at various specific moments, actual as well as virtual.

Even though many animal horror movies can rightly be characterised as pure exploitation films, they still articulate a moving and challenging awareness of the deep ecology. The movies often draw on scientific facts and ethical-philosophic analyses, but their critique is a lot more radical. Their speculative visions of the apocalypse do not depict the deep ecology simply as a victim, but feature it as an entity with vigour, will and capabilities for “revenge”. In that sense the ecological uncanniness in the movies is disquieting in two ways. They describe how human civilisation has a destructive effect on the deep ecology as well as how this destruction calls forward forces of the deep ecology that with no hesitation annihilates humans. These are forces that cannot be cultivated by the processes of civilization or fought with ordinary means of defence at hand. Ancient forces originating in a time many millennia before the modern project of enlightenment began to violate and exploit nature. Forces superior to man. Forces that in a sovereign demonstration of power both revenge nature and redeem the animals as the true inhabitants of the American land as part of the deep ecology of the planet.

Freak Creature Horror

Animal horror can be divided into two subgenres, *freak creature horror* and *deep eco horror*. Generally, freak creature horror focuses on the problematic aspects of scientific experiments with nature, while deep eco horror stages a deep ecological drama in which the main protagonist is the immanent forces and intelligences of nature. While the animals in freak creature horror are mostly of a supernatural size, the animals in deep eco horror are predominantly small. Yet, in terms of thematics and animal species there is an overlap between the two subgenres. The most characteristic distinction between the two subgenres is that freak creature horror focuses on how humans deal with and overcome (man-made) events in nature, deep eco

horror as the name indicates sees the cause and unfolding of events from the perspective of deep ecology that reduces humans to extras. Or put in other words, while freak creature horror is based on a human conception of nature, deep eco horror takes its point of departure in deep ecology as a frightening and obscure system beyond human understanding.

Freak creature horror is introduced with Gordon Douglas' *Them!* (1954) and Jacob Arnold's *Tarantula* (1955). Both films deal with the angst that modern science generates. They speculate about how its processes can easily mutate, run amok and turn against mankind, for instance by involuntarily creating freakishly threatening natural phenomena. The bogey is the first and foremost nuclear science. After the bombings of Japan to end the Second World War and numerous tests on American soil, this new science comes to occupy the collective imagination of the US population. Not as a lighthouse of progress but as a discipline with potentially unlimited destructive risks whose ultimate end point was global Armageddon. This point was furthermore enforced by the aggressive rhetorical propaganda intended to produce fear that characterised the arms race of the Cold War. Hence, the films depict the nuclear science as a discipline that in uncontrollable and disastrous ways tangles with Creation, with the work of God, and as such compromises the self-image of the USA as nature's nation.

The bad guy in freak creature horror is thus the irresponsible experiments done by government scientists in the pursuit of political power through nuclear power. As extreme metaphors the abnormal scale and behaviour of the animals reflect the risks and dangers of modern science playing God and read as the nemesis of a nation that has betrayed its exceptional relation to nature by exploiting it in the name of progress.

After the success of the first freak creature horror films a large number of movies are made elaborating on the freakish appearance of the animals and how they kill humans. In the 1970s the subgenre receives a strong dose of exploitation in the form of close-ups of animals in rage and gory images of mutilated human bodies. Among the most memorable ones are Bert I. Gordon's *The Food of the Gods* (1976) and *Empire of the Ants* (1977) that are both loosely based on H. G. Wells novels. Also John McCauley's creepy claustrophobic *Rattlers* (1976), Joe Dante's baffling horrific *Piranha* (1978), Harry Kerwin and Wayne David Crawfords underrated underwater scare *Barracuda* (1978) and Hernan Cardena's *Island Claws* with its stylistic homage to 1950s sci-fi needs to be mentioned.

The collective imaginary of the Cold War is still in effect today and many of the film in the subgenre stages scenarios that resemble those of *Them!* and *Tarantula*. However, it is no longer so much nuclear science as it is genetic and brain science that is fraught with the end of civilisation. Guided by deeply dubious motifs and the warped self-image of being the ultimate Creator, these new sciences – like nuclear science before them – ignore both risks and precautions and end up creating something unwanted and destructive. The list includes Lorenzo Doumani's *Bug Buster*

(1998), Fred Olen Ray's *Venomous* (2001), David Jackson's *Locusts: Day of Destruction* (2005), *Glass Trap* (2005) and Jeffrey Scott Lando's *Insecticidal* (2005).

Despite a number of artistic successes, the quality of freak creature horror is generally decreasing by indulging in fictional universes in which the political discourse is trivialised – if at all present – in favour of a grand scale freak show featuring ever more supernatural, baroque and monstrous creatures. From the 1950s when the subgenre was introduced to today, the latter track has become dominant and the critical expressiveness and potency diluted. Nevertheless, the notion of the discussion of the USA as nature's nation remains an implicit frame of reference for these movies.

Deep eco horror

The subgenre of deep eco horror, to which *Kingdom of the Spiders* belongs, can be traced back to Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). Hitchcock's seminal work outlines a new direction for working with dangerous animals as "characters" in films. It proposes a highly original interpretation of the genre with a strong focus on the intelligence of animals as setting an apocalyptic agenda for human civilisation. First of all the animals in the movie are not depicted as gigantic mutants. On the contrary, they are simply animals with a reality of their own. No more, no less. Moreover, the birds in the movie are ordinary birds. Seagulls. Crows. In this sense, *The Birds* is fundamentally characterised by a straightforward and recognisable realism and this goes for most – and certainly the best – movies of the genre. What is abnormal is not the animals, but their behaviour and organisation. Hence, the horror of these movies mirrors the Freudian idea of "the Uncanny", i.e. the known showing itself to be something different than you thought.¹⁷ The domesticated turns alien and hostile and humans are left with a shaken perception of reality.

More than anything, Hitchcock's intuition introduces a new and defining narrative element that is developed further in exemplary fashion by *Kingdom of the Spiders*, namely the swarm as the main character. In the classic freak creature film it is typically one or a few mutated individuals that take on the role as the slashers of nature and the challenge facing human civilisation is the elimination of the monstrous animal(s). It is humans against animals and the fight is characterised by both symmetry and transparency. With the introduction of the swarm, the symmetry and transparency disappears. It is no longer possible to identify the enemy as a large overgrown super shark like the one in Steven Spielberg's iconographic *Jaws* (1975) or the 18 feet giant bear in William Girdlers *grind house* hit *Grizzly* (1977). In deep eco horror the animal enemy is way more intangible and can no longer be clearly identified in terms of size and outline. How large are the flock of birds in *The Birds* and the swarm of killer bees in Irwin Allen's *The Swarm* (1978)? How many tarantulas have come together in Verde Valley in *Kingdom of the Spiders*? And exactly

how large a territory do they cover? The films do not give many, if any clues, making it impossible to answer these questions. Hence, much of the horror in deep eco horror films originates in the blurring of the contours of the threat, which in that sense makes the threat potentially ubiquitous and all encompassing. A part of this horror is also a lacking understanding of the qualities and order of the swarm, its intentions and intelligence. What is it that the birds want in *The Birds* or the bees in *The Swarm*? It is impossible to say. With their mum presence, the animals articulate something beyond our comprehension and so annul the political-discursive room for negotiation that the power structures of Modern civilisation are based on. They cannot be negotiated with. Arguments, political will or weapons are of no use. The traditional instruments of power have no effect on the changes in the deep ecology. They are unstoppable and leave humans without any escape routes. That is the plain message that the darkest works in the genre delivers to the audience.



Frame capture from *The Birds* (1963). Ordinary birds suddenly become aggressive and humans have no answer to cope with this ecological reversal. Instead humans become prey.

The narrative in deep eco horror is not, as in freak creature horror, related to science. The motives for the violent behaviour of the animals are rarely explained in detail and the narratives in the films follow a relatively loose structure. In *The Birds* the attacks of the birds seems unmotivated by direct actions. Certainly, the inhabitants on the small town are unaware of why the animals suddenly turn aggressive and become determined to kill every human that come into sight. More and more birds gather and the situation develops from a few accidental attacks to a massive and seemingly well-organised attack orchestrated by the birds themselves

based on unknown and opaque motives. *Kingdom of the Spiders* and *The Swarm* have exactly the same narrative structure. The animals attack without giving any reasonable explanation and for humans to try to figure out why they are attacking seems only to weaken their chances of survival.

As already indicated deep eco horror experienced a golden age in the 1970s with a lot of original films such as Walon Green and Ed Spiegel's Oscar-winning mockumentary *The Hellstrom Chronicle* (1971), George McCowan's progressive "sound-piece" *Frogs* (1972), Jeff Lieberman's muddy nightmare *Squirm* (1976), Robert Scheerer's unforgettable critique of land exploitation and the recreational conception of nature in *Ants!* (1977) as well as Saul Bass' psychedelic space vision *Phase IV* (1974). Despite being produced with minimal budgets the films develop the genre by way of aesthetic experiments that fully compare with and in many ways trump more respected contemporary art films and large productions from Hollywood. Later contributions to deep eco horror typically tend, exactly as in the sub-genre of freak creature horror, towards exploitation and gore. That is evident when one watches films such as Juan Piquer Simón's campy blood feast *Slugs* (1988), Frank Marschall's humorous neo-classic *Arachnophobia* (1990), Ellory Elkayem's earlier mentioned *They Nest* (2000) or David DeCoteau's legendary homo-gore ballad *Leeches* (2003). Yet, the fundamental horror caused by an animal threat that cannot be clearly identified and therefore impossible to avoid or overcome remains intact.

Like freak creature horror movies, deep eco horror movies are often set in small American towns such as Verde Valley or Bodega Bay and it is also life in a well-ordered American society that is at stake and being threatened by a faceless enemy. In deep eco horror however it is not possible to overcome the threat and return to the life of yesterday. As the endings of both *The Birds* and *Kingdom of the Spiders* make evident, with the birds completely taking over the village and potentially the world and the tarantulas have enshrouded the town and the surrounding area into a giant cobweb, the animal take-over is definitive.

In Evan Hunter's original manuscript to *The Birds* there is a final scene with the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco completely covered with birds. The image was supposed to illustrate that not only Bodega Bay, but also large American cities had been taken over. Similarly, there is a never used end scene to *Kingdom of the Spiders*, where it is the whole world and not only Verde Valley that is covered by cobweb. The alternative end scenes indicate in both cases a deep ecological apocalypse of omnipotent extent. That is if you are human. For the animals and the planet it is just another phase in the transition towards a new era in the deep ecology.

Territorial anarchy

A general motive in deep eco horror is that the animals transgress the borders of a given territory, be that a private home, recreational areas or whole cities. The point,

nonetheless, is that this is not really a transgression, but a manifestation of the fact that these territories were not delimited in the first place. Since life originated on the planet the landscape have been connected to the deep ecology, which as a planetary network recognises no borders, certainly not man-made ones. As such the deep ecology challenges the territorial discourse and the institutions that promoted it that were foundational for the American pioneer movement and the westward expansion of American civilisation.

In *Kingdom of the Spiders*, before discovering the disquieting number of mounds the people of Verde Valley involved in the situation believe the problem is isolated to the Colby farm where a dozen calves have been found bitten to death and covered by spiders. One mound has been burned down in order to find a quick solution to the problem, but as the days goes by more and more inexplicable episodes occurs in other areas and places in the little town. The body count grows exponentially and people are found dead in strange cocoons. Soon the entire valley is covered in a gigantic cobweb. Valley Verde is no longer a human territory.

Even if America understands itself as nature's nation, it nonetheless begins to map the land onto what the historian Andro Linklater (2002?) has described as "the perfect grid" and starts selling it as small defined parcels as early as the end of the 17th century. The proprietary understanding of the land was thought of as a democratic initiative that enabled even less well-off Americans to own and cultivate land, but it also lead to a widespread speculation that directly countered the political ideas and created new social hierarchies. Beyond the political sphere, the parcellation of the American land introduces another challenging schism for the notion of the USA as nature's nation, namely a schism between owning and being in nature. It is obvious to ask, how one can own something that is God's creation? Certainly, the capitalist enterprises that benefitted from the proprietary transformation of the land saw no schism. If the land was given to the American people by God in order to prosper, it it was only natural that they also owned it and made it a business.

Deep eco horror on the other hand ridicules the idea of owing land as a naïve and highly fragile construction. From the perspective of the deep ecology the question is not just, if humans have the right to own the American landscape, but if they are capable of defending it like animals do in nature. Deep eco horror answers "No" to both questions. In the confrontation with the animals human ownership of the land means nothing. Animals do not care about certificates, let alone read them. All they care about is the territory and what they have to do to take it over.

Kingdom of the Spiders contains a number of minor, yet significant scenes, which emphasise the territorial challenge that the deep ecology represents to human society. In one of the movie's classic scenes the arachnologist, Diane Ashley, is finally alone in her hotel room after a long day of work and while she – with a nod to Hitchcock – takes a bath, the camera shows a tarantula crawling on her desk. When she returns to the room with a towel around her body, the audience is getting

ready for an attack, but she gently takes the tarantula up in her hand and puts it out in nature where it belongs.

The scene is discrete but points to the territorial schism that repeatedly is articulated in the genre. As natural science has documented, life on planet Earth was antagonistic until a territorial order was established and a hierarchy between God's creations was put in place, including a food chain. A defining moment for humans was the step away from the daily direct contact with the animals to the new isolated life in cities and houses where the dealings with the natural surroundings had been minimized. In an act of territorial sovereignty humans distanced themselves from animals and their natural habitat both in order to protect themselves against potential dangers that animals present and in order to be able to focus on other things than the battle for survival. A silent covenant is decided for the animals, namely that they can live and master all other areas than those areas – from houses to cities – where humans live. If animals transgress the border to these areas and disturb human life they will be destroyed by humans with extreme prejudice. In nature – in the fields and in the gardens – on the other hand the animals have territorial sovereignty and can establish their own order without human interference.

In *Kingdom of the Spiders* is it exactly that order that no longer can be sustained and isolated to the outside of human society. Instead the territory of the tarantulas expands into human society, causing its infrastructural order to break down. The spiders intrude garages, cars, planes and not least houses where they hunt humans out of their "kingdom". The radical state of the situation is evident in the end scene. The state of emergency is already in full effect. Verde Valley is struck by panic and the tarantulas are attacking humans, young and old, and taking over the city. Just as in classic horror movies such as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) a little group of people, amongst them the arachnologist and the veterinary has taken shelter in a house to survive the attack. The group runs from room to room and tries to keep the tarantulas out by putting up boards in front of the windows and doors, etc., but to no avail. Moreover, the ensuing fight between humans and animals is uneven, because even if the little group of people succeeds in keeping some of the spiders out, other spiders keep coming in without any concern about the life of the single spider. The spiders seem to accept or almost expect the death of a few individuals in the fight for the success of the species.

After a night of fighting and deep frustration, fear and sadness, the people in the house wake up to a new territorial order. Outside it is strangely quiet. On the radio the situation in Verde Valley is ignored and a very frustrated Rock Hansen removes a couple of boards from the windows and he can only turn to his creator by saying, "Dear God" when he sees the world outside. The camera changes perspective and zooms out from the city and the whole area is covered in one humongous cobweb. It is only a question of time before the little group will have to give in and become

prey to the new master race in the kingdom of the tarantulas – the horrifying manifestation of the deep ecology annihilating the human race and reterritorialising the land.

The New Collectivity

The apocalyptic vision in *Kingdom of the Spiders* is a bone-chilling nightmare from the darkest regions of the human subconscious. To witness tarantulas turn an entire valley – or the entire globe depending on what ending of the film you watch – into a giant cocoon-like food storage will produce a strange uncanniness in any audience with just a little respect for animal life. But what is it that we are actually witnessing in the film? The disaster is cataclysmic, yet it is not generated by the unstoppable and uncontrollable forces that we know from earthquakes, tsunamis and tornados and have come to acknowledge as some sort of cosmic necessity that occasionally hit us with relentless power and then disappear again. We know we have little means to avoid these large-scale disasters and have learned to prepare for and handle them as an unavoidable evil. The evil in *Kingdom of the Spiders* is of a whole other kind. The inhabitants of Verde Valley are facing the violent force of something that humans until now has been able to live with and to a large extent also been able to control. The tarantulas are animals that apart from a poisonous bite when attacked have lived quietly outside human civilisation minding their own business. Until now. Like the apes in the *Planet of the Apes* series and the ants in *Phase IV*, the spiders develop a new sense of collectivity or rather they reorganise and remobilise their existing collectivity and turn it into a force that the collective of human society is not prepared for and has no defence against.



Frame capture from *The Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011). When the apes decide to turn against the human civilisation there is no stopping them. While crossing the Golden Gate even the military is defeated.

This vision of the development of a new tarantula collectivity in *Kingdom of the Spiders* can be approached with the Belgian writer and Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck's (1862-1949) philosophy on nature. His philosophy is based on observations of bees, termites and ants and is articulated in the three books *The Life of the Bee* (1901), *The Life of Termites* (1926) and *The Life of the Ant* (1930). The insects fascinate Maeterlinck because they much like humans live in advanced collectives and are organised in large societies with millions of individuals. They are equipped with a social instinct and their centre of attention is the extended family of these collectives, which are systematically organised in order to maintain self-sustainability. In Maeterlinck's opinion the collectives of the insects is a herald.

Maeterlinck describes a number of characteristics in the social life of insects that resembles features found in the best animal horror films. Firstly, Maeterlinck is highly fascinated by the ability of insects to build functional and complex edifices, e.g. the enormous dwelling of the termites: "Nothing is more bewildering, more fantastic, than the architecture of these dwellings... With their needles, their crest of spires, their flying buttresses, their multiple counterforts, their overhanging terraces of cement, they recall age-worn cathedrals... like skeleton pyramids or obelisks fretted and scarred by centuries more devastating than in the Egypt of the Pharaohs" (Maeterlinck 1926: 25-27). In addition to being impressed by the sheer architectural genius of these insect dwellings, Maeterlinck focuses on how these "republics of the insects", where millions of individuals live in peace and harmony in gigantic collectives, are very successful examples of "nature's experiments" in terms of creating intelligent forms of existence. As he writes, "the bee, the ant and the termite alone, among all the living creatures we know of, present the spectacle of an intelligent life, of a political and economic organisation" (Maeterlinck 1926: 185-186). In another part of his analysis, Maeterlinck points out that the design of the dwellings of the termites besides from enforcing a strict social order also includes advanced ecological systems for ventilation, water management and nutrition as well as complex physiological mechanisms and technologies. Hence, he concludes that, "the termites are chemists and biologists from whom we might have much to learn" (Maeterlinck 1926: 49).

Maeterlinck is in other words fascinated by the intelligent design that the life of the insects exposes. What we need to acknowledge according to Maeterlinck is, "to mistrust the intentions of the universe towards ourselves" (Maeterlinck 1926: 186). From an evolutionary perspective, the societies of the insects have been here millions of years before humans arrived on the planet, let alone began to build societies. Moreover, the societies of the insects will most likely be here a long time after humans have disappeared from the planet. As species humans arrived later than any other species and even if we claim to be superior compared to animals when it comes to intelligence and inventiveness, our ability to adapt to the surroundings is clearly not sustainable and inferior to the insect societies, which have survived ice

ages, tectonic shifts and meteor impacts. That is the dark, yet honest point of both Maeterlinck's studies and animal horror.

While spiders like insect are from the arthropod phylum – by far the largest in the animal kingdom – they are not insects but arthropods with distinctive characteristics such as eight legs instead of six, no antennas and no ability to fly. Yet, this biological difference aside, Maeterlinck's thesis on the social life of insects and not least the brutal force of this life serves as a relevant prism for an analysis of *Kingdom of the Spiders*.

In a basic sense the movie speeds up the above-mentioned evolutionary process and gives it a dramatic twist by presenting a vision in which a new collective of tarantulas systematically and with determined intelligence annihilates a competing species, humans, from the face of the planet. It is a vision that shows that animal life can operate as a well-regulated collective. However, its intentions remain a mystery to humans. In the film, Diane Ashley and Robert Hansen, the scientist and the local veterinarian with knowledge of the area, do not understand the events since it do not correspond to anything they have seen before. The collective behaviour of the tarantulas exceeds the knowledge that the two have acquired as professionals. Science – the pride of human progress – is rendered inadequate when faced with this ancient civilisation and the lesson learned by Ashley and Hansen as well as the other inhabitants of Verde Valley is that it is too late to try to recognise it and take measures.

Like the majority of disaster films, *Kingdom of the Spiders* emphasises how humans cannot agree on a strategy to deal with the current challenges. Political and economic agendas are opposed to scientific and ecological arguments, and even when the survival of the town (read: the species) is at stake, it is not possible to reach a common approach to the challenge. That is a disturbing portrait of an impotent human society, split by egoism and special interests. Seen from Maeterlinck's perspective, the insect society of the other hand embodies a radical collectivity. All spider individuals have assigned roles and functions in the great totality that is sustained as the sole purpose of life. It is a totalitarian order characterised by an extreme work ethic and energy, manifested in the collective structures of the mound, the nest and the swarm.

Maeterlinck is especially fascinated by the insects' will to sacrifice everything in order to support the greater good as an ultimate goal that exceeds the individual. In the insect society the dwelling or the nest is larger than the individual, and the survival of the collective and the reproduction is the purpose of all activities. This collectivity is in Maeterlinck's eyes a form of absolute communism, where all individuals are anchored in a higher purpose and lives for the execution of this goal without questioning the current organization. The ego is non-existent and every insect is completely focused on working for the common good.

For Maeterlinck the greatness of the insect collectives is the,

absolute devotion to the public good, their incredible renouncement of any individual existence or personal advantage or anything that remotely resembles selfishness; to their complete abnegation, their ceaseless self-sacrifice to the safety of the state. In our community they would be regarded as heroes or saints (Maeterlinck 1926: 150).

In a modern America that built its self-image in opposition to Communism this is both an unattractive and scary thought, but *Kingdom of the Spiders* shows that it is nevertheless a powerful alternative to a society based on individuality. Moreover, the movie shows that individuality can be a weakness for the survival of societies.

The Spider Intelligence

If we dig further into Maeterlinck's thinking we discover an additional aspect that helps explain the fundamental fear we experience when facing the collective of spiders in *Kingdom of the Spiders*. Maeterlinck articulates it quite simply as the wonder you experience when you are confronted with the dwelling of the termite or the mound of the ant: "What is it that governs here? What is it that issues orders, foresees the future, elaborates plans and preserves equilibrium, administers, and condemns to death?" (Maeterlinck 1926: 150) Humans are used to see the world as a gathering of individuals, but what if the way the tarantulas organise should not be conceived as a gathering of individuals but rather as one multifaceted individual? Then one would be forced to see the dwelling and the mound, "as a single individual, with its parts scattered abroad; a single living creature, that had not yet become, or that had ceased to be, combined or consolidated; an entity whose different organs, composed of thousands of cells, remain always subject to the same central law, although outside it and apparently individually independent" (Maeterlinck 1926: 150). The question that both Maeterlinck and *Kingdom of the Spiders* raise is if humans are ready to cope with such a conceptual turn.

Maeterlinck compares the organisation of the insects with the human body, where our own physiological systems are working completely independent of our consciousness and based on principles that normal people have limited knowledge of. As such, the vision of the tarantulas in *Kingdom of the Spiders* is the development of a body with swarm-like characteristics, regulated by an irreducible intelligence that gives the scattered body parts direction, purpose and a deep necessity in every single movement. This is an intelligence that humans have consciously ignored since it turned to modern science as the exclusive model for explaining the world and as *Kingdom of the Spiders* makes clear humans are therefore not able to respond to the manifestations of this intelligence with sufficient sensibility. Modern science has put humans out of sync with the way animals think and act, and it is this ignorance that comes back to haunt the inhabitants of Verde Valley and the people in animal horror in general. They are totally unprepared – mentally as well as practically – when confronted with this ancient intelligence of animals inherent

to the planet that has no sentimental concerns when it comes to the survival of humans.

Maeterlinck is repeatedly trying to describe this intelligence, because it gives him a sense of understanding the different experiments and options of life that nature has brought forward as cosmic experiments competing for dominance in the earthly kingdom. In a central passage in *The life of the Termite* the intelligence is described as,

“an intelligence dispersed throughout the Cosmos; to the impersonal mind of the universe; to the genius of nature; to the Anima Mundi ... the vital force, the force of things, the “Will” of Schopenhauer, the “Morphological Plan,” the “directing Idea” of Claude Bernard; to Providence, to God, to the first Mover, to the Causeless-Cause-of-all-Causes, or even to blind chance; these answers are one as good as the other, for they all confess more or less frankly that we know nothing, that we understand nothing, and that the origin, the meaning and the end of all the manifestations of life will escape us a long time yet and perhaps for ever” (Maeterlinck 1926:155-156).

In the grand cosmic scheme that deep eco horror outlines humans are just one amongst other intelligent life forms and have a very limited understanding of the vital energies that characterise the scheme. Instead our knowledge and intelligence tend to place humans at the centre of the scheme. Hence, when we describe and interpret other modes of being, other forms of life, we typically do so from an anthropocentric perspective. We attribute motifs and intentions that we know from ourselves to these non-human species. This “method” is indeed ignorant and as deep eco horror demonstrates it is furthermore fatal. *Kingdom of the Spiders* and deep eco horror shows that to underestimate the intelligence of small creatures such as ants, termites and tarantulas in comparison with human intelligence is a death trap of hubris. Because the behaviour and intelligence of the tarantulas do not conform to human models of explanation neither science nor society have any answers to the appearance and later attack of the spiders. Thousands of years of progress are rendered useless in a matter of a few days by the intelligence of a collective of small hairy creatures and reminds us that our accumulation of knowledge is fundamentally inadequate in terms of dealing with the forces of the deep ecology.

Kingdom of the Spiders is in other words a speculative attempt to articulate images and visions of non-human intelligences as a historical and cosmological perspective beyond human intelligence. Even though it is now more than forty years since the film premiered, art has still only scratched the surface in terms of giving form to and reflect on these perspective. As such *Kingdom of the Spiders* is still current and fresh. It might seem more like a gloomy myth from the Jungian depths of the collective subconsciousness than anything else, yet as a cinematic vision it feels surprisingly concrete, horrifying real.

A Planet without Nations and Nature

Deep eco horror connects with existing discussions of a possible environmental apocalypse in the near-future. In this context, the genre seems to express an ethical challenge to the inconsiderate and egoistical behaviour of humans. It responds critically to pollution, manipulation and straight-forward destruction of the environment in the name of civilisation. This critique is well-known and concerns the inability of humans to handle their sovereignty on planet Earth with respect for its ecological systems. As such the genre points beyond the specific American perspective to a global situation, where every nation is falling from grace when it comes to its relationship with nature.

Extrapolating this critique, deep eco horror also introduces a critique of the inability of humans to handle their role on the planet to their own best. Not only do they disturb the deep ecology, they also naively continue to ruin their own habitat. As the example of *Kingdom of the Spiders* shows it is not the deep ecology but the humans who are the true victims of the environmental changes. It is the humans who die “at the mercy of Gaia”, while the spiders live on as if nothing happened in their newly won territory. Moreover, the deep ecology seems to have absolutely no problem with the disappearance of mankind. It never had any use for humans in the first place. Covered in the silk threads of the tarantulas Verde Valley looks as peaceful as ever.

Although the alternative ending of *Kingdom of the Spiders* in which the entire planet was covered by spider thread was dropped, the article wants to conclude by connecting the film and the genre in general to the radical vision of a planet without humans. The vision is presented by a number of current products of fiction. In the remake of *War of the Worlds* (2008) and the TV series *Falling Skies* (2011-) aliens invade Earth and the surviving humans are destined to fight against total extermination. The environment is not the issue in either *War of the Worlds* or *Falling Skies*. They tap into the Cold War narrative of outside enemies. Disastrous environmental changes are on the other hand the main frame of reference in films like *After Earth* (2012), *Oblivion* (2012), *Elysium* (2013) and *Interstellar* (2014) as well as in TV series like *Terra Nova* in which mankind has left the planet due to pollution, overpopulation and nuclear war and is now living on space stations and other planets.¹⁸ However, the heroic human individual still thrives in these stories, if not on Earth, then in space, and secures the anthropocentric perspective on the situation. It is exactly this perspective that deep eco horror closes off. The ending of *Kingdom of the Spiders* emphasises this perhaps clearer than any film in the genre by a shift in point of view from the people inside the house looking out through the barricaded windows to a look down on the covered Verde Valley from “somewhere” above the town. The alternative ending shows the entire covered Earth from a distance, hanging in space. In both cases, the point of view exceeds human perception and serves to connect the events to a planetary perspective.

Compared to these movies and TV series, a more consequent and thought provoking version of the vision is developed by Alan Weisman in his book *The World without Us* (2007) and the related TV series *Life After People* (2008-2010). Both the book and the TV series speculate about the development of Earth without humans and they do so without speculating about the reason why humans have disappeared. They are just gone. No more. From one day to the next.¹⁹ What remains are the products of civilisation and the marks that civilisation has put on nature. Yet, they also disappear as time goes on and after hundreds of years they come to resemble prehistoric objects.²⁰ It is a view into the near and far future, where nature liberated from the interference of humans can create its own ecological system. One of Weisman's main examples are the island of Manhattan and he describes how the New York City borough in time will change as part of a process where nature will grow back to a state from before humans began to settle there.

In essence, Weisman's vision is a romantic one, in the sense that he nurtures a mythology of a pure, true and harmonious nature. Like deep eco horror films, his point of view is post-human but as he writes in the preface to his latest book *Countdown: Our Last Best Hope for a Life on Earth* (2014) he nevertheless still dreams of a life on earth. His books are written as encouragements to develop new forms of life that makes this dream possible.²¹ Deep eco horror has no such dreams. Its point of view is a cosmological point of no return. The deep ecology has begun a new different process that does not consider nor include humans.

This difference between *The World Without US* and deep eco horror connects with Timothy Morton's notion of "ecology with nature." Morton belongs to the group of contemporary thinkers that attacks anthropocentrism and challenges the phenomenology of subjectivity in favour of an object-oriented understanding of the world according to which humans are no longer privileged but just one object among many. As he writes in *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), "true planetary awareness is the creeping realization not that "We Are the World" but that we aren't" (Morton 2013: 99). According to Morton, Earth never belonged to humans in the first place and nature is just a concept that humans have invented to comprehend, frame, control and exploit this fundamentally alien phenomena. Nature as such does not exist, he argues. What does exist is an ecological hyperobject whose spatial and temporal scale exceeds the horizon of human perception.²² Its qualities, network of connections and dynamics are basically imperceptible to humans and for Morton the challenge humans are facing is to develop a philosophy that can cope with this nature of the hyperobject. Only thereby can humans also develop an adequate – in the sense of respectful and sustainable – ecological awareness and behaviour.

Deep eco horror expresses a similar understanding of the ecological hyperobject as something that is fundamentally alien to humans and at the same time fundamentally connected to human life. However, contrary to Morton who sees this as a philosophical problem the genre uses the schism as the point of departure for dystopic

speculations about how humans are confronted with a superior intelligence and force. As Nils Hellstrom – the main character of the film *The Hellstrom Chronicle* – points out, insects have a 300 million years head start on humans when it comes to life on Earth. Moreover, unlike humans, the insects have succeeded in creating the perfect society, including an effective army of soldiers that sacrifice themselves for the survival of the society as a whole. “The insects will endure, where man will fail,” as Hellstrom laconically expresses it.²³ As such deep eco horror can be seen as a potentialization of Maeterlinck’s thesis combined with an exposure of the weaknesses in human society. The conclusion is critical and absolutely without sentimentality: The spiders and insects will trump and the American nation as well as the global civilisation will come to an end. Humans may have been able to land on the Moon and collect data from the far regions of outer space but its planetary intelligence is too limited and narrow-minded to enable them to outlive, let alone crush those little creatures that have gathered and processed data on planet Earth for many millions of years.

To use the word of the author J. G. Ballard, the visions of deep eco horror are indeed “extreme metaphors”. The truth-value of these metaphors cannot be confirmed nor can they be refuted. Maybe they are real and not simply metaphors. We humans cannot know that and that is perhaps the most frightening and fascinating aspect of the films. They introduce us to the limit of our perception and control and leave us with the realisation that we are mere subordinate organisms in the ever changeable and super violent planetary narrative that constitutes the deep ecology.

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Notes

¹ See Næss 1973.

² As such the genre connects with the critique of anthropocentrism that has been launched by the recent branch of environmental studies that focuses on "keeping the wild" and argues that not only humans but also animal can "inhabit" the Earth. (See Crist 2014) However, the vision that animal horror presents is less concerned with the ethical question of animals as "inhabitants" as with the mythological fear of animals as sovereign force.

³ As such the perspective of animal horror – and of the article – differs from the recent "animal turn" in environmental discourse, which argues for the recognition of animals as equals to humans in the integrated bio system of the planet Earth. Animal horror is not concerned with such an extension of civil rights as it shows how animals without ethical or institutional support eventually will "rise" and prove that human sovereignty is a myth. See Weil 2010 and Crist 2013.

⁴ Of course, the apocalypse is not limited to the US context but for the sake of argument the article will focus on the significance of the apocalypse in that specific geopolitical context.

⁵ See Thrower 2007.

⁶ See Miller 1967 and Hughes 2003.

⁷ The frontier movement is of course not the first settlers on the North American continent. Recent discoveries shows that the first humans arrived from Asian on the coast of what is today California as early as 13.000 years ago. When the frontier movement began its travels westward to explore the "untouched land" the descendants of these first settlers, the Native Americans, already inhabited the land. Furthermore, the democratic ideals were to a considerable extent inferred with by an aggressively expanding capitalism and its inherent power structures.

⁸ Of course, the mythology ignores that the USA was indeed founded on a political struggle, namely The American Revolution (1765-1783), the fight for independence from the British Empire and the wars with Mexico and Native Americans.

⁹ This claim of innocence has ironically – and tragically – accompanied military interventions and wars in foreign countries in the 20th century by the USA. Also, since he was elected President Barack Obama has continuously referred to the USA's "manifest destiny" as the reason behind the nation's active and leading role in the global politics. That the USA is a nation driven by higher principles than simple politics is in other words a myth created to justify and disguise the liability of its political actions.

¹⁰ See Schmidt 2005.

¹¹ See Ron Sakolsky and James Koenhline (1993). As it is well-documented in the literature on the frontier movement realising the dream of the peaceful life in nature was no easy task. The conditions were tough and included a great deal of violence both internally between the settlers and in confrontations with Native Americans.

¹² As an illustration of this see J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur's classic text *Letters from An American Farmer* (1872), which is instrumental to the idea of cultivating the American soil.

¹³ As it is often pointed out in the critique of Fred Jackson Turner's seminal essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893) large parts of the frontier movement also justified genocide on the Native American population in the name of the progress of civilisation and capitalism. The Native Americans were considered to be a disturbing – "savage" – part of nature and thus were to be exterminated for the landscape to be claimed by the frontier movement. An obvious example of this dark and horrible side of the utilitarian quest is the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, which to save time and money went straight through several Native American territories and left blood in its track.

¹⁴ To get an idea of how widespread the genre is see the list of 389 "Killer Animals/Insects and Giant Monsters (Horror) Movies" at <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls050510252/>.

¹⁵ It needs to be mentioned that by "the people" the Western genre almost exclusively means the white settlers of the frontier movement. The Native Americans' "right" to the land is either ignored or suppressed by racist politics.

¹⁶ A US specific perspective on this point would be to see the genre as a "reenactment" of the exposure and vulnerability experienced in the wild nature by the settlers of the frontier movement.

¹⁷ See Freud: *The Uncanny*.

¹⁸ See Lillemose 2013.

¹⁹ For the sake of argument Weisman does mention two possible causes: A virus or aliens.

²⁰ This vision points to the recent notion of the anthropocene, which claims that the material presence of humans on Earth has reached such a massive state that it constitutes a geological layer in itself.

²¹ Whereas *The World Without Us* is a speculation *Countdown* is a description of actual situations. The main argument of the book is that Earth's and man's biggest problem is overpopulation.

²² Morton does not subscribe to James Lovelock's Gaia theory. He criticises the theory for its misleading understanding of the current environmental crisis. He argues that Lovelock on the one hand encourages a kind of ecological defeatism thinking that Gaia will replace man as a dysfunctional component, and on the other hand is simply an alibi not to do anything.

²³ The Nils Hellstrom character is further developed by Frank Herbert in his novel *Hellstrom's Hive* (1978). In the novel Hellstrom leads a secret underground experiment intended to create a society based on the life of insects and take over the world.

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