Gothic Nature

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Tentacles Everywhere: William Eubank's *Underwater*

(United States: TSG Entertainment and Chernin Entertainment, 2020)

Emily Alder and Sarah Artt

'In space, no one can hear you scream'—strapline for *Alien* (1979)

If Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) is the now-classic hybrid of science fiction and horror, then William Eubank's *Underwater* (2020) demonstrates how this now-established narrative model can be used to address contemporary ecological concerns. Like *Alien*, *Underwater* deals with a small group negotiating survival in a claustrophobic and hostile environment, while menaced by monsters. But this time, instead of on a spaceship, we are in an extensive mining base, Kepler Station, 36,000 feet deep on the ocean floor. This scenario—nonetheless alien, but now much closer to home—importantly emphasises the relentless process of extraction and consumption of natural resources that underpins the economic and political systems ultimately responsible for climate change.

The Mariana Trench, as a magazine article forming part of the opening credits notes, 'may as well be another planet'; it is 'an isolated environment' and (even if only to humans) 'as deadly as space'. 'Rumours of strange sightings at drill site [are] dismissed by the company', we're informed, while unknown physiological and psychological effects of working in the sunless, high-pressure environment are implied. All of this sets up expectations of a classic sf horror movie, with shades of *Alien*, H. P. Lovecraft, and James Cameron's *The Abyss* (1989). *Underwater* is also indebted to Neil Marshall's underground horror, *The Descent* (2005), which also features claustrophobic spaces, darkness, and creatures that have evolved perfectly to live deep in the earth. Using sf and horror conventions to encode the effects of carbon emissions and resource extraction methods on the planet and its global climate systems, *Underwater* presents a variety of ecohorror that we might call 'climate horror'.

The film begins with an immediate crisis: a pressure breach in the structure of the base kills off many crewmembers and forces those who remain into survival mode, led (for a while) by Captain Lucien (Vincent Cassel). While the opening provides an exciting action sequence, it comes at the expense of any real connection to the characters, who must, and do, cooperate just to survive. We follow Norah (Kristen Stewart), a mechanical engineer who looks like the fetching mash-up of Jean Seberg and Ellen Ripley (*Alien*), even when she is covered in dirt and scratches, crawling through debris and the bodies of her fallen colleagues. Everything we've come to expect of disasters in space—a hull breach, a character sucked from an airlock, tense slow-motion EVA, malfunctioning space-suits—are present here. Nevertheless, these tropes resonate differently in the submarine setting; on the floor of our own planet, this alien space is disturbingly domestic.

Underwater is mired in the conventions of the horror genre: dark, enclosed spaces, mysterious noises, and of course, demonic creatures from the deep. Norah is deliberately positioned for us as the Final Girl in terms of physical appearance, drawing on some of what Carol Clover (1992) says of the heroines of early slasher films: 'The Final Girl is [...] feminine enough to act out in a gratifying way [...] but not so feminine as to disturb the structures of male competence and sexuality' (p. 51). In some ways, with her practical sweatpants and bleached buzz cut Norah evokes something of Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in her final incarnation in *Alien 3* (1992), an exhausted survivor who hasn't yet lost her grit. In *Underwater*, Norah both is and isn't the Final Girl. She is marked out as the protagonist through her voiceover and her solitary status at the outset of the film. Yet, she is pitted against two possible enemies: the collapsing base which she must work to make safe for herself and her colleagues, and later some angry, demonic sea monsters. So far, we are in textbook eco-horror territory with the natural world revolting to expel humans and their technologies (see e.g. Foy 2010, Parker 2019).

The location of Kepler Station at the bottom of the Mariana Trench is nearly seven miles deep. The company, Tian Industries, is drilling even deeper, disturbing the oceanic crust below the seabed and with it, whatever lives there. At first the characters attribute the collapse of the base to seismic disruption caused by the drilling, yet they cannot ignore hints they have somehow suffered a deliberate attack of some sort, that they have precipitated an active

response to human transgression against the environment. In one of the few moments of breathing space for the characters during their high-intensity flight for safety, which takes up most of the film's action, the perplexed engineer Smith (John Gallagher Jr.) observes a wrecked drill, which weighs 6000 tons, and whispers 'How did it get ripped up like that?'. The despairing biologist Emily (Jessica Henwick) then reflects 'We did this. We drilled the bottom of the ocean. We took too much. And now she's taking back. We're not supposed to be down here'. Emily's remarks hint at the breaching of planetary boundaries and the tipping points of climate change that our world is approaching with frightening speed (Steffen *et al*., 2015).

While the creatures themselves are, as one character in the film remarks, very much 'Some *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* shit', they are ultimately just a convenient horror motif. The demon crabs, jellyfish, flesh-eating tentacles, and the half-seen, kraken-like Final Monster are symptoms of a transgression that has already taken place. That transgression is irreversible climate damage, set in motion by our own predecessors generations ago. This is what sets climate horror apart from eco-horror: the knowledge that even a rebellion by creatures from the deep will not be enough to repair what has already been done. If, as Clover suggests, the slasher films of the 70s and 80s tell us something of that era's sexual attitudes, climate horror expresses today's collective dread. *Underwater* is nothing new, but the dread that it conceals, the fear of being too late to reverse global warming or to mitigate rising ocean temperatures may be a crucial amplification of eco-horror's more generalised sense of exposure to the wrath of nature. If Norah is the Final Girl, it is climate catastrophe that is the serial killer or alien who always comes back for the sequels. If horror is always about cultural anxieties, then here in climate horror the fear is of the inexorable consequences of climate catastrophe that cannot be vanquished—although there is still hope for mitigating them.

Underwater is often extreme and fanciful in its creatures, not to mention containing some logical inconsistencies such as diving helmets that can withstand eight tons per square inch of water pressure yet crack under three blows from a fire-extinguisher. Nevertheless, the film has a clear point to make. Norah saves Smith and Emily by blowing up the base, the monsters, and herself, concluding that 'Sometimes you have to stop feeling. Start doing'. She breaks through the inertia of our culture's general inaction around addressing climate change—of eco-paralysis—but it is a temporary victory: single direct actions are not that effective for

driving long-term change. Tian Industries suppresses the testimony of sole survivors Smith and Emily and is going to drill again. We have no reason to suppose that more monsters of the same species do not still remain, heralds of a deep-sea ecosystem rising against its extractive colonisers. They haven't been stopped, and neither has the power of equally giant and tentacular corporations.

BIOGRAPHIES

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