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'Why Wouldn't the Wilderness Fight Us?' American Eco-Horror and the Apocalypse

Rachel Carson's 1962 book *The Silent Spring*, perhaps the most influential work of environmental advocacy ever written, opens with a 'Fable for Tomorrow'.[1] She depicts a town completely at one with its pastoral surroundings:

> Even in winter the roadsides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The countryside was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of wildlife, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and autumn people travelled from great distances to observe them.[2]

It's all too good to last. Soon, 'a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change'.[3] It's a development that she casts in distinctly Gothic terms: 'Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death.'[4] One of the most eerie developments is the fact that there are no birds anymore: 'It was a spring without voices.' However, there is nothing supernatural about this ecological devastation: 'No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world.' The awful truth is: 'The people had done it themselves.'[5] Carson made it clear that every disaster described in her 'fable' had already happened somewhere.[6] Ecological catastrophe was no longer an alarmist fantasy, but a stark reality of late twentieth-century life. Her book '[...] helped spark a tsunami of catastrophic rhetoric in environmental science and literature'.[7] It is

B. M. Murphy, *The Rural Gothic in American Popular Culture*

partially due to the immense impact made by *The Silent Spring* that '[...] our society is haunted by nightmares of an ecological apocalypse':[8]

> We live under the constant threat that the world of life will be irrevocably undermined by a society gone mad in its need to grow – replacing the organic by inorganic, soil by concrete, forest by barren earth, and the diversity of life forms by simplified ecosystems; in short a turning back of the evolutionary clock to an earlier, more inorganic, mineralised world that was incapable of supporting complex life forms of any kind, including human species.[9]

Bookchin's rhetoric evokes Susan Sontag's 1963 contention, 'Modern historical reality has greatly enlarged the imagination of disaster.'[10] Sontag argued that fantasy both distracted people from their likely fate (nuclear annihilation) and helped normalise what was psychologically unbearable. During the 1950s and 1960s, American audiences and readers certainly had plenty of material to help them get used to the idea of the nuclear holocaust, in part because, as Sacvan Bercovitch has noted, the popular culture of the time embraced what 'higher' culture tended to treat evasively.[11]

A similar pattern can be observed in American popular culture from the late 1960s onwards regarding the threat of environmental catastrophe. In 1971, Thomas M. Disch opened his collection *The Ruins of Earth* by 'remarking that, while 1950s concerns about nuclear holocaust had been successfully "black-boxed" ('one had learned to live with the bombs largely by looking the other way'), environmental crisis was different because "[...] now, in 1971, it isn't possible to look the other way" '.[12] Frederick Buell describes how this urgent sense of looming eco-catastrophe was quickly diffused by political, industrial, and business interests for whom the danger of increased environmental regulation was a threat. 'Something happened to strip environmental crisis of what seemed in the 1970s to be its self-evident inevitability. Something happened to allow environmentalism's antagonists to stigmatise its erstwhile stewards as unstable alarmists and bad-faith prophets – and to call their warnings at best hysterical, and at worst crafted lies.'[13] For him, as for other commentators (such as Bill McKibben) a 'Politics of Denial' came to dominate the way in which environmental concerns were perceived in the US. In recent eco-horror films such as *The Last Winter* (2006), *The Happening* (2008), and *Take Shelter* (2011), we shall see the ways in which this perception – that an absolutely catastrophic ecological disaster looms not in the distant future, but is in fact *already*

unfolding – has been assimilated into contemporary popular culture. As Lisa Garforth puts it:

> At the beginning of the Twenty-First century the threat of ecological breakdown is deeply imbedded in our social consciousness. Although the intensity of announcements of the 'environmental crisis' of the 1970s has faded and even been absorbed and normalised by the institutions of capitalist modernity, through the lens of environmentalism the future can seem an unthinkable or utterly miserable prospect. Whether framed in terms of the risk of catastrophic disasters associated with nuclear accidents like Chernobyl, or the steady decline implied by current scenarios of global climate change, it appears that things can only get worse.[14]

This sense of powerful foreboding – reinforced, of course, by the fact that the impact which global warming is beginning to have upon this planet is fast becoming obvious to all but the most entrenched sceptics – is also, I will argue, reflected in the post-2000 release of a number of strikingly similar genre movies, novels, and TV shows in which the collapse of the US means that the protagonists have to embark upon perilous road trips through a ravaged, depopulated American landscape. These narratives not only have much to say about the way in which a nation currently beset by all manner of economic, political, and environmental woes sees itself. They also imagine a future in which the American landscape is transformed once more into an inhospitable 'wilderness' straight out of Puritan nightmare. As such, it is my contention that these post-apocalyptic fantasies represent the 'final frontier' for the Rural Gothic.

I will begin this chapter by discussing the wave of eco-horror films which emerged during the 1970s, and served as precursors to the even despairing visions of environmental catastrophe seen in recent narratives of this type. Although ecocriticism has become an increasingly prominent facet of literary studies, not much has yet been written from this perspective about the relationship between the natural world and horror in literature and popular culture. As Tom J. Hillard (2009) notes, 'Throughout its relatively short life, ecocriticism has largely overlooked representations of nature inflected with fear, horror, loathing or disgust [. . .] Examining this darker side of nature writing, with its emphasis on fear, inevitably intersects with an examination of Gothic fiction and literature.'[15] He goes on to mention the likes of William Bradford, Cotton Mather, Charles Brockden Brown, and Edgar Allan Poe as being

examples of American authors whose work often reflected this 'darker side of writing about nature', and might, therefore, be profitably looked at from this perspective. Hillard's starting point here is Simon Estok's term 'ecophobia':

> Ecophobia is an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism. It plays out in many spheres; it sustains the personal hygiene and cosmetics industries (which cite nature's 'flaws' and 'blemishes' as objects of their work); it supports city sanitation boards that issue fines seeking to keep out 'pests' and 'vermin' associated in municipal mentalities with long grass; it keeps beauticians and barbers in business; it is behind landscaped gardens and trimmed poodles in women's handbags on the Seoul subway system; it is about power and control; it is what makes looting and plundering of animal and non animal resources possible.[16]

Estok further suggests that 'Human history is a history of controlling the natural environment', and argues, 'Ecophobia is one of the hallmarks of human progress.'[17] However, whilst the 'nature strikes back' horror films of the 1970s are obviously linked to the sense of ecological crisis that become a part of American life following the publication of *The Silent Spring*, they also belong to the much longer tradition of American narratives in which the natural world and the landscape itself are seen as actively hostile. Referring to the initial colonisation of North America, Francis Jennings notes, 'To the European who lacked woodcraft, knew not the native trails, and imagined gothic horrors in every copse, the familiar hunting parks of the Indians were lethal wilderness.'[18] If 'ecophobia', as Estok defines it, is related to the human drive to control and exploit the natural world, then it stands to reason that American popular culture would frequently encompass narratives in which this kind of hatred of the natural world is dramatised. Eco-horror films are most commonly found in the US and Australia, both nations established by the descendants of white settlers who set out to create a 'new world' in the midst of a vast, unfamiliar, and often physically treacherous landscape already occupied by resentful native inhabitants. Catherine Simpson has recently observed (in relation to Australian eco-horror) that films in which the natural world 'strikes back' serve as a means of dealing with environmental topics and issues of trespass, as well as of extending 'post colonial anxieties over settler Australian issues of belonging'.[19] I will argue here that American eco-horror serves much

the same function, combining an urgent sense of present-day crisis with a much older awareness of the fraught relationship between the white colonist and the unfamiliar landscape inhabited by potentially hostile plants, animals, and humans.

As we have seen, the project of transforming what they perceived to be a 'howling' wilderness into a settled, 'productive' landscape was one of the main objectives of the colonists. The presence of the Indians was certainly one of the most disquieting elements, but the animal population was also a source of anxiety:

> Wild animals added to the danger of the American wilderness, and here too the element of the unknown intensified feelings. Reporting in 1630 on the 'discommodities' of New England, Francis Higginson wrote that 'this Countrey being verie full of Woods and Wilderneses, doth also much abound with Snakes and Serpents of strange colours and huge greatnesse'. There were some, he added, 'that haue [have] Rattles in their Tayles that will not Flye from a Man . . . but will flye upon him and sting him so mortally, that he will dye within a quarter of an houre after'. Clearly there was some truth here and in the stories that echo through frontier literature of men whom 'the savage Beasts devoured . . . in the Wilderness,' but often fear led to exaggeration. Cotton Mather, for instance, warned in 1707 of 'the *Evening Wolves*, the rabid and howling *Wolves* of the *Wilderness* [which] would make . . . Havock among you *and not leave the Bones* till the morning.'[20]

It is, perhaps, hardly surprising that narratives in which animals, insects, bird life, and amphibians 'strike back' at humanity should recur so frequently in the American horror movie. As Nash observes, it was midst the unfamiliar territory of the 'New World' that the settlers re-experienced afresh their old, insecure relationships with the wilderness and the beasts that dwelled there.[21] What is particularly interesting about 1970s eco-horror films is that whilst there are certainly attacks by animals that humans have long feared for good reason – sharks, bears, dogs – aggression in these films is also exhibited by creatures whose potential for menace is much less immediately obvious (such as ants, earth worms, and rabbits). The 'ecophobia' which Estok cites as enabling the commercial and industrial exploitation of the natural world is, in these films, violently turned back upon the humans whose explicit or implicit disrespect for the natural world has precipitated a *wholesale* revolt of nature. As in the real-life examples cited by Carson in *The Silent Spring*, the desire to actively control and/or profit from nature

results, instead, in chaos and disorder. Ironically, therefore, the fear of the natural world that facilitated these doomed attempts at control is retrospectively vindicated.

American eco-horror movies made between the 1960s and 1970s tend to conform to the same basic formula, summarised as follows:

- Setting: a small town within a distinctly rural setting. This is already a place in which humans live in close proximity to the natural world.
- Protagonist: almost always an out-of-towner who foolishly seeks peace and quiet in the countryside. They must work with local allies (often a local love interest) in order to defeat or, at least, escape the natural menace.
- Starting point: some kind of violent disruption of the natural world – often the result of foolish human interference in or indifference towards nature (occasionally no definite explanation is given, however).
- Antagonist: usually one specific animal or species.
- Anti-humanism: there is often a distinct sense in these films that, whilst the revenge of nature may be disproportionate and indiscriminate, humanity has nevertheless brought the horror upon itself by disrespecting the environment.
- The role of authority: local authority figures ignore or disastrously downplay the threat, refuse to believe the warnings of the main protagonist and his/her allies, and only act when they really must. Their greed has often contributed to the problem in the first place. Their behaviour strongly resembles that of the corrupt mayor in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882).
- The ending: although the protagonist and their allies usually escape the immediate threat, and sometimes defeat it entirely, there is almost always a moment just before the closing credits when it is made clear that the threat has yet to be completely defused – in fact, the true horror may only just be beginning.

Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963) did more than any other film to establish the formula cited above, in part because it had a very timely release date. Although there is no direct connection between *The Silent Spring* and *The Birds* (the film was well into production when Carson's first articles appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1962), in one of those striking coincidences that popular culture so often provides, the book and film appeared within months of each other. If Carson's book can indeed be considered the Ur-text of modern environmentalism, then Hitchcock's

claustrophobic, eerie film is the foundational narrative of post-Carson eco-horror.[22] In *The Silent Spring*, the loss of birdsong 'comes to function as a synecdoche for a more general environmental apocalypse'.[23] One of the things that had most impressed the early European visitors to New England was the birdlife, and in particular, the flocks of passenger pigeons so large that they briefly blocked out the sun.[24] The passenger pigeon, of course, had been hunted to extinction by the early twentieth century. It is appropriate that Carson would choose the absence of birds as the key symbol of a fable which presents us with an idealised small town in which agriculturally based prosperity and natural abundance exist alongside each other, until disrupted by human interference. There is also the fact that 'Small towns have featured so prominently in American culture that they have become a deeply rooted symbol in the country's collective consciousness.'[25] The small town is, therefore, the most common setting for 1970s eco-horror because it also often serves as a stand-in for the nation.

Although *The Birds* begins with a long, establishing scene set amidst the bustling streets of San Francisco, once spoiled-but-vulnerable socialite Melanie Daniels (Tippi Hedren) impulsively heads for the coastal town of Bodega Bay she, like the viewer, spends the rest of the film trapped there. As is the case in many of the other films discussed here, there is no immediately obvious cause for the events that transpire. Various theories have been mooted by critics, with many noting that the bird attacks seem to revolve around Melanie herself.[26] However, the fact remains that the narrative itself, like Du Maurier's original story, gestures towards a much more ominous explanation: an apocalyptic revolt of nature.

The various strains of public opinion regarding the reason for the bird attacks is best represented during the film's masterful restaurant scene, which, as Paglia notes, is '[...] like a play within a play'.[27] Having just witnessed a flock of crows attack children from the local school, Melanie telephones her father. Gradually, the other patrons in the restaurant join in a heated discussion about what has happened. Amongst them there is an Irish drunk who declares it as sign of 'the end of the world', a cynical travelling salesman who opines, 'If you ask me, we should wipe them all out. World would be better off without them', a mother travelling with her two children who becomes increasingly hysterical, and Mrs Bundy, the local bird expert.[28] Mrs Bundy is quick to correct Melanie and the others when they display their dangerous ignorance of the natural world. 'Why, if we believe that birds are attacking, why ... why next we'll believe that grasshoppers and cockroaches are capable of [...].'

If, as Melanie claims, birds of a father are flocking together in order to wage war against humanity, 'We wouldn't have a chance. How could we possibly hope to fight them?' As the following scenes make clear, Mrs Bundy is indeed correct: humanity would have little or no way of defending itself. *The Birds* ends not with a triumphant fight-back but with a retreat, as Melanie (who has been rendered catatonic by a bird attack) and the Brenner family slowly drive away. They're heading out of town, and hopefully towards safety, but as the absence of any other noise on the soundtrack save the cry of birds and the flapping of wings makes clear, the world may well belong to their avian foes now.

As *The Birds* demonstrated, even the smallest creatures could be imbued with menace. Further evidence of this came in the *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, which won the 1971 Academy Award for best documentary.[29] What brings the film firmly into my purview is the fact that its real footage of insect life is interspersed with sequences scripted by David Seltzer (who also wrote *The Omen* (1976) and *Prophecy* (1979) which will be discussed later) in which the movie's narrator, 'Dr Nils Hellstrom, MD, PhD' (Lawrence Pressman), urgently expands upon his theory that humankind's dominion over the earth will soon be over. The film's melancholy tone is established in the opening sequence, which indicates that from the outset, the struggle for survival has been a bitter one. 'Masked beneath the beauty of nature's world is one single and ugly truth. Life must take life, in the interests of life itself. It is a mistake of arrogance to mistake size with significance. For the less visible one's enemy, the more powerful its strength.' Hellstrom, in standard maverick scientist tradition, is privy to truths those in positions of authority would prefer to ignore. He has, he says, 'learned something that no one wants to hear. But unless someone does hear – unless someone is at least exposed to it – we as a species might pass from existence without knowing why.'

The Hellstrom Chronicle anticipates the most recent (post-2000) cycle of American eco-horror in that, unlike the other films of this kind from the 1970s, the threat here poses a danger to the future of humanity rather than just one small town. Inevitably, the use of DDT to control the insect population and safeguard agriculture is mentioned. In a conclusion that echoes Carson, we are told, 'In fighting the insect, we have killed ourselves.' The insect is 'waiting patiently beside our death bed'.[30] Like *The Birds*, the film is very obviously a product of a post-Carson world. It reminds the viewer, 'Extinction is the ultimate fate of every species.'[31] *The Hellstrom Chronicle* was succeeded by a number of other insect-attack films. Amongst them were the atmospheric

1973 Saul Bass-directed oddity *Phase IV* (in which desert ants affected by cosmic radiation battle the scientists who have been investigating their strange behaviour); *Bug* (1975) (in which fire-starting cockroaches invade a small town); *Empire of the Ants* (1977) (tag line: 'They shall inherit the earth – sooner than you think'); *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977) (in which a small-town veterinarian played by William Shatner battles giant tarantulas mutated by crop-dusting spray); and in 1978, two 'bee attack' flicks – *The Bees* and *The Swarm*.

It wasn't only the insects you had to keep an eye on during the 1970s. Even the most harmless-seeming mammal – the rabbit – becomes a deadly threat in William F. Claxton's *Night of the Lepus* (1972). The plot revolves around the consequences of an ill-advised scheme to come up with a 'safe' alternative to DDT. An Arizona cattle rancher faces ruin because his land is being overrun by voracious bunnies. His plea for help reaches the husband-and-wife team of scientists based at the local university, who come up with a cunning plan: they'll inject a breeding pair with hormones that disrupt their reproductive cycle. Inevitably, tinkering with nature has dire effects once a modified rabbit is accidentally released by the couple's meddling little girl Amanda, who otherwise exists merely so that she can ask questions such as, 'Mommy, what's a control group?' In no time at all, the region has been overrun by giant rabbits that roar like lions and sound like stampeding horses. The local authorities, as is invariably the case, refuse at first to believe in the threat: 'Rabbits as big and ferocious as wolves? It just isn't conceivable!' During the deliriously silly climax, the rabbits are herded into traps made from downed power lines.

Night of the Lepus further dramatises the very fear that even the most well-meaning attempts to control the development of plants and animals can go awry, and that the most innocuous creatures may evolve in ways that cannot be predicted or controlled. In other words, 'Chaos reigns' when humans interfere with natural processes that should be left alone. An odd real-life corollary to *Night of the Lepus* appeared to occur in August 1979, when *The Washington Post* ran a story headed 'President Attacked by Rabbit'. However, the truth of Jimmy Carter's odd encounter with the frantically swimming animal (he was in a boat) was rather less exciting than initial reports suggested.[32]

The most famous eco-horror movie of the decade, *Jaws* (1975), differs substantially from many other 'revenge of nature' films cited here in that the Great White's attacks are never at any point explicitly blamed on the humans themselves. The shark hasn't been affected by poisonous chemicals or meddling scientists, even if it is larger than

usual, and inhabiting waters unusually close to shore. The shark also acts alone. In fact, it actually serves as an effective stand-in for any random, unpleasant, and unpredictable eruption of disorder into an otherwise orderly environment. (It is for this reason that the shark is often compared to Michael Meyers in *Halloween* [1978].)[33] As such, the film evokes a paradigm which we have also seen enacted in Rural Gothic texts such as *Wieland*, *Ravenous*, and *The Village*, in which a close-knit and seemingly contented community is disrupted by the intrusion of a mysterious outsider. *Jaws*, like *Moby Dick* (1851), also reminds viewers that there is a whole other world around them that contains forces that we can never fully understand. 'Beyond human control, the sea takes on all the aspects of wilderness that the virgin forest or desert might possess. And it is as archetypal and immediately recognisable as any other wilderness.'[34] Even though it doesn't contain the same resoundingly obvious environmental message hammered home by many of the films discussed here, *Jaws* shares with them the paranoid suspicion that the natural world is a chaotic, pitiless place populated by resentful 'lesser' creatures waiting for an excuse to get their own back.

Rather less obviously terrifying than a Great White are the flesh-eating worms that slither amuck in writer/director Jeff Lieberman's 1976 film *Squirm*. The revolt of nature's slimiest denizens is caused by a downed power line that transforms them into human-chomping menaces that like to pop up at unexpected moments (such as in the middle of an egg-cream soda being enjoyed by the film's hero). As in *Night of the Lepus*, the director gamely tries to make a resolutely unterrifying creature frightening by providing us with lots of extreme close-ups and dubbing the soundtrack with unlikely noises (these worms screech). There's a tentative feint early on towards some kind of overtly eco-conscious angle, when it is noted that tourists pollute the local bay, but this is never directly connected to the activities of the worms, even if it does help explain some of the hostility directed towards the hero, who is an out-of-towner. The most memorable thing about *Squirm* is the immortal line, 'The worms are coming up the stairs!', and the closing shots, which oddly resemble the final moments of *Halloween* (1978) – a slow pan through the by now worm-free house which ends on an ominous close-up of the ground outside. *Squirm*, therefore, leaves us with the feeling that further worm-related disorder can happen again at any time. As noted earlier, it is rare for eco-horror films to end with a definitive defeat of the threat concerned (exploding sharks aside). How can one escape nature, after all?

The most painfully earnest eco-horror film of the 1970s was John Frankenheimer's *Prophecy* (1979). The film attempts to tackle a number of pressing contemporary issues – contemporary debates about Indian land rights and concern about the polluting ways of big business; and mixes it all up with a story which exploits one of the most characteristic preoccupations of 1970s horror: reproductive anxiety.[35] Robert Verne (Robert Foxworth) is a crusading public health doctor working for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). When we first see him (after a prologue in which a team of illegal loggers are violently dispatched by an unseen, but massive creature), he's been called out to a decrepit apartment building because a baby has been gnawed on by rats. In an early acknowledgement of the complex relationship between humans and the animal world, one of the building's residents shrugs and says, 'The rats got to have room to live too.' The building is owned by an absentee landlord who refuses to do anything to improve the lot of his tenants, just as the paper mill central to the narrative is owned by a company that cares nothing for the environment. Sensing that Verne is burnt-out, his supervisor suggests that he take on an assignment in the backwoods of Maine, which involves managing a conflict between restive local Indians and the paper company that has purchased a tract of forest the tribe considers its own. Verne is, however, merely the latest in a long line of city dwellers who find that the wilderness is a lot less relaxing that they have anticipated. He also brings along his wife Maggie (Talia Shire). Unbeknownst to him, Maggie is pregnant, but has yet to break the news, because Robert is so disgusted by the state of the world that he doesn't want to bring a child into it. Later events will make Robert's reluctance to reproduce seem entirely reasonable.

Initially, it seems as if exposure to the wilderness will be just the thing to help patch up the couple's relationship. This positive view of wilderness as a restorative and regenerative site is, of course, one that first emerged during the nineteenth century, when it increasingly came to represent '[…] a highly attractive natural alternative to the ugly artificiality of modern civilisation'.[36] As they fly over the forest, Robert marvels, 'I forgot the world could look like this.' In a reminder, however, of the reason why they are there in the first place, we also see the paper mill sitting on the edge of the river like a carbuncle – a reminder that even in the wilderness, commercial interests have established themselves. The sense of unease is compounded when plant manager Isley (Richard Dysart), greets them with the warning, 'This particular forest isn't too safe right now.' An Indian protest group, led by activist John Hawks (Armand Assante), has blocked access to local logging trails. Isley

is dismissive of their claims that the forest is inhabited by a mythological creature known as the 'Ka Tha Din' [sic]. It is worth noting that 'Kathadin' was the Maine peak climbed by Thoreau in 1846, his account of which formed a key chapter of *In the Maine Woods* (1864). The experience was a profoundly unsettling one for him, because it was where:

> Thoreau for the first time encountered nature in its most primitive and forbidding state, where it was devoid of organic life [...] The validity of Thoreau's quest was founded on the pantheistic belief that the universe was congenial to human life and that human meaning could therefore be found in nature. The stark, inhuman nature Thoreau experienced at Katahdin thus threatened his most basic premise.[37]

The association of the creature which causes so much destruction in *Prophecy* with a feature of the Maine landscape which had proved famously inhospitable to Thoreau is one that further emphasises the ways in which the American landscape had long resisted white understanding and control. Further emphasising the Thoreau connection is the fact that Rob and Maggie are given a lakeside cabin in the woods to stay in – accommodation, which, as we have seen, seldom bodes well (in stark contrast to Thoreau's time on the shores of Walden Pond). Rob catches a giant salmon in the lake, which he and Maggie eat. Later that same night, they are attacked by a raccoon which appears to be suffering from brain damage. In what may be an early indication of the films reproductive anxieties, the first thing the racoon does upon breaking into the cabin is launch itself at Rob's crotch.

When he and Maggie visit the local Indian village, the tribe's elder expresses his belief that 'Ka Tha Din' has awakened to protect his people – a misconception that will later prove fatal. Rob notices that the trees that surround the village have become twisted and malformed, and upon finding a giant tadpole (and hearing about the high rate of birth defects in the tribe) he realises that the water has been contaminated. Isley gives the couple a tour of the paper mill, during which Rob notices a distinctive silver residue clinging to Maggie's shoe. After analysing it, he discovers that the mill has been discharging methyl mercury into the river, and as a result, 'This whole place has been contaminated.' The compound acts on the nervous system and destroys the brain, but it is also a powerful mutagenic which can corrupt the chromosomes of a developing foetus. Rob's discovery reflects an infamous incident which

took place in Japan in 1956. A hundred people died and thousands were paralysed after eating contaminated fish from Minamata Bay. The cause was methyl mercury poisoning caused by pollution.[38] Although the Minamata incident obviously took place outside of the US, there were also plenty of home-grown eco-disasters of this sort: '[. . .] events like the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill alerted middle-class Americans to the dangers of environmental disaster, and many mainstream organisations worried about pollution, toxic waste, and development of wilderness lands'.[39] As W. Scott Poole (2011) notes, one of the most infamous instances of industrial pollution involved the upstate New York city of Love Canal. During the 1960s and 1970s, children born to residents suffered an unusually high number of birth defects. These defects were later attributed to the fact that the working-class community had been erected on an industrial waste dump.[40]

Whilst Rob and Maggie are visiting the scene of a vicious attack by the creature, they discover a deformed bear cub trapped in a poacher's net and decide that they must bring it back as evidence. As Rob says to John, '[. . .] it could save your people, and this forest'. In a by now familiar turn of events, the film treats the Indians and the forest as synonymous. Rob is now seized with an almost messianic sense of mission, but he fails to notice the hollow-eyed desperation of his wife, who is forced to care for the grotesque cub whilst the group shelter from a storm. It is during this scene that Maggie cracks and reveals that she is expecting a child which may have been affected by the contaminated fish they ate earlier. She punctures her husband's belief that all will be well when the truth is exposed. 'It's not a nightmare that's going to end. It's just beginning, because it's inside me!'

Isley finally admits that he knew all along that the mill was polluting local waterways. He plays a steep price for his transgressions: the creature emerges from the forest and rips off his legs. 'Kah Ta Din' is no mythical figure (it even kills the old man who believes it to be such), but a mutant grizzly driven insane by mercury poisoning. Although Rob eventually manages to kill it with an arrow (in yet another example of the white man in the hostile wilderness surviving by adopting Indian ways), it is obvious that all will not be well. Maggie is still carrying a baby that will probably be as deformed as the animals in the forest, and in the final shot, we see another mutant grizzly emerge from the forest. The damage has been done. Even middle-class white folks will now suffer in the same way that the Indians have for years. The 'prophecy' here, as the film's poster art makes clear (it shows a mutant bear foetus), is that the reckless disregard for the natural

world that characterises the present has irrevocably damaged future generations.

It is notable that Foxworth's character works for the EPA, because this organisation had only been established nine years previously. It is only when Verne sees with his own eyes evidence of the effect that the mill's rampant pollution has had that he takes definitive action – and even then, he has already exposed his wife and unborn child. Verne's haplessness reflects the fact that, in real life, the ecological agenda of the EPA was and is often secondary to the interests of big business.

> Over and over again, Nixon ensured that environmental regulations would remain subordinate to economic growth and that they would rely much more heavily on market mechanisms and less on established bureaucratic and judicial controls [...] He established the EPA rather than the broad-based, more powerful agency that the environmental groups favoured.[41]

The conclusion of the film, which suggests that governmental failure to protect the environment will have a terrible impact upon Verne's family, vividly highlights the cost of putting profits before the natural world. As in *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, it is once more made obvious that in poisoning the earth, Americans have poisoned themselves.

Less well-known eco-horror films from the decades dramatised similar concerns. They included the likes of *Frogs* (1970) (in which the amphibious inhabitants of a Louisiana swamp besiege an isolated mansion in order to take revenge upon the arrogant patriarch, who has been exterminating them with pesticide), *Dogs* (1976), *Grizzly* (1976) *Day of the Animals* (1977), and cult classics such as *Piranha* (1978) and *Alligator* (1981) (which teaches the viewer that they should never flush an unwanted pet down the toilet lest it return after a 20-year growth spurt with vengeance on its mind).

Despite the relative frequency with which eco-horror and its sci-fi counterpart, the eco-dystopia (films of this kind released during the period included *Soylent Green* [1973] and *Silent Running* [1971]) surfaced in American popular culture during the 1970s, the sub-genre had a low profile during the 1980s and 1990s. It was not until the post-2000 era that eco-horror resurfaced as a significant element of American popular culture. Buell suggests that the eco-dystopianism often found in 1970s sci-fi continued in the new wave of cyberpunk narratives which emerged during the 1980s, but with one important difference: 'Environmental apocalypse was depicted not as the end of everything, but

as a milieu people dwelt in as they moved out beyond the limits of nature.'[42] He argues that these texts were characterised by the perverse sense of possibility found amidst the ravaged landscapes they presented. 'Environmental apocalypse was depicted as a source of excitement, not dismay, a stimulus to thrilling new adventures and a path to hitherto undreamt of new modes of being, not an account of doom and destruction.'[43] It is this sense that the threat of environmental catastrophe had, in fact, come to pass, and had as a result been normalised that perhaps helps explain just why it is that eco-horror had such a low profile from the early 1980s up until the mid-2000s. It had become clear that the changes predicted by commentators such as Carson had already come to pass, and, in particular, that global warming, a preoccupation that only really came to the public consciousness during the mid- to late 1980s, was well underway.

This awareness means that the most recent expressions of ecological anxiety in the horror genre differ in some significant ways from their 1970s predecessors. Aside from the likes of the cult bad movie *Birdemic* (2008) and the many self-consciously terrible films of this kind made by the SyFy Channel, modern eco-horror films that adhere to the 1970s formula are rare.[44] A notable recent exception to this rule, however, is Barry Levinson's *The Bay* (2012) which, apart from its canny use of the currently ubiquitous 'found footage' format, closely adheres to the 'classic' eco-horror paradigm (even down to its use of a small-town setting and the presence of short-sighted local officials). The threat here comes from waterborne parasites which have been mutated by pollution, and eat people from the inside out (often in glorious close-up). As in *Prophecy*, the events depicted are partially inspired by real-life incidents (albeit ones that are greatly exaggerated in the film). Levinson initially wanted to make a documentary about the despoliation of Chesapeake Bay, but decided that a horror film would be a more effective means of drawing public attention to the issue.[45]

A storm is coming: eco-horror in the post-2000 era

In *The End of Nature: Humanity, Climate Change and the Natural World*, Bill McKibben writes about what he characterises as a 'new nature' most notable for its very unpredictability:[46]

> Our comforting sense of the permanence of our natural world, our confidence that it will change gradually and imperceptibly, if at all, is, then, the result of a subtly warped perspective. Changes that can

> affect us can happen in our lifetime in our world – not just changes like wars but bigger and more sweeping events. I believe that without recognising it we have already stepped over the threshold of such a change: that we are at the end of nature. By the end of nature, I do not mean the end of the world. The rain will still fall and the sun will shine, though differently than before. When I say 'nature', I mean a certain set of human ideas about the world and our place in it. But the death of these ideas begins with concrete changes in the reality around us – changes that scientists can measure and enumerate. More and more frequently, these changes will clash with our perceptions, until, finally, our sense of nature as eternal and separate is washed away, and we will see all too clearly what we have done.[47]

William Cronon challenges this argument by arguing that this perspective '[...] is only possible if we accept the wilderness premise that nature, to be natural, must also be pristine'.[48] Nevertheless, this sense of being confronted by violent changes in the normal patterns of nature which are the result of human arrogance finds its fullest and most despairing expression in eco-horror narratives from the past decade. Whereas in the 1970s films, the terror is always a localised one, usually focused on a small town (with the exception of events in *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, and, possibly, *The Birds*); in the films I shall discuss next, the revolt of nature is ultimately on a global scale, rather than a regional one. Whereas 1970s eco-horror generally focused upon a specific animal, insect, or sea creature as the threat to an otherwise orderly environment, in post-2000 American eco-horror, there no longer *is* such a thing as natural order. As a result, the 'revolt of nature' is much more nebulous, and indeed, downright apocalyptic.

In their essay on Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth: A Global Warning* (2006), Thomas Rosteck and Thomas Frentz note that:[49]

> Americans have always had a complicated relationship with the environment. From the colonial Puritans, to the birth of the environmental movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and through annual Earth Day celebrations, we have remained preoccupied with the Earth. However, this preoccupation is curiously double-sided. On one side, the environment is revered as an awe-inspiring sublime, a synecdoche of our relation to the cosmos – and on the other, it is the resilient source of raw materials, a wilderness to be mastered, the site of our manifest destiny. Our bifurcated attitude towards nature is

> thus both spiritual and political, with the dominant trend in any era being a kind of barometer of cultural attitudes.[50]

This 'bifurcated' attitude is perhaps best expressed in modern eco-horror by writer/director Larry Fessenden's *The Last Winter* (2006). Here, the conflict between those who see the Alaskan wilderness as a resource ripe for exploitation and those who view it as a place of sacred significance informs a plot which concludes, like the other films I will discuss here, with the (possible) end of the world. In fact, *The Last Winter* and *An Inconvenient Truth* were released in the same year, and even serve as unintentional companion pieces. Gore's impassioned call to arms accessibly outlined the case for global warming and encouraged the viewer to take action in their own lives to help reverse, or at least, mitigate these effects. As such, though his lecture was sobering, it held out the possibility that if the will to change was there, disaster could perhaps be averted. *The Last Winter* takes place in a world in which the devastating effects predicted by Gore are not only underway, but unstoppable.

As well as being of immense ecological significance, Alaska has an important symbolic charge – it is, essentially, the 'last' American wilderness. Writing about Jimmy Carter's signing of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (which granted Federal protection to land totalling 28 per cent of the state) in 1980, Nash notes that the favourable public response to this then unprecedented move tapped into the sense that Alaska was '[...] America's last frontier', a place where,

> [...] Americans could visit their past both in person and as an idea.[51] Indeed, though many Alaskans were wary of the rules and restrictions that accompanied wilderness preservation, 'Armchair' tourists, intellectual importers of Alaska's wilderness, were amongst the most vocal in defending land that they never expected to see. They said that Alaska represented the nation's last chance to do things right the first time.[52]

Carter's signing of the act was preceded by the 1960 establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), an 8 million acre tract of wilderness granted Federal protection for the purposes of '[...] preserving unique wildlife, wilderness and recreational values'.[53]

Over the past two decades, there has been increasing pressure for the government to remove the ban on drilling in the ANWR. It amplified with findings of a 1998 US Geological Survey report which concluded

that the coastal plain of the refuge likely contained at least 20 billion barrels of oil.[54] The question then became, 'To drill or not to drill?'[55] Fessenden's film, therefore, dramatises a specifically *American* environmental conundrum – whether or not to prioritise the nation's ever-growing energy needs, or preserve the last relatively unpolluted natural landscape. In the film, the former consideration triumphs over the latter, with catastrophic results.

The 'triumph' of big business is highlighted even in the opening moments, which feature a promo made by 'North Industries'. It's a slick piece of corporate propaganda which characterises Alaska as 'The Land of Black Gold', and neatly sets up the rest of the film. In 1986, the company drilled a test well in the ANWR (the 'K.I.K.' [sic] well). Following a vote in Congress authorising further development, North is now determining future drill sites in the expectation that full-on drilling will be authorised 'within the decade'. The promo is being watched from a company camp in the far north by a young employee named Maxwell. Maxwell's interest in the K.I.K. well is more than just professional curiosity: the test site will soon reveal itself as the focal point of all a manner of eerie, mysterious occurrences – in fact, it is Ground Zero for the eco-apocalypse.

The main action of the film begins with the return to camp of blustering team leader Ed Pollack (Ron Perlman) who agrees entirely with the business-first attitude of his employers. Ed is put out on both a personal and professional level when he discovers that the bed of his romantic interest Abby (Connie Britton) is now occupied by environmentalist James Hoffman (James LeGros). Hoffman has spent years as an environmental activist and climate-change researcher but has now, along with his colleague Eliot Jenkins (Jamie Harrold), been brought in to perform the impact study needed before drilling to be authorised. Hoffman is burnt out by years of dealing with disasters like the Exxon Valdez oil spill, and the trip to the ANWR is, for him, 'A chance to come to the last place with pristine, untouched wilderness before we fuck it up.' The trouble is, the 'wilderness' has already been 'fucked up' – the data that he and Eliot collect proves that global warming is accelerating exponentially, and nature, as McKibben predicted, is reacting in ways that confound conventional assumptions.

In the film, as in real life, the permafrost beneath the tundra has begun to melt. Despite the fact that it is winter, the temperature is freakishly warm. More disturbing is the sense that an immensely powerful (and hostile) natural intelligence has begun to assert itself. Fessenden includes repeated shots of the camp and the people that inhabit it as

though seen from above, to reinforce the sense that they are being watched by an all-seeing higher intelligence. The technique evokes Hitchcock's use of a similar trick in *The Birds* (which featured shots from the avian perspective which emphasised the vulnerability of the townsfolk) and the opening scenes of *The Shining* (1981). These shots also bring home the fact that *The Last Winter* is engaging with the 'Gaia Hypothesis' first popularised by James Lovelock. Lovelock's suggestion was that '[...] the Earth could be described as a self-regulating mechanism, analogous to a living organism'.[56] Fessenden combines this sense of the earth as a sentient, self-regulating organism with elements of the Windigo mythology discussed in Chapter 3. *The Last Winter* is a thematic companion piece to his 2001 film *Wendigo* (2001). Like *The Last Winter*, *Wendigo* focuses on a small group of individuals isolated in an ultimately unknowable natural landscape. Further aligning it with *The Last Winter* is the sense that the wilderness is imbued with an intelligence that may not be sympathetic to humankind, and the overt referencing of Windigo belief. In both films, it is also the youngest character – a little boy named Miles in *Wendigo*, and Maxwell in *The Last Winter* – who is the first to be influenced by this intelligence. *The Last Winter* also resembles *Ravenous* in that it has Indian characters who are the first to bring up the Windigo mythos. In *The Last Winter*, camp cook and mother-figure Dawn mentions her tribe's belief that 'familiar friends' can be replaced by a 'stranger'. However, the fact that Dawn and fellow Indian Lee are full members of the North Industries crew highlights the fact that, as the opening promo tells us, the company is a partnership between both business and Native Alaskan interests. No one here has clean hands.

As the thaw accelerates, relations between the camp's inhabitants grow more strained. Ed believes that the need for energy should outweigh all other considerations. Hoffman disagrees, and his opposition is reinforced by his sense that nature's delicate balance has fallen desperately out of kilter. There are repeated shots of the K.I.K. well, an off-white steel box that sits monolith-like in the snow, which seems to emit an eerie hum. Maxwell goes missing after being mysteriously drawn to it, only to return when the rest of the crew have given him up for dead. He's incoherent and unable to provide an explanation for his absence. His pragmatic colleagues dismiss it as claustrophobia, but he's not the only one affected. Hoffman seems like one of the more reasonable members of the team, but when Eliot leafs through his colleagues' note books, he finds not just graphs and figures, but also a rambling stream-of-consciousness-style rant that becomes increasingly

apocalyptic in tone (a similar scene occurs in *Antichrist*, when the extent of 'the woman's' madness is revealed by her journal entries). According to Hoffman, 'The biosphere has turned – become indifferent to us.' He asks, 'Why wouldn't the wilderness fight us? Like any organism would fend off a virus?' Hoffman tries to convince Ed that 'something's out there, and it's trying to drive us out of here'.

Abby initially seems to have some sympathy with Hoffman's position, but as their relationship deteriorates, she increasingly aligns herself with Ed. The sense of crisis accelerates when Maxwell is found frozen to death, naked, in front of the well. His eyes have been pecked out by the ravens that show themselves increasingly often, and remind the audience of the film's connection to Native American folklore. Maxwell's body is also surrounded by reindeer tracks, and the video footage he shot in order to convince the others that 'There's something out there in the snow' is inconclusive. Hoffman tries to convince the team they have all been poisoned by 'Sour Gas' – a toxic by-product of natural gas and oil – 'This ground's been frozen for at least ten thousand years. Who knows what's coming out of it?' After Eliot dies from a nose bleed, Ed finally decides that they should all head to the nearest town for medical examinations. The plan is that they will travel back on the plane due to arrive the next day with the company boss, Foster, on board. Catastrophe strikes when the plane crashes into the camp, killing all of the passengers, severing the electrical supply, and destroying all but one of the snowmobiles. Whilst Ed and Hoffman team up to seek help (Hoffman wants to go to the local Indian village, which is nearer, whilst Ed, typically, insists they head towards the company's ice road construction site), Abby and the others are left behind. The ice road site is devoid of a crew, and the men discover that their snowmobile no longer works. They make a camp so that Ed, who has fallen through the ice, can dry off. In a sentiment that would sound familiar to former Alaska governor and vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, who encouraged chants of 'Drill, baby drill!' at her campaign rallies during the 2008 presidential campaign, as the men rest, Ed argues, 'What's needed out here is a pipeline [...] that's what God wants.'[57]

Back at the camp, things deteriorate even further when Dawn suddenly goes insane and suffocates Motor, an injured member of the crew. Abby accidentally kills the other woman during the ensuing struggle, leaving her as the camp's only remaining survivor. The increasing dominance of the elemental forces of nature is signalled by the intrusion of ravens into the camp interior. Hoffman, whose boots have been stolen by Ed, knows that he will not survive, but contacts Abby via

walkie-talkie, and urges her, to 'tell the whole world' about what has happened. In an ironic echo of Gore, he predicts, 'They're gonna rise up, make a change', but there is a strong sense that they both know that any such effort would be futile. Ultimately, Hoffman is carried off by the phantom reindeer that here epitomise the presence of an actively defensive natural world. Whilst Ed is trampled to death by the spectres, Hoffman is granted a comforting vision of home in his dying moments. The concluding moments depict Abby waking up in a deserted hospital in town. The corridors are eerily quiet, beds are empty, and one of the doctors has hanged himself. Abby slowly walks outside, finding herself ankle deep in water. Sirens and alarms ring in the air, and emergency vehicles and cars lie abandoned in the street. She almost seems to be the only person left. As the wind picks up around her, we hear the sound of hooves, as she turns to stare at something that remains unseen by us, the film ends. A comment made by Maxwell on the night of his death hangs in the air – 'I just hope this isn't happening everywhere else.'

A film which has much in common with *The Last Winter* – most particularly this sense that the natural world will justifiably rise up against humanity – is M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008). It begins in the style of any number of other horror films in which previously normal individuals suddenly begin to act in irrational and violent ways, such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *The Crazies* (1972, 2010), and *Impulse* (1984). We see two women conversing on a park bench, when suddenly a scream pierces the air. All of a sudden, people walking past stop, as though frozen by some unseen force. One of the women on the bench begins to repeat the same phrase over and over (always a precursor to homicidal insanity) and then stabs herself in the neck. As police cars tear down the street in response to what is clearly a citywide emergency, construction workers plummet from the scaffolding of a nearby sky rise. In an early clue as to who the culprit is, there is a shot of nearby trees gently waving in the breeze. The 'happening' has begun.

The film's hero is Eliot Moore (Mark Wahlberg), a Philadelphian high-school science teacher. His role is mainly to serve as a mouthpiece for the film's clunky pseudo science. In his opening lines, he addresses his students, 'Look, I don't know if you guys read this article in *The New York Times* about honeybees vanishing [...].' Where as in 1970s eco-horror, the presence of (killer) bees was the problem, here it is their absence. Although he allows the kids to brainstorm a few possible explanations, Moore concludes his lesson by (inaccurately) declaring that it is 'An act of nature, something we'll never fully understand' – an attitude the film ultimately takes towards the 'happening'. Moore's class is interrupted

by the principal, who announces that something very bad indeed is happening in New York. As the situation escalates, and it becomes obvious that the 'attacks' are also happening in other cities on the East Coast, and that they involve a toxin that overrides the brain's natural self-defence mechanisms, Moore, along with his wife Alma (Zooey Deschanel), their friend Julian (John Leguizamo), and his little girl Jess (Ashlyn Sanchez), decide to travel to the supposed safety of the countryside by train. The train comes to a halt in the middle of nowhere when the driver loses communication with the outside world. Having clearly never seen a horror movie, Moore reassures the child that, 'We're in a small town, Jess. Nothing bad can happen to us here.' He and Alma, who have been having marital problems, are left to look after Jess when Julian leaves try and find his wife (he dies shortly thereafter). The couple decide to leave the town and walk to safety through the countryside.

In a moment of epiphany which occurs when they rest in a plant nursery, Moore realises, 'It's the plants. They can release chemicals.' The decision to seek shelter in rural Pennsylvania may not have been so smart after all. They join up with a group of fellow refugees under the 'command' of a terrified young soldier. As they make their way across a field in two separate groups, an exaggeratedly sinister rustling noise (indicating the presence of the tress around them) indicates the spread of the toxin. Everyone in the other cohort kills themselves. The remaining refugees for some reason look to Moore for an answer, and he reasons that if they can 'stay ahead of the wind', they'll escape exposure to the toxin triggered as they traipse across the field. As they flee, we see a billboard which helps explain why nature has acted to eradicate humanity: the site is the spot where 'Clear Hill Community Development' will soon be building a new housing estate.

The realisation that plants respond to human stimuli leads to a scene in which Walberg speaks to a houseplant as though it were a gun-toting homeowner: 'We're just here to use the bathroom. Then we're going to leave. Is that ok?' The house concerned is a show home promoting the future estate. The relationship between the human destruction of the natural landscape and the 'happening' is further emphasised when two groups of refugees spotted in the distance converge and end up killing themselves. In the film's only moment of wit, the camera pans to a nearby billboard that cheerily reads, 'You deserve this!'

Eventually, Alma, Eliot, and Jess hide out in the isolated home of Mrs Jones, a dangerously eccentric old woman (Betty Buckley), and, after a close call during which the couple prove their love for one another by

meeting outside just as the phenomenon crests, they make it to the end of the 'happening'. However, as is usually the case, the end of the initial revolt of nature doesn't mean that order has indefinitely been restored. In a coda set three months later, we see the couple happily bustling around their apartment. Talking heads on the television blame the 'happening' on a rapidly evolving plant defence mechanism, and conclude, 'This was an act of nature. And we'll never fully understand it', whilst noting, 'We have become a threat to this planet.' The shot cuts to a park in France, and we see two men walk down a pretty, tree-lined street – one of who suddenly stops dead and begins to repeat himself. The horror has returned, but this time, the phenomenon is obviously of global, rather than regional extent. As in *The Last Winter*, we are presented with a scenario in which the natural world violently rejects humanity in a manner that begins in one specific location but which in the closing moments is shown to be a worldwide phenomenon. In both films, the character who realises what is happening before everyone else is a male scientist whose profession has tuned him in to the vicissitudes of the natural world, and in both cases, this knowledge proves useless in the long term, because the damage has been done.

Take Shelter (2011), is an even more recent narrative in which, as in *The Happening*, an apocalyptic revolt of nature is counterpointed with a relationship crisis for a married couple. The film is about a blue-collar everyman named Curtis La Forche (Michael Shannon) who suddenly begins to experience what are either psychotic delusions or prophetic visions of eco-catastrophe. *Take Shelter* is set in 2010, less than two years after the beginning of the fiscal catastrophe that rapidly took a heavy toll on the American middle-classes. It is all the more fitting then that one of the first portents of impending doom glimpsed by Curtis – who, in an echo of *The Last Winter*, works on a drill site owned by a local sand company – is a rain of oil. The rise in oil and gas prices which took place in the summer of 2008 was one of the most notable harbingers of the economic calamity to come. It was also another painful reminder of the fact that the modern American way of life is predicated upon the availability of cheap oil. This awareness underpins the thinking of those who believe that the nation will only achieve true energy independence by opening up protected sites such as the ANWR.

In a scene that evokes Carson and Hitchcock, one of Curtis's most notable visions involves a flock of birds that flies above him in eerily structured patterns. Curtis also has exceptionally vivid dreams that bleed their way into his waking life, including one in which the beloved family dog, 'Red', violently attacks him. Convinced that the dream is

some kind of portent, he gives Red away. Curtis is an exceptionally self-contained man who, nevertheless, has a close relationship with his wife Sam (Jessica Chastain), and their young daughter Hannah (Tova Stewart), who is deaf. Horrified by a news report about a local family killed by a chemical spill, Curtis is seized by the conviction that he needs to 'protect' them. Although he is painfully aware that his 'visions' are most likely signs of the mental illness that struck his now institutionalised mother at the same age (many of the film's most affecting scenes involve his attempt to seek medical help without alerting those around him), Curtis is simply unable to stop himself from taking direct action. He does so by expanding the storm shelter in their backyard. Things reach crisis point for the family when Curtis loses his job as a result of his obsession, which means the cochlear implant Hannah was scheduled to have fitted will not be paid for by the insurance company. He takes out a large loan to help refurbish the shelter without telling Sam.

When Curtis has a seizure, he for the first time reveals to her something of his troubled inner life. It always starts, he says, '[. . .] with a kind of storm. A real powerful storm. Dark, thick rain, like thick motor oil. People go crazy and attack me.' His delusions become public knowledge when he is attacked by the workmate who was disciplined for helping facilitate his unauthorised use of company equipment. Curtis's fragile self-control snaps, and he rages like an Old Testament prophet in full view of friends and neighbours. 'There is a storm coming, like nothing you have ever seen, and not a one of you is prepared for it!' Throughout the film, the implication is that Curtis's fear is most likely a manifestation of inherited mental disorder. However, when a real storm happens, he finally gets the chance to protect his family, by ushering them into the shelter. When the storm subsides, he refuses to let them leave. It seems for a moment as if he may even harm Sam and Hannah in order to further 'protect' them. Forced by Sam to choose between obeying his compulsion and losing his family, Curtis finally unlocks the doors. There's been some damage, but the sun is still shining – indeed, 'It's fine.'

If the film had ended there, it would have served as a vivid portrait of blue-collar masculinity during a time of crippling economic and psychological crisis. What brings *Take Shelter* firmly into the eco-horror category, however, are its closing minutes, which are set in a beach house where the family has gone to relax before Curtis starts a new treatment regimen. As he plays in the sand with Hannah, the wind picks up, and the little girl looks out over the ocean. We see reflected in the screen doors of the house a giant waterspout, and a black storm

cloud. Sam nods at Curtis, as if in anguished confirmation of something, and he nods back. She has clearly seen whatever it is that's out there too. As rain that is thick and black like oil begins to fall, we hear a crack of thunder, and there is one final, ambiguous snatch of dialogue before the end credits. It isn't really clear whether the events we see here are actually happening, or are merely another of Curtis's dreams. As in 'Young Goodman Brown', it doesn't really matter. The apocalyptic conclusion ties in perfectly with the sense of impending doom that pervades the film. The sense of environmental crisis is still profound, as is the suggestion that the patterns of living and consumption innate in twenty-first-century American life are to blame.

Indeed, it is this implication that makes the visions of eco-horror depicted in *The Last Winter*, *Take Shelter*, and even *The Happening* so compelling. Although the sense of urgency and genuine desperation evoked in these films has, as we have seen, much to do with the entirely reasonable sense of environmental crisis that pervades modern American life, it is also the latest manifestation of a paradigm that originated in the earliest encounters between European settlers and the North American landscape. 'On every frontier in the nation's past, man's economic interest had been pitted against wilderness in an either-or relationship. And wilderness, in general, fared poorly.'[58] The uncompromisingly materialist perspective which many settlers and colonists expressed towards the plants, trees, and animals of the 'New World' soon manifested itself in the effort to ship back to the Old World every exploitable natural resource that they could get their hands on. 'Most of the early explorers sought to discover what Richard Hakluyt called "merchandisable commodities" [. . .] These were the natural products which could be shipped to Europe and sold at a profit in order to provide a steady income for colonial settlements.'[59] Although the characterisation of the Indians as nomadic savages fits neatly into the Puritans' pre-existing theological world view, it also allowed the likes of the Reverend Samuel Purchas to justify the seizure of their land. He argued that Christian Englishmen might rightfully seize Indian lands because God had intended his land to be cultivated and not to be left in the condition of 'that unmanned wild Countrey, which they [the savages] range rather than inhabite' [sic].[60] The land was there to be cleared and settled; trees existed so that they could be chopped down; and animals were for taming, eating, or hunting for sport.

Yet, as seen in Chapter 1, if the 'New World' was a place laden with promise and opportunity, for the Puritans, in particular, it was also a territory inhabited by wild beasts and wild men. As such, until it was neatly

mapped and bounded, and made to resemble, as much as was possible, the English landscape, it was a threat. This perception of the wilderness was irrevocably linked to the theological imperatives that had brought Puritans across the Atlantic in the first place.[61] In post-2000 American eco-horror narratives, the natural world, and the creatures that inhabit it, are once more perceived as threatening – so much so, in fact, that they threaten the very future of humanity itself. But the threat this time is largely free of the theological and practical considerations that fuelled early colonial anxieties about the wilderness. Few Americans these days believe that the forests are home to the servants of Satan; and just as few have good reason to fear being eaten by wild animals. As a result, the revolts of nature that we have seen so far in this chapter are extreme but understandable payback for the irrevocable damage that humanity has inflicted upon the natural world. If there is a devil in the modern eco-horror film, it is humanity itself.

The return to wilderness in post-apocalyptic narratives

'Forest preceded man, desert follows him', stated graffiti scrawled in Paris in May 1968.[62] Such is certainly the case in the narratives which will be briefly discussed in this concluding section, which focuses on texts which do not conform to the 'eco-horror' formula just outlined. For a start, they are all *post*- rather than *pre*-apocalyptic stories, and the various catastrophes which bring about the end of the US here include pandemics (the most common trigger for the collapse of civilisation), nuclear warfare, and the sudden disappearance of electricity. There is, as we shall see, only the occasional environmental catastrophe, and even when there is, these texts deal not so much with a 'revolt of nature' as with a 'return to wilderness' (which is not quite always the same thing). What brings these narratives under the purview of this study is the fact that they are all set in ruined American landscapes populated by survivors who tend to find themselves sliding towards chaos and savagery – the ultimate nightmare in the Rural Gothic.

Perhaps the most significant early example of this post-apocalyptic loss of 'civilised' impulses in American popular fiction can be found in the 1889 novel *The Last American* by John Ames Mitchell, which is presented to the reader as the journal of a Persian explorer from the thirtieth-century, who travels to a backwards, desolate America long since devastated by climate change. The basic premise has much in common with that of J.G. Ballard's satirical novel *Hello America* (1981) in which a motley crew of scientists and sailors travel through

the US several generations after an ecological catastrophe caused by attempts to find new energy sources. Ballard makes it clear that their journey is a blackly comic re-enactment of the initial European settlement of North America. The explorers have left behind a grey, austere Europe, departed from Plymouth (where else), and for a moment mistake the glint of the bright yellow sand dunes that have swallowed up lower Manhattan for gold. Although they are meant to remain on the East Coast, they find themselves gradually drifting ever westward, towards the gaudy remains of Las Vegas, and they encounter eccentric 'native' tribes and all manner of iconic and bitterly humorous ruined Americana.

Jack London's 'The Scarlet Plague' (originally published in 1912) is like many of the texts discussed here, in that a deadly virus is responsible for the death of the US. The main character is a contrary old man who is the last survivor of the pre-apocalyptic era, and who becomes a founding member of a new 'tribe' of savage but resilient youngsters. The story begins with the kind of detail that arises again and again in these kinds of narratives, as the old man and his grandson walk on an overgrown track that had once been part of a railway line. Now, it has been 'swallowed up' by the forest, and is no more than 'A wild animal runway' (the same image appears repeatedly during the opening episodes of the television show *Revolution* [ABC 2013 –] which will be discussed later).[63] In 2013, the old man was a youthful professor of English literature named James Howard Smith. Then the 'Scarlet Plague' killed off most of the population – though not before an accompanying epidemic of murder, robbery, and drunkenness. As he puts it, 'Ten thousand years of culture and civilisation passed in the twinkling of an eye.'[64] San Francisco is set alight once more, and the streets are clogged with thousands of 'stalled motor cars' (a recurrent motif of the Rural Gothic). Howard spends several years journeying through a 'deserted land', noting that before long, horses and dogs have begun to degenerate into more hardy, less refined versions of themselves. At the same time, 'a sea of rank vegetation' has smothered California's farmland. The 'reversion' undergone by both animals and the landscape is replicated in the newfound primitivism of the few humans to survive. When Howard (an inveterate snob) finally encounters other people, he is horrified to find that a crude, uneducated former chauffer – 'the most abhorrent man I have ever known' – is now married to a women who was once 'the most perfect flower of generations of the highest culture this planet has ever produced'.[65]

Although he loathes the chauffer, Howard is too cowardly to challenge his authority, and joins his growing 'tribe'. We see in the frame narrative that surrounds his account of the plague and its aftermath that in the years since 2013, the few 'Americans' that remain have embraced a way of life that resembles greatly that practised by the Indians before colonisation. Howard and his grandson are clad in goatskin, and the boy, like his peers, has brown skin, 'prehistoric weapons', and 'lean muscles'. Their language is '[...] an English that had gone through a bath of corrupt usage'.[66] Although Howard has stowed away books and a key to the alphabet in the hope that they will one day spark a new age of enlightenment, the story ends with a line that emphasises how far they have fallen: 'And old man and boy, skin-clad and barbaric, turned and went along the right-of-way into the forest in the wake of the goats.'[67] It's a narrative that has a great deal in common with another tale of a US similarly depopulated by pandemic: George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* (1949).

Once more, the protagonist is a male academic, this time, a graduate student named 'Ish' who is in the woods working on his thesis when he's bitten by a snake (as throughout this study, efforts to enjoy the 'peace and quiet' of the wilderness always fail). He feverishly stumbles back to his cabin, and wakes up to discover that during his illness, 'Supermeasles' has killed off what seems like every other human being in the world. The frequency with which epidemics depopulate the US in these kinds of stories owes much to the fact that the European invasion of the Americas was greatly facilitated by the rapid spread of disease amongst the native population. North America has already seen one civilisation seriously undermined by infectious disease, so it is not all that surprising that pandemics so often manifest themselves in popular literature and culture as a means of facilitating rapid depopulation.

Although shocked and saddened, Ish-the-scientist isn't really all that surprised: 'Biologically, man has for too long a time been rolling an uninterrupted run of sevens.'[68] The plague has taken hold without too much of the chaos that London associates with the collapse of civilisation: 'Mankind seemed to have been removed rather neatly, with a minimum of disturbance.'[69] It is a conclusion which echoes the sentiment expressed in the novel's title, which emphasises the permanence of the natural world. The main action of the story, also as in London, takes place in and around San Francisco. Perhaps because San Francisco is a city established on the Pacific Ocean, like Alaska, it represents a logical end point for American 'civilisation'.

Ish, always a loner, soon adjusts to his solitary new life, and takes a view of events which consciously draws upon the beginnings of 'America'. 'The world of those Indians passed away', he thought. 'And now our world that followed theirs has passed too.' Armed with food, guns, and a canine companion, he embarks on a lengthy road trip, finding solace in the very act of movement. As he travels east, he realises that '[...] in twenty-five or fifty years some kind of moderately stable situation would result and that the land would steadily get to look more and more like what it had been before the white men came'.[70] His journey ultimately brings him to New York, which is slowly but inexorably disintegrating. After a brief stay with a pair of friendly but hapless survivors (they can't even drive – the ultimate sign of urban dependence), Ish heads home, all the time looking for '[...] the small things that showed how the wilderness was moving in to take charge – the tiny sprout of a poplar tree standing up in the shaggy grass of a lawn, a telephone wire dangling on the road [...]'.[71] Resurgent native grasses begin to crowd out the wheat planted by white farmers, hordes of insects invade his home, and domesticated dogs go wild. The reassertion of native plant species means that *Earth Abides* dramatises a reversal of the process of 'ecological imperialism' known as the 'Columbian Exchange', during which plants, micro-organisms, and animals brought over by Europeans quickly overwhelmed many native species.[72] Although he douses troublesome insects with DDT, Ish can't help but ponder, in a precursor to *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, if 'With the removal of man were they now destined to inherit the earth?'[73]

After he returns home, Ish finds love with a fellow survivor named Emma, who, in another indication of the erosion of pre-catastrophe social mores, reveals that she is of mixed-race descent. Together with a number of other family groups, the couple establish a new community in the suburbs of San Francisco, and for as long as the electricity supply lasts (several years), they are able to live a life that roughly approximates existence before the plague. As children are born, and a generation that has never known anything other than this way of life begins to grow up, Ish and the rest of the adults jokingly begin to refer to themselves as 'The Tribe'. His attempts to educate the younger generation in the old manner fail, but Ish's one hope for the continuity of 'civilisation' lies in his precocious son Joey. When the boy dies, he realises that he must let go of his 'hope for the future'.[74]

As time passes, the community becomes ever more superstitious and ritualistic, and certain artefacts from the 'time before' – such as Ish's old rock hammer – take on a totemic significance (in fact, it becomes more

and more like the small towns discussed in Chapter 2). When the tribe's youngest children remark 'Why, the *Americans* made everything!', Ish inspires awe by proclaiming, 'I am an American.'[75] Having relinquished his hopes for the re-establishment of 'civilisation' as he knew it, Ish realises that ritual will help maintain a sense of cohesion for the community. He also teaches the children how to make bows and arrows so that when the last of the ammunition runs out, they will be able to hunt and protect themselves. Ish is, 'The Last American' as he puts it, and in his final years he can only observe as the generational divide widens ever further. His descendants will, he knows, gradually establish their own civilisation, which will inevitably collapse and then be succeeded by another.[76] After all, 'Men come and go, but Earth abides'.[77]

As we have already seen, a more pessimistic perspective on life after catastrophe comes in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The novel is set in a US devastated by an unspecified apocalyptic event – which may or may not have been ecological in nature – that has killed off all forms of plant and animal life. Birds no longer sing; the only food left comes in cans, and cannibal bands hunt other humans. 'The Man' and 'The Boy' shuffle ceaselessly down empty roads and through dead forests, heading to the 'country to the South' in the hope that once they arrive, things will be just a little better. John Hillcoat's 2009 film version also features scene after scene in which the protagonists trudge through a landscape littered with ruined houses and abandoned cars. Lending the visuals an extra air of melancholy verisimilitude is the fact that the settings included real-life sites of environmental and natural disaster such as post–hurricane Katrina New Orleans and the industrial ash-piles of Pittsburgh. As in London and Stewart, father–son relationships are key here: for the protagonist, his boy is for keeping 'the fire' alive.

The Book of Eli (2010) also features interminable scenes of the hero walking through an ecologically devastated and depopulated American landscape, though with added gun play and an extra dose of mawkish religiosity. The event which brought it all crashing down here is 'The Flash', a massive nuclear detonation which tore a hole in the ozone layer (a sudden flash also marks the onset of disaster in McCarthy). The few humans who survived sheltered underground until the worst had passed. Denzel Washington stars as Eli, a man with a mission from God. Once again, the collapse of centralised authority results in cannibalism, looting, and disorder. Unlike as in *The Road*, there are still a few functioning cars left, but they're all in the hands of the villains, which means that Eli spends almost the entire film on foot. At one point he passes by the ruins of a collapsed highway, a melancholy reminder of

the freedom of movement that he and his fellow Americans once took for granted.

Rueben Fleischer's road-trip horror-comedy *Zombieland* (2009), opens with a shot of the American flag and a voice-over from the youthful lead, Columbus (Jesse Eisenberg). 'I wish I could tell you this is still America. But I've come to realise that you can't just have a country without any people. And there are no people here.' This is now 'The United States of Zombieland'. The quartet of misfits who become the main characters are known to each other not by their given names, but by those of their respective hometowns. Who they were before the disaster no longer matters, but in their new names there is still some connection to the US that was. In spite of the fact that they face the constant threat of zombie attack, the survivors here actually have a pretty good time. For instance, Columbus, who was a phobia-ridden shut-in before the outbreak, discovers that his obsessive fixation upon rules is now a lifesaver. Although he soon realises that there is no point in going home to Ohio because his parents are already dead, his companions have Quixotic quests of their own in mind. 'Tallahassee' (Woody Harrelson) wants to eat the last Twinkie on earth before the expiration date runs out, whilst sisters 'Wichita' (Emma Stone) and 'Little Rock' (Abigail Breslin) are bound for an LA amusement park they visited as children. On their way to LA, the group take great pleasure in smashing up a gloriously phoney gift shop on an Indian reservation, and, in the comic highlight of the film, even take a breather in actor Bill Murray's Hollywood mansion. Ultimately, the four realise, 'Without other people, you might as well be a zombie', and create a loving, ad hoc family amidst the ruins.

Carriers (2009) is essentially *Zombieland* without the laughs (or the zombies). It too features a quartet of young people travelling by car across a US strewn with dead bodies, empty houses, and abandoned cars. The plague this time is a highly infections kind of Super-SARS. We also once more have siblings, although this time, brothers – one a reckless slacker with a mean streak, and the other a cautious, Ivy League-bound neurotic, who like Columbus, believes that sticking to a strict set of rules will ensure survival. This group also revels in aspects of the freedom that catastrophe has granted – they can speed down the highway, loot stores, and smash windows at the Country Club – but tellingly, this lack of behavioural restriction is ultimately depicted as unsatisfying and dangerous. In the end, it is the two survivors who have restrained their appetites, played by the rules, and been willing to put them into practice no matter the cost, who make it to their final destination (a beach the

brothers played together on as children). The closing shot plays like a melancholic reprise of the start of *Zombieland*. We see a flashback to the brothers as little boys, trying, but failing to touch a tattered Stars and Stripes waving in the breeze. The implication – that the US is dead and gone, and the survivors will not be far behind – is obvious.

Zombies also feature in the remorselessly grim TV show *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010–), based on Robert Kirkman's long-running comic book series of the same name. The living dead, here known as 'walkers' (like the cannibals in *The Book of Eli*), are condemned by their ceaseless appetites to mindlessly keep moving. So too are the small band of perpetually bickering survivors forever moving from one site of temporary safety to another (a farm, a prison), because to stay put is to die. A visual trope often seen in the show – the sight of roads filled with rusting, corpse-filled cars – it is as grim and suggestive a metaphor for twenty-first-century American life as one can possibly imagine. The vast network of highways built during the apex of the nation's economic, political, and technological power has simply ground to a halt. Certainly, there is a kind of freedom in the terrible new world depicted in these narratives, but, *Zombieland* aside, it is a freedom most fully exploited by the devious, the crazy, and the immoral. The absence of external authority, as in many of the novels and films already discussed in this study, leads to degeneration and chaos.

Such is also the case in another, even more recent TV show, *Revolution*, which is set ten years after a mysterious blackout during which the electricity that powers almost every aspect of modern life is switched off, seemingly permanently. Although those who survived the chaos and disorder that quickly swept the nation have not yet resorted to cannibalism, the US is no more (even the Stars and Stripes have been outlawed), cities lie in vegetation-strewn ruins clearly inspired by the speculations contained in Alan Wiseman's *The World without Us* (2007), and survivors live in feudal villages beset by the fascistic 'Monroe Militia'. The main character is a teenage girl named Charlie whose ability with a crossbow highlights her suitability for taking part in the nomadic rescue mission (her brother has been kidnapped) that drives the plot of the first season. The bow and arrow has, in fact, featured rather prominently in American popular culture in recent years, usually as signifier of a dystopian reversion to the use of primitive weaponry. Katniss Everdeen's skill with a longbow is a key element of *The Hunger Games*; whilst Saba, the heroine of Moira Young's 2011 novel *Blood Red Road* (set in a post-apocalyptic North America that has become largely desert) wields a crossbow. Whereas in some of the texts discussed in previous

chapters, scenes in which the protagonists adopt weaponry associated with the Indians signify a regression to primitive behaviour (as in *Edgar Huntly*), here, crucially, as in *Earth Abides* and 'The Scarlet Plague', the bow is used by young protagonists whose penchant for archery signifies *adaptation* rather than *degeneration*. This may be because they are citizens of a *new* 'New World' in which there is no longer any 'civilisation' (at least in the old sense of the word), left to fight for, even if they themselves often seem to embody nobility. This is particularly the case in the narratives just mentioned, all of which feature capable and adaptable young women who represent the hope for a better future.

In *The Walking Dead*, as in *The Road*, *The Book of Eli*, and *Zombieland*, those who manage to survive the initial disaster are robbed of a home of their own. As such, one of the things that most bothered the first European settlers about the Indians – their nomadic lifestyle – becomes associated with whites of European descent (and these characters are indeed overwhelmingly white). Along with the recurrent archery motif, it furthers the sense that one of the most notable effects of the end of the world is that it turns white Americans of European descent into Indian, or rather, *Indian-like* figures – sometimes almost literally, as in London and Stewart, sometimes obliquely, as in McCarthy, Collins, and Young. In all of the narratives discussed in this concluding section, there are scenes in which the reader, or the viewer, is confronted with images of a depopulated US in which centralised authority has collapsed, and the wilderness has begun to reclaim the urban, suburban, and even rural landscapes. It is a development which often parallels the reversion to primitivism or outright savagery of the few citizens that remain alive. This sense that the physical trappings of 'civilisation' are much more tenuous than we like to think informs non-fiction works such as *The World without Us*, which discusses what would become of a world from which humans were suddenly 'extracted'. 'Wipe us out, and see what's left. How would the rest of nature respond if it were suddenly relieved of the relentless pressures we heap on it and our fellow organisms?'[78] Wiseman explains why 'The time it would take nature to rid itself of what urbanity has wrought may be less than we might suspect', and illustrates his contention with scientifically grounded case studies. New York is the subject of a chapter entitled, 'The City without Us', which charts the surprisingly rapid collapse of the city in a scenario in which humans are no longer present to perform maintenance, kill weeds, and pump water from the storm drains.

Wiseman also discusses the so-called 'Mannahatta Project', 'an attempt to recreate, virtually, Manhattan Island as it was when Henry

Hudson's crew first saw it in 1609: a pre-urban vision that tempts speculation about how a posthuman future might look'.[79] The result is a remarkable interactive map which superimposes the New York-that-is over the New York-that-was, and includes detailed descriptions of the kind of landscape, animals, and flora that would have been there when European exploration first began.[80] We see a panoramic image of the modern city that is haunted by the 'ghost forest'. I would argue that American literature and popular culture in general is similarly haunted by this idea of the 'wilderness-that-was', and that this legacy finds its fullest expression in the narratives which I have identified in this study as examples of the 'Rural Gothic'. The cities and suburbs that define the US in the twenty-first century are very far removed indeed from the forests and small settlements that dotted the coasts of Virginia and New England 400 years ago, and a nation that was, until just over a century ago, still predominately rural, certainly isn't anymore. Yet, a significant strand within American literature, film, and popular culture still returns repeatedly to anxieties and the tensions that, as we have seen, have their beginnings in early European responses to the American landscape.

Whilst my definition of the 'Rural Gothic' is obviously drawn from a specifically American set of historical and cultural contexts, it is, finally, important to note that some of the more general characteristics of the sub-genre can be found in horror and Gothic narratives from other nations, and, in particular, those which, like America, were colonised by white settlers who displaced an existing native population. For instance, as I noted earlier, the only nation to have an eco-horror tradition as significant as that found in the US is Australia. In Australian cinema we also find a 'backwoods horror' tradition that strongly resembles that seen in the US. Greg McLean's *Wolf Creek* (2005), one of the most disturbing films of the past decade, is particularly interesting. It is certainly distinctively Australian – indeed, it initially evokes the eeriness of home-grown films from the 1970s 'New Wave' such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Long Weekend* (1978), both of which inspire unease by suggesting that the natural landscape is possessed of an intelligence that may not see white Australians in a particularly welcoming light. The horror that McLean's film inspires also owes much to the fact that it was inspired by a number of real-life serial killings which took place in the Outback during the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, *Wolf Creek* soon evolves into a story very clearly influenced by classic American backwoods horror tropes, as its likeable young backpackers are captured, tortured, and murdered by a bushman who initially seems like an exemplar of rural friendliness and practicality (the car graveyard surrounding his lair

should have been a dead giveaway). *Storm Warning* (2007), a much more by-the-numbers kind of film, also deploys the familiar 'city folks versus evil rural clan' formula within a specifically Australian setting. Indeed, as far back as 1974, in Peter Weir's *The Cars that Ate Paris*, Australian film-makers were dramatising the conflict between urban outsiders 'just passing through' and rural aggressors in distinctively Australian films that, nevertheless, also have much in common with their American equivalents.

The past decade has also seen the release of a series of intense European backwoods horror films, many of which also owe a major debt to the American variety of the Rural Gothic. They include the genuinely bizarre 2005 Belgian/French film *Calvaire* (*The Ordeal*), *Frontiers* (France, 2007), *The Cottage* (UK, 2008), *Small Town Folk* (UK, 2007), *Severance* (UK, 2006), and the Spanish thriller *King of the Mountain* (*El rey de la montaña*, 2007).

In European-set backwoods horror, national and continental history is often evoked as a background factor in the terrible scenes that are unfolding, just as the American Rural Gothic draws upon that nation's past. *Frontiers* begins in a near-future Paris riven by racial dissent and riots, and dispatches its mixed-race heroine to the supposed safety of the countryside, where she is tortured by an inbred, insane clan of neo-Nazi farmers who want her to participate in a hellish 'breeding programme' that evokes fascist eugenics. In *Severance*, British and American office workers employed by military defence contractors named 'Palisade Defences' embark on a team-building trip to Eastern Europe but accidentally stumble into the Former Yugoslavia (they've taken a wrong turn, of course) and are picked off one-by-one by vengeful paramilitaries. We later discover that the paramilitaries were actually armed by Palisade Defences. The final confrontation of the film takes place in an abandoned death camp that evokes the Holocaust but also resembles those established by Serbian forces operating in Bosnia during the mid-1990s. Although it is obviously an American film, *Hostel*, as mentioned earlier, is set in Slovakia and draws heavily on the perceived anti-Americanism that existed in Europe in the aftermath of the American-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

As observed in Chapter 4, the recent remakes of two of the most famous non-American-set Rural Gothic films of the 1970s – *The Wicker Man* and *Straw Dogs* – move the action to the US. Both remakes serve as cautionary tales which demonstrate that moving the Rural Gothic text away from its original context is usually a bad idea. Neil LaBute's version of *The Wicker Man* attempts to substitute Washington State for the Scottish islands, and new-age matriarchal religion for the cod-Celtic

mysticism of the original, but amongst the film's *many* other problems, when robbed of the conflict between High Church Presbyterianism and opportunistic paganism, which powered the original, the film becomes merely an insubstantial shadow of a classic. The same could be said of the *Straw Dogs* remake. In the original, David Sumner's status as the only American in an insular Cornish town highlighted his naiveté and outsider status: he was very literally on unfamiliar territory (in every sense). Although the remake attempts to echo this conceit by making the new version of David an urban outsider in God-fearing, football-loving, small-town Mississippi, the transplant is once again unsuccessful, because the story lacks the historical and cultural contexts of the original, and botches the job of establishing a satisfactory American substitute.

The Rural Gothic in its very *broadest* outlines is, therefore, by no means necessarily a specifically American phenomenon. As Carol J. Clover has pointed out, 'An enormous proportion of horror takes as its starting point the visit or move of (sub) urban people to the country', and this scenario rests on 'what may be a universal archetype'. It is only to be expected, therefore, that elements of the sub-genre as I have outlined it here would be found elsewhere. As we have seen, however, no other nation has a Rural Gothic tradition as rich, or as influential, as that found in the US.

In his famous preface to *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Charles Brockden Brown urged American writers to look to their own history, and to write about their own wilderness, rather than slavishly imitate the 'gothic castles and chimeras' of the European Gothic tradition.[81] He need not have worried. Long before *Edgar Huntly*'s publication, as we have seen, many of American literature's most interesting and most evocative narratives were doing just that. The many twentieth- and twenty-first-century texts discussed here would indicate that they still do.

The primal struggle between the forces of order and chaos, 'savagery' and 'civilisation', which so fascinated and troubled the Puritans, in particular, surfaces time and time again in American horror and Gothic narratives. Despite the fact that hundreds of years have passed since Europeans first encountered the North American wilderness, first impressions (and subsequent adaptations) had an impact that lingers still. The Rural Gothic endures, and will continue to do so, for one simple reason: the US is not out of the woods yet.