



## LIVING LEXICON FOR THE ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES

# Horror

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As wildfires raged in California during the summer of 2020, the United States National Weather Service (NWS) created a new warning category: “fire tornado.”<sup>1</sup> Heat from the fires created powerful updrafts that drew in colder air, creating intensely hot burning vortexes. Disturbing events like this are becoming increasingly commonplace during the climate crisis. However, the climate crisis includes more than increasing temperatures and fire. It also includes Florida’s abnormally cold temperatures earlier in 2020, which prompted the NWS to warn of hypothermic iguanas tumbling out of trees.<sup>2</sup> What kind of monstrous story includes both fire tornadoes and frozen lizards?

The eruption of these “highly improbable” events forces a reconsideration of realism as a genre for making sense of the world.<sup>3</sup> We can no longer rely on the “ordinary” or “predictable” as markers of reality, but perhaps we can find more adequate narratives within the genre of horror. The steady emergence of the “eco-horror” genre in particular signals an increasingly adequate match between the improbabilities of the climate crisis and the dark imaginings of horror works.<sup>4</sup> In Ann Radcliffe’s original formulation of the horror genre in 1826, horrific fiction engages with “obscurity,” a darkness that hides the world, to incite the imagination.<sup>5</sup> Horror reveals our limits. For contemporary theorists

1. Moleski, “‘Fire Tornado’ Warning?”

2. Chinchar, “National Weather Service Warns of Falling Iguanas.”

3. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*, 24.

4. Morton, *Dark Ecology*; Dillon, “Horror of the Anthropocene”; Lysgaard, Bengtsson, and Laugesen, *Dark Pedagogy*; Booth, “For Some Horror Writers.”

5. Radcliffe, “On the Supernatural in Poetry.”

of horror like Julia Kristeva<sup>6</sup> and Eugene Thacker,<sup>7</sup> horror continues to dance along the limits of the unspeakable and the unthinkable as the experience of unimaginable reality.

Taking horror seriously means being critical toward the capacity of reason to meaningfully conceptualize the climate crisis. Humanistic and social scientific analysis frequently proceeds by developing or applying concepts, but horror reveals the limits not only of particular concepts but of conceptual thinking itself. In the Kantian tradition, concepts are the organizing principles of experience. Beginning with what Kant calls a “manifold,” the chaotic disorganization of sensory inputs, reason organizes or “synthesizes” elements into a structured “experience.” “Concepts” are precisely those spontaneously synthesizing representations that make experience intelligible.<sup>8</sup> Even for poststructuralists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for whom concepts cease to be naturally pre-given, concepts remain synthetic organizing principles: “Each concept will therefore be considered as the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation of its own components.”<sup>9</sup>

Yet lived horror frays the very unity of concepts. Horrific experiences stubbornly refuse to be understood. In his metaphorical study of twentieth-century horror via the real yet mysterious *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, the monstrous “vampire squid from hell,” the philosopher Vilém Flusser notes that, as we dive into the abyss of the ocean (or the metaphorical heart of fascism), “there begins to emerge a suspicion that the starting points for these expeditions are chosen according to ‘superficial’ criteria that do not apply at the depths.”<sup>10</sup> Genuine horror is the feeling that one cannot possibly make sense of a new impression or, as the horror writer Darja Malcolm-Clarke explains, that “there are things for which we do not have categories, and, therefore, that our ways of making meaning are artificial.”<sup>11</sup>

Horror is an anti-concept. It shatters our confidence that concepts can adequately encapsulate crises. Theorists of the Anthropocene like Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing have demonstrated the fragility of humanistic concepts through their attention to the breakdown of settler traditions or the contingency of “worlding.”<sup>12</sup> While theorists debate naming the present era as Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Plantationocene, among other suggestions, finding the proper prefix might be a less important issue than the presumption of a stable epoch implied by the suffix *-cene*. Even Haraway’s suggestion to address the “horrors of the Anthropocene” through the “Chthulucene,” while significantly more open to monstrosity and weirdness through its emphasis on “monsters” and “the

6. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

7. Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night*.

8. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

9. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 20.

10. Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, 119. This passage comes from Rodrigo Maltez Novaes’ translation of the extended Portuguese version of Flusser’s text rather than the earlier translation of a German publication of *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*.

11. Malcolm-Clarke, “Tracking Phantoms,” 339.

12. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*; Tsing, “Worlding the Matsutake Diaspora.”

material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters,” still presumes that a distinct “cene” provides a sufficiently large “carrier bag” that gathers up all the weirdness of the contemporary moment.<sup>13</sup> Given the enormous disparities of responsibility and vulnerability in the climate crisis and its unfolding chaos, are we certain that we live in a singular “cene”? Is there a single concept that could encompass the multitude of worlds fading into and out of existence? Or rather, are we immersed in a maelstrom of forces beyond our reckoning? Approaching horror as an anti-concept challenges us to, in Haraway’s terms, “surrender the capacity to think,” to appreciate instability without rushing for the reassurance of singular framings.<sup>14</sup>

Some worry that if climate activists and scholars give in to horror, the resulting “alarmism” will create paralysis or fatalism.<sup>15</sup> However, film scholars have long noted the capacity of the “excess” of horror to excite audiences, moving them physically and emotionally.<sup>16</sup> Horrific monsters pose genuine threats, but their ability to transgress boundaries makes them a productive source of inspiration for art and science alike.<sup>17</sup> Horror provides cues for a concrete ethics that engages with the immediate demands of the climate crisis while transversally overflowing any conceptualizations. Through these transversal strategies, previously unimaginable forms of agency emerge to offer respite from fire tornadoes and other calamities yet to come. Attending to horror may serve to spur imaginative and practical activity rather than halt it. As the climate crisis strains our imaginations, shattering traditional understandings of the world, horror’s prompting to keep concepts at a weary distance creates space for new forms of thinking and action to emerge from the shadows.

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13. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2–3, 55. While Haraway’s term may seem to evoke the horror stories of H. P. Lovecraft, specifically the monster “Cthulu,” Haraway notes that her term *Chthulucene* is spelled differently in order to avoid the confusion (*Staying with the Trouble*, 174n4). Instead, Haraway’s term draws from the Greek for “earth,” *khthôn* anglicized as “Chthonic.”

14. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 35.

15. Chaturvedi and Doyle, *Climate Terror*.

16. Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.”

17. Park and Daston, “Unnatural Conceptions”; Halberstam, *Skin Shows*; Dixon, *Feminist Geopolitics: Material States*.

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