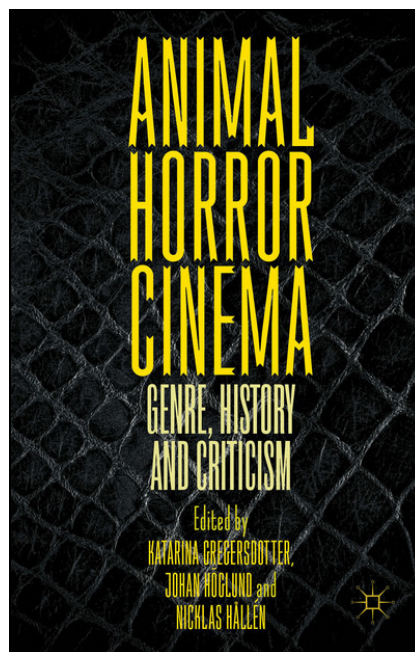


Reviews

Isaac Rooks

“Nature, **Rea**d in Tooth and Claw”

Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hällén, Eds. *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015. 248 pp. \$95.00 hc, \$69.99 e-book.



Modernization and industrialization endeavor to minimize and control encounters with the non-human. Consequently, many regard “wild animals” with romanticized, nostalgic delight. Those aware of humanity’s impact on the environment may pity their planetary co-inhabitants, wishing to provide benevolent stewardship. Conversely, the rarity and strangeness of non-domestic animals may enhance their abject reputation. People react with disgust at discovering vermin in or around their homes. On the rare occasions when animals kill or eat people, the media gawks in fascinated terror. Both theriophilia and theriophobia are distorted perceptions. Non-human creatures deserve protection and respect. This means acknowledging their difference from humans, differences that might make them unpalatable or dangerous. Still, between –philia and –phobia, exaggerated dislike for animals poses a more obvious impediment to forging enlightened, responsible attitudes towards non-humans.

It is therefore unfortunate that few scholars have devoted much attention to what Katarina Gregersdotter, Johan Höglund, and Nicklas Hällén call animal horror cinema, fiction films about extant animals terrorizing humans. Whatever their differences, all these films, from revered classics to Z-Grade oddities, exploit people's perceptions of animals' frightful potential. *Animal Horror Cinema* takes these movies seriously and considers the significance of their genre-specific representation of humanity's relationship to the non-human world. The horror genre feels especially appropriate for engaging the anxiety-inducing conditions of the Anthropocene. The editors draw clear parameters when identifying animal horror as a distinct subgenre. Yes, films with mutant animals count (bring on the giant critters from 1950s B-movies). However, these animals should resemble real creatures and not be fantastic beasts (sorry, werewolves).

The anthology's subtitle (*Genre, History and Criticism*) signals that scholars can approach these texts from various methodological angles. While the anthology does not formally categorize its entries, the introduction suggests thematic connections between chapters. Due to its loose groupings, readers can dip into *Animal Horror Cinema* as they choose. While the individual contributions are enriched when taken in conjunction with other entries, they function independently. The anthology nevertheless works as a coherent whole since many of the chapters address similar concerns. Animal horror grows out of divisions separating the human and non-human, divisions exacerbated by modernity. These movies transform that conceptual binary into a melodramatic opposition. Regardless of whether these films challenge and subvert that binary, they foreground that imaginary border, leaving it open to interrogation.

In addition to showcasing multiple methods for engaging these films, this anthology highlights the subgenre's diverse array of texts. The editors note that the limited attention previously given to animal horror has gravitated towards the big three: *King Kong*, *The Birds*, and *Jaws*. This collection expands consideration beyond those canonical texts. Indeed, Spielberg's classic receives less in-depth critical engagement than its infamous sequel *Jaws: The Revenge*. Part of the anthology's appeal comes from it giving serious consideration to everything from laudable cult classics, to obscure schlock, to high-profile contemporary works. The eclectic menagerie showcased here ensures a tantalizing initial engagement with an understudied body of texts.

Before getting into case studies, the editors provide context with "A History of Animal Horror Cinema." The chapter covers a lot of ground quickly, going from animal horror's pre-cinematic roots to present day. Especially in the chapter's latter half, the

authors drift from a linear chronology in ways that obscure the subgenre's development over time. It also occasionally feels as if they pad their analysis with (amusing) plot synopses. This overview works best when drawing on historian Gregg Mitman's work to detail animal horror's origins in sensationalistic ethnographies, and the migration of tropes and personnel from these "documentaries" to feature narratives.

The section informally grouped as ecocritical begins with Michael Fuchs's "'They are a fact of life out here': The Ecocritical Subtexts of Three Early-Twenty-First Century Aussie Animal Horror Movies." Fuchs's introduction, which positions *Rogue*, *Black Water*, and *The Reef* as distinctly Australian, feels underdeveloped. However, Fuchs provides insights relevant to understanding animal horror regardless of nationality. Fuchs's most intriguing points come from discussion of these films' formal presentations. Their aesthetics blend naturalism with spectacular idealization. Their use of (not always convincing) digital effects further compromises their realism. These narratives, inspired by true events, present humans entering a natural world they do not understand. Simultaneously, Fuchs argues, their conflicted aesthetics reflect our limited ability to understand and represent the non-human world from an anthropocentric perspective, through an anthropocentric medium.

In "Polluting and Perverting Nature: The Vengeful Animals of *Frogs*," Jennifer Schell addresses a horror film exploiting 1970s environmentalist sentiment. Schell notes that previous scholarly engagement with *Frogs* consists of fleeting acknowledgment of its surface-level progressivism. Schell challenges that orthodoxy, charging that its fantastic narrative of the natural world in revolt undercuts its apparent endorsement of environmentalism, implying that nature's self-regulation makes human intervention unnecessary. Schell opens up discussion around a text (and narrative strategy) relegated to the sidelines of larger debates about popular narrative media's ability to address pressing social issues in progressive ways. Her impressive eye for detail and sense of historical context makes for a convincing close reading.

Maja Milatovic's "Consuming Wildlife: Representations of Tourism and Retribution in Australian Animal Horror" complements Fuchs's piece and engages its national context more fully. Milatovic argues that Australia's settler-colonial identity lends resonance to the cinematic spectacle of Anglos being punished for treating a hostile environment carelessly. Milatovic details how many Australian animal horror films deal with similar themes, so her reason for focusing on *Long Weekend* and *Rogue* specifically feels unclear. She appears more interested in *Long Weekend*, resulting in an unbalanced analysis. However, like Schell, Milatovic's appreciation of context and eye for detail makes for

strong close readings. Milatovic argues that both films, despite their Eurocentric imperialist gaze and imagination, highlight white complicity in the exploitation and destruction of the land and wildlife.

John Edgar Browning closes the ecocritical section with “Oil and the (Geo)Politics of Blood: Towards an Eco-Gothic Critique of *Nightwing*.” *Nightwing* focuses on reservation residents fending off developers and plague-carrying vampire bats, and Browning argues that it respectfully grounds its allegorical solution to environmental crises in Native American spirituality. However, Browning’s answer to criticisms of *Nightwing*’s representation of Native Americans is not wholly convincing. Indeed, his descriptions make it sound problematically stereotypical. Browning’s contribution does offer strong analytical work, particularly in its discussion of how *Nightwing* adapts the Gothic to the American frontier.

Craig Ian Mann provides a well written and argued contribution with “America, Down the Toilet: Urban Legends, American Society and *Alligator*.” Mann details the work of critics who already recognize *Alligator* as a work of class-conscious satire. Mann enhances earlier analyses by approaching *Alligator* as an adaptation of the urban legend about alligators in the sewer, a story offering its own social commentary. Mann notes that the alligator folktale’s popularity spikes during tumultuous periods in the US, suggesting an affinity between the source material and the satirical intent of John Sayles’ screenplay. Mann is perhaps too intent on discerning authorial intent, but that is a slight weakness in a strong piece offering an explicit and convincing theory for why an odd piece of animal horror lore possesses great potency.

As in Browning’s chapter, tweaked Gothic tropes feature in Susanne Schwertfeger’s “Re-Education as Exorcism: How a White Dog Challenges the Strategies for Dealing with Racism.” Skeptics of the animal horror film genre might question its suitability for addressing serious topics. Indeed, Schwertfeger details how many feared that it was inappropriate for *White Dog*, with its genre tropes and Anglo director, to engage the sensitive topic of racism in America. Schwertfeger argues that director Samuel Fuller’s cinema-savvy approach results in a reflexive narrative up to the task. *White Dog* offers an “inverted” Gothic narrative that capitalizes on the aesthetic’s strengths, while avoiding the racial prejudices tainting traditional Gothic conventions.

While other chapters center on specific texts, Niklas Salmose builds “We Spiders: Spider as the Monster of Modernity in the Big Bug and Nature-on-a-Rampage Film Genres” around an entire animal order. Informed by philosophy and literature, Salmose argues

that spiders, industrious creatures that ensnare others in their complex webs, are the ideal monstrous representatives of modernity. Tackling multiple films from the 1950s and 1970s, Salmose sometimes gets sidetracked by thinner texts. There is only so much to say about *Mesa of Lost Women*. However, when Salmose deals with richer material his analysis provides great insights. His conclusion intriguingly implies that postmodern spider films have stripped the monstrous spider of its deeper meaning, and it leaves one wanting more detail. Perhaps, given the chapter's scope and ambition, this criticism is unfair. However, it is testament to Salmose's skill that he leaves the reader wanting more.

Myha T. Do's "Concubine and Chameleons: Deconstruction and Consumption in Pu Songling's and Gordan Chan's *Painted Skin*" examines a tale of supernatural animal spirits that take human form. In doing so, it compromises the editors' criteria for animal horror and thus feels out of place. In the introduction, the editors justify its inclusion by citing their desire to feature a non-Western film, claiming that Asian cinema deals with animal horror differently. Without dismissing the importance of cultural specificity in regards to perceptions of animals, this overlooks numerous films from South Korea, India, and Thailand directly in line with the anthology's focus. While dealing with a different kind of text, Do's feminist Bakhtinian analysis makes an argument in line with a general theme of animal horror identified by the editors: these animals are horrific because they cross the border separating humans and animals, and their doing so reveals the porous nature of that division.

Dawn Keetley's "*Frozen*, *The Grey*, and the Possibilities of Posthumanist Horror" is one of the anthology's highlights. Keetley considers the posthumanist potential of horror, a genre that traditionally rests on humanist notions of self. Posthumanist horror recognizes the non-human otherness inside the human and grapples with the existential crisis of reevaluating notions of self. Keetley offers two films centered on wolf attacks to illustrate different strands of horror: *Frozen* (not the Disney film) represents a humanist approach, while *The Grey* represents a posthumanist one. Keetley's precise focus and clear thesis makes for a manageable and highly satisfying chapter that considers animal horror's capacity to reify and challenge humanist conventions.

Editors Gregersdotter and Hällén return as the authors of "Anthropomorphism and the Representation of Animals as Antagonists." Like Salmose, they cite several movies in order to explore a larger topic; in this case, they address how animal horror anthropomorphizes its antagonists to create worthy opponents. Their use of disparate examples occasionally causes problems. They do not address how granting human-like

intelligence to some species requires a greater suspension of disbelief than others, nor the significance of whether a film suggests an equivalency between humans and animals seriously or for comic effect. Still, their broad focus allows them to elucidate interesting tropes in the subgenre, including the frequent use of point-of-view shots and close-ups on animals' eyes.

Johan Höglund finishes the anthology with "Simian Horror in Rise and Dawn of the *Planet of the Apes*." Höglund engages Agamben's work on the processes by which society grants or denies the right to be considered human and treated accordingly. After explaining the relevant theory succinctly and clearly, Höglund details how the *Apes* films enact and interrogate those processes. As the anthology demonstrates, the subgenre thrives on divisions separating humans and animals. Höglund's entry allows this collection to end with a case study suggesting that those divisions, and the violence they generate, are the true source of horror and require dismantling.

In their introduction, the editors suggest various critical communities who might benefit from this collection. They argue for animal horror's relevance to feminist and postcolonial scholarship, given links between anthropocentric logics and those that oppress women and non-Western, non-white communities. While these groups might find much of interest in the subgenre itself, these concerns remain fairly marginal within this collection. Only a few chapters explicitly foreground a feminist or postcolonial focus. Unsurprisingly, those most likely to find the larger collection worthwhile are scholars interested in ecocriticism and the intersection of animal and media studies. Though a bit of a hodgepodge, *Animal Horror Cinema* points to rich possibilities for future exploration. The horror genre offers a unique method for engaging ideas relevant to animal studies and ecocriticism. Bringing genre texts into these larger conversations promises to facilitate the well-rounded consideration of important topics.