

AN ECOGOTHIC READING OF SEA MONSTERS: *DEEP BLUE SEA* (1999) AND *THE MEG* (2018)

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ABSTRACT

Even though our planet is mostly covered by water, seas and oceans are still considered inhospitable environments where the force of nature can be appreciated in all its splendor. It is perhaps this unconquerable character that makes humans perceive marine ecosystems with a mixture of awe and horror, feelings which may be increased if we think of the unknown creatures that populate the depths of the ocean. This article will look at two films which portray both the wonders and horrors of nautical landscapes, *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and *The Meg* (2018), and it will do so by using an ecogothic approach. The analysis will focus on why these movies could be catalogued as ecogothic by observing on their settings, their characters and their plot development. It will also analyze how humans relate to the marine ecosystem and to the creatures that inhabit it, particularly with different forms of sharks, including their ancestor, the megalodon, emphasizing how these relationships tend to be portrayed as a fight for control. Furthermore, the representation of these nonhuman animals' agency will also be considered with the aim of raising awareness about the dangers of humans' attempts to control and manipulate nature.

KEYWORDS: Ecogothic, Sharks, *Deep Blue Sea*, *The Meg*.

UNA LECTURA ECOGÓTICA SOBRE MONSTRUOS MARINOS:
DEEP BLUE SEA (1999) AND *THE MEG* (2018)

RESUMEN

Aunque nuestro planeta está cubierto principalmente por agua, los mares y los océanos se consideran aún entornos inhóspitos en los que la fuerza de la naturaleza puede apreciarse en todo su esplendor. Es quizá este carácter incontestable el que hace que los humanos perciban los ecosistemas marinos con una mezcla de admiración y horror, unos sentimientos que pueden verse acrecentados si pensamos en las criaturas desconocidas que habitan en las profundidades del océano. Este artículo explora dos películas que retratan tanto las maravillas como los horrores de los paisajes náuticos, *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) y *Megalodón* (2018), y lo hace desde un enfoque ecogótico. El análisis se centrará en por qué estas películas pueden catalogarse como ecogóticas observando ambientaciones, personajes y el desarrollo del argumento. También se analizará cómo los humanos se relacionan con los entornos marinos y con sus habitantes, especialmente con los tiburones, y su antepasado el megalodón, poniendo énfasis en cómo estas relaciones tienden a ser una lucha por el control. Además, la agencia de estos animales no-humanos también se tendrá en cuenta de cara a promover cierta concienciación sobre los peligros que suponen los intentos del ser humano por controlar y manipular la naturaleza.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ecogótico, tiburones, *Deep Blue Sea*, *Megalodón*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

With an approximate seventy percent of the surface of the Earth being covered by water, we can probably argue that the oceans and seas still conceal many secrets not yet discovered by humans. Besides, whenever we think about the ocean we do so with a mixture of awe and fear, or as Sidney I. Dobrin comments, “we cast the ocean as the wildest nature, the untamable, the unpredictable” while also “as a place of salvation” (2021, 1). These mixed feelings exist because, despite our historical coexistence and our attempts to conquer the sea –or at least to use it for our benefit, there is still much we do not know about it, and everything unknown provokes concern. If we embark on analyzing the mixture of admiration and horror that the sea provokes in us it is necessary to explore the concept of ecophobia. Developed by Simon Estok in several works, including *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, ecophobia is defined as “a uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature ... It is a phobia that has largely derived from modernity’s irrational fear of nature and hence has created an antagonism between humans and their environments” (2018, 1). When enumerating the different aspects of nature humans may feel ecophobic about, Estok includes different types of elements, from geographical to animal ones, including bodily processes and products and seascapes, and he does so quoting phrases from the Bible so as to indicate that ecophobia has always existed (2018, 1). Regarding modern societies, as Michelle Poland asserts, ecophobia lies at the core of capitalism because for this system to exist, it is necessary to perceive the non-human world in terms of control and oppression, a situation that has led to the concept of the Anthropocene, “a new geological epoch caused by the impact of human activities on the planet” (2024, 114). Although criticized by some scholars when first postulated, Estok’s definition of ecophobia entails the acknowledgement of this fear and disdain towards the natural world and adopts a more environmentalist approach towards the natural world. In other words, by becoming aware of our ecophobia we can overcome it and embrace nature with respect rather than with contempt.

As we have seen, Estok’s definition of ecophobia is concerned with the fear of nature and as he explores in several of his works, it is a uniquely human feeling. Considering this concept, we can highlight another term that has been recently coined and which also contributes to examine the fear and contempt that the natural world may produce in us, and that is the ecogothic: “In its broadest sense, the ecogothic is a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic, and it typically presupposes some kind of ecocritical lens” (Estok 2018, 1). As Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Silvis argue, by “[a]dopting a specifically *gothic* ecocritical lens” an ecogothic approach allows for an analysis of “the fear, anxiety and dread” that humans feel towards nature, that is, “it orients us ... to the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of our interactions with nonhuman ecologies” (2018, 1). Therefore, as Keetley and Silvis comment, considering the definitions of ecophobia and the ecogothic we can see how both intersect “not only because ecophobic representations of nature will be infused, like the gothic, with fear and dread but also because ecophobia is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world” (2018, 3).



Therefore, and as Hillard points out, it is surprising that ecocriticism has generally ignored those representations of nature “inflected with fear, horror, loathing, or disgust”, an idea that he relates to Estok’s concept of ecophobia in his article “Gothic Nature Revisited: Reflections on the Gothic of Ecocriticism” (Hillard 2009, 688). Actually, it remarkable that Gothic ecocriticism is such a recent approach since, as Hillard argues, “ecocriticism itself has always been a Gothic story” (2019, 22) because of its “awareness of crisis and danger” (2019, 23).¹

Michelle Poland also comments on the potential of the ecogothic by focusing on how it can help us “examine our troubling relationships with the nonhuman world, particularly our fears *of* and *for* our earthly home” (Dang 2022, 117 emphasis in original). Besides, there is another reason why ecocriticism and the Gothic interplay in an interesting way and that is related to what lies at the core of the latter, which is a mixture of “fear *and* desire” (Dang 2022, 116 emphasis in original). Regarding this, Elizabeth Parker argues that when dealing with the ecogothic, “binaries ... may twist at any moment” since “something is alluring and inviting, but it’s also terrifying at the same time” (Dang 2022, 116). Therefore, the ecogothic both conveys the fear towards nature and the fear for a natural world that human actions have endangered, while also finding fascination in the frightening creatures that the deep sea may harbor, and thus exploring fictional works through an ecogothic lens may be the way to learn about what aspects of the nonhuman world scare us and how we can learn to overcome that feeling in order to embrace a more hopeful vision of our ecological future.

As commented before, Estok explores what seems to be a total fascination with that side of nature that frightens us, the unexpected natural catastrophe against which humans have little to do but trying to survive. To this respect, Tom Hillard refers to Estok’s work and how he analyzes the way we humans are captivated by images from natural disasters around the world—he mentions hurricane Katrina or global warming—and the way “our media daily writes nature as a hostile opponent who is responding angrily to our incursions and actions, an opponent to be feared and, with any luck, controlled” (2009, 687). Hillard emphasises real news to point out the raising number of examples in the popular culture that portray nature as a cruel entity (Hillard 2009, 687). He mentions *Twister* (1996) and *Volcano* (1997), among others, and includes more recent examples such as *Open Water* (2003). I would also add many of the low budget productions of the company The Asylum which include *San Andreas Quake* (2015), or *Apocalypse of Ice* (2020), or the popular *Sharknado* series (2013-2018). In fact, among the many products of the company, there seems to be a special interest on sea monsters with examples such as *2-Headed Shark Attack* (2012) and its sequels, *Bermuda Tentacles* (2014), or *Megalodon* (2018)

¹ Despite its relatively short trajectory, it is important to highlight the vast number of recent publications focused on the ecogothic; see, for instance, Hillard (2009) and Keetley & and Sivils (2018), or the journal *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic* (2019). This evolution of the ecogothic, including the volume this article belongs to, proves that the interest in the field is nothing but growing.



and its two sequels. The abundance of movies of this type proves the interest we have in what Hillard calls “the hostile and deadly aspects of the otherwise nurturing image of ‘Mother Nature’” (2009, 688).

These movies show that we look at the darkest side of nature with both fear and fascination, and this is a mixture of feelings that has populated much of the cultural products labeled as Gothic. As Hillard comments, using a Gothic lens enables us to understand the way in which movies of this type represent “fears and anxieties about the natural world” (2009, 689) and perhaps, in some cases, analyze the environmental message they conceal. Considering everything exposed above, the aim of this article is to explore the Gothic elements present in the movies *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and *The Meg* (2018). The analysis will focus on why these movies could be catalogued as ecogothic by focusing on their settings, their characters and their plot development. It will also analyze how humans relate to the marine ecosystem and to the creatures that inhabit it, particularly with different forms of sharks, including their ancestor, the megalodon, emphasizing how these relationships tend to be portrayed as a fight for control. Furthermore, the representation of these non-human animals’ agency will also be considered with the aim of raising awareness about the dangers of humans’ attempts to control and manipulate nature and the nonhuman creatures we share this planet with. Both films show how humans’ attempts to master nature and to manipulate it without considering the consequences of their actions result in catastrophic situations that then they have to resolve. Ironically, at the end once balance is reinstated the human protagonists emerge as saviors of the very same problems they have provoked, although some of the characters die in the process as a way of atonement.

2. INTO THE DEEP BLUE VASTNESS

If we think about our fears regarding the future of our civilization and of the nonhuman world, one of the first elements that comes to our minds is water. Being the substance that covers most of the surface of the Earth –and a resource without which life could not exist– we may be surprised by how relatively little critical attention marine ecosystems have received. In this sense Hester Blum, when talking about oceanic studies, defends “that the sea should become central to critical conversations about global movements, relations, and histories” (2013, 151). She proposes that the sea should not only been conceived in terms of a thematic focus or “organizing metaphor with which to widen a landlocked critical prospect” but that it should be understood as a “new epistemology ... for thinking about surfaces, depths, and the extra-terrestrial dimensions of planetary resources and relations” (Blum 2013, 151). As the sea has always been part of human history, it is then not surprising to assert that “The ocean has lapped at the margins of the critical courses that literary, historical, and cultural studies have shaped in recent decades” (Blum 2013, 151). However, Blum posits that the oceans should be analyzed as a realm of “cultural exchange ... on its own terms” going beyond “the seas’ function as a passage for travel” (2013, 153).



The ocean as such seems to have been excluded from critical analysis in general, and this situation has been no different if we talk about Gothic studies. In this sense, Natalie Deam comments that “Gothic studies have rarely considered the marine world and almost entirely overlooked the Gothic potential of marine biology” (2020, 260). Although we may wonder how the ocean can be related to the Gothic, she highlights that Gothic elements such as “the threats of sublime and desolate horizons, haunted ruins, confinement, suffocation, and the supernatural all have long traditions within the literatures of the sea” (Deam 2020, 257). In a similar way, Emily Alder highlights that the “intersections between the Gothic and the sea are so visible that the main question is why they are so rarely examined” (2017, 1). In order to support her view she points out several elements typical of aquatic narratives that can be clearly related to traditional Gothic imagery:

Ships can be isolating, claustrophobic structures; ocean depths conceal monsters, secrets, bodies; the sea and its weather provide storms, sunsets, and remote locales for sublime and terrifying experiences; deep water is a useful metaphor for the interiority of the self; the ocean’s precarious surface interfaces between life and death, chaos and order, self and other. (Alder 2017, 1)

We can see several characteristics that prove that even though the Gothic has not been usually related to cultural productions focused on the sea, maritime settings present features that we can extrapolate to Gothic works.

In her defense of the marine Gothic Deam continues explaining that since the ocean is considered “a massive receptacle of the earth’s primitive history”, literature and other cultural products started to portray what kind of monsters may be hidden “in the depths, allowing a Gothic evolutionary imagination to flourish” (Deam 2020, 260). Actually, when we think of marine ecosystems it is precisely the depths which usually become the most frightening area as they are mostly unknown (and unconquered) territory. Although human expeditions into the ocean tend to avoid the complex infrastructure surrounding deep immersions –we may remember the catastrophe of the OceanGate’s submersible Titan when trying to reach the Titanic wreck—any experience related to the ocean makes us aware of our insignificance when compared to the immensity of the sea. Moreover, this insignificance is emphasized when we consider how humans need to adapt to life at sea, “an unstable medium that has depth as well as breadth” (Packham and Punter 2017, 17).

Nevertheless, if the immensity of the ocean is not enough to make us humans feel small and horrified, the numerous scientific and fictional accounts of frightening sea creatures lurking in the depths throw us overboard: “The ocean environment offers tremendous potential for monstrosity” (Costantini 2017, 99). Because of the wild forces of nature operating at sea and the dangerous creatures –whether fictional or real– that inhabit the deep blue sea, marine ecosystems awaken “the vulnerability of the human condition in an environment controlled by primeval forces” (Costantini 2017, 101). The deep ocean may harbor unknown monsters that escape human understanding and thus “challenge notions of anthropocentricity” (Alder 2017, 12). One of these sea creatures that have populated literature an



audiovisual media proving human readers and spectators their insignificance is the shark. Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975), based on Peter Benchley's eponymous novel, terrorized generations with its realistic portrayal of a great white shark that decides to attack swimmers in Amity Island's waters. In the following decades numerous productions offered similar accounts of different types of sharks attacking humans without any apparent reason to do so. One of the things that make sharks so frightening is precisely their ability to make us feel inferior, to make us "a possible prey species for animals occupying higher trophic levels" (Giblett ctd. in Fuchs 2020, 108). In the following pages the analysis of two productions of this type, *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and *The Meg* (2018) will be performed through the lens of the ecogothic.

3. DEEP BLUE SEA AND THE MEG

Released in 1999 under the direction of Renny Harlin, *Deep Blue Sea* portrays a group of people –including scientists, a shark expert, and a cook– at an underwater base. Their research, for which they need funding from a pharmaceutical company, focuses on how a protein found in sharks' brains can help mitigate the effects of Alzheimer's disease. Although everything seems to be under control and the experiments seem to go as planned, it soon transpires that some of the scientists have ignored ethical limits and have been forcing their research on some shark specimens with devastating consequences. The consequences of human actions on the marine ecosystem are also the central theme in Jon Turteltaub's *The Meg* (2018), based on the 1997 novel *Meg: A Novel of Deep Terror*, by Steve Alten.² In this film, because a human expedition has trespassed a thermocline, two specimens of megalodon –although for most of the movie the protagonists think there is only one– start attacking humans at open sea so the plot revolves around hunting down these creatures. Separated by almost twenty years, both films explore how sharks – or sharks' ancestors– are affected by human actions and how humans have to kill these creatures so that balance is restored to how it was before the events in the films. Despite their differences, both audiovisual products contain similar elements that can be analyzed from an ecogothic point of view, such as the constant feeling that something awful is going to happen, the settings where the action takes place and the monstrous creatures themselves.

² Although the movie title only featured *The Meg*, the novel title *Meg: A Novel of Deep Terror* includes the adjective deep both as a modifier of terror but also with a reference to the terrifying depths of the ocean. Just as in *Deep Blue Sea*, the titles invoke the fear of the depth, of unknown and dangerous territory.



3.1. GOTHIC SETTINGS

When asked about her idea of the Gothic, Michelle Poland, one of the editors of the journal *Gothic Nature*, comments that to her the term evokes “castles, convents, tunnels, hallways, various wildernesses, mountains, the sublime” (Dang 2022, 116). In fact, much Gothic literature and audiovisual productions usually feature dark and semi-abandoned places with a certain sense of claustrophobia, as well as sublime landscapes unconquered by men and full of secrets where things are not what they seem at first sight. Thinking about claustrophobia at sea we can easily imagine isolated platforms in the middle of the sea, but also the suffocating space of underwater facilities that utterly depend on electricity –which in horror films stops to work at some point. Thus, Mariacconcetta Costantini explores the discomfort that usually implies a life at sea, highlighting that, “Despite continuous advancements in nautical technology, the sea literature of the last three centuries abounds in representations of the potential powerlessness and anguish of an embarked life” (2017, 102). Life at sea can be perceived as a contradiction as the sea usually entails freedom whilst being oppressive at the same time as it is impossible to survive at open sea without some kind of vessel. Similarly, ships enable people to travel across the ocean, but as a ship “is both a means of transport and a prison” (Costantini 2017, 102) as one cannot abandon it easily because of being in the middle of the ocean. Alder also emphasizes the contradictory nature of ships as she describes them as “are liminal spaces, between life and death, inside and outside” (2017, 4). Actually, in *Deep Blue Sea* when the character played by Samuel L. Jackson first arrives by helicopter in the marine facility –which used to be a base used by the US navy– his first thought is that its appearance is that of a prison: “Looks like Alcatraz floats” (Harlin 1999, at 00:06:49-51).

Most of the movie *Deep Blue Sea* takes place in this modernized underwater base that looks like a prison. It includes laboratories and scientific devices that have probably cost a large amount of money as they are highly specialized. Despite the high tech machines, we get an anxious feeling of claustrophobia and powerlessness, as despite all the money spent on the facilities, the base ends up becoming a mortal trap –something spectators may anticipate from similar films of the action/terror genre such as *Aliens* (1986). This setting also makes spectators think of the vulnerability of human beings, as when scientists are working in a laboratory and one of the genetically modified sharks destroys the glass of a huge window that separates the facility from the depths of the sea. The sense of isolation is emphasized by the fact that there is a storm approaching so that helicopters cannot evacuate the base, which means the protagonists are completely trapped once the attack of the sharks provoke the base to be flooded. The inundation of the facility implies that sharks can move around it and not just at open sea, so the protagonists –and the spectators by identifying with them– become the prey of a superior creature.

This sense of helplessness can also be perceived in *The Meg* as we can see some high tech submarines become mortal traps when attacked by the megalodons. In the opening scene of the film, a rescue team lead by the protagonist, Jonas, arrives in a nuclear submarine that has been attacked by some unknown creature. As spectators



we see nothing, and we have only the character's word—which is taken as imagination by the other characters— that a huge sea monster has attacked the submarine. The scene may result suffocating as time is running out and the submarine is inevitably being destroyed, forcing Jonas to make a difficult decision: to sacrifice part of his team so that not everyone dies as a completely successful rescue is unfeasible. Later on in the movie, when the first scientific submarine goes through the thermocline and encounters a whole new ecosystem, this feeling of powerlessness appears once again. The audience observes the dark sea floor and then something hits the small submarine, and it is not until some minutes later than we can actually get a glimpse of the megalodon, but the vehicle is already damaged and its occupants need to be rescued in a matter of minutes.

Therefore, although the marine facilities in both movies are presented as modern and with state of the art technology, at some points they become deadly traps. This is more evident in *Deep Blue Sea*, as the base gets flooded and once electricity stops working everything is dark with a hostile weather outside. Although these settings have nothing to do with castles, abbeys and other buildings portrayed in traditional Gothic works, the atmosphere of fear and foreboding in the spectator is quite similar. We can see how the characters feel trapped in metallic and plastic facilities that become sort of prisons as they are in the middle of the sea, surrounded by a mass of water that harbors unknown dangers. These man-made bases, submarines and ships become thus asphyxiating spaces that turn against the humans that built them, as it happens with abbeys and castles in Gothic literature. The fear that these places provoke is further enhanced by the presence of shark-like creatures that make humans vulnerable and disposable, a feeling that is already present as even if these facilities are destroyed, their wrecks will remain at the floor of the sea while human bodies will be eaten and disappear in time. We can also interpret the destruction of these human underwater infrastructures as an attempt of the sea to recover its control by erasing any human trace, proving that humanity is temporary while oceans remain a constant presence.

3.2. SEA MONSTERS

Apart from the constant tension in the movies, partially motivated by the settings the action takes place in, the presence of the sea monsters is probably the most prominent Gothic element. In the case of *Deep Blue Sea* sharks are portrayed as evil creatures from the beginning, when we see a shark attacking a yacht. Afterwards, when the investor arrives at the base he comments: "Beneath its glassy surface... a world of gliding monsters. It's pretty scary stuff, huh?" (Harlin 1999, 00:10:48-50). This way of referring to the sharks, together with the opening scene, already sets the tone of the movie regarding the sea creatures as they are considered monsters rather than non-human animals. This monstrosity comes from the inability to classify them as sharks anymore. We progressively see how these sharks do not behave as regular specimens and then we discover, after the confession of one of the scientists, that they have been altering their forebrains' to five times their size so that they produce



more of the protein the scientists will need to cure Alzheimer's disease. Although the experiment is successful, the sharks start attacking the base and in the end all the results of the research disappear, as if by some kind of poetic justice nature restores the original balance. The most interesting aspect of the sharks portrayed in the movie is that, as a consequence of the growth of the sharks' brains, they become more intelligent and their behavioral patterns start to change, as when they attack regular sharks, start to hunt in groups or when they show they can swim backwards.

Apart from the two main scientists³ that ignored ethical considerations when altering the sharks' forebrains –echoing the mad scientist of Gothic fiction, who thinks that can alter the natural order of things and manipulate nature without consequences– the rest of the characters in the movie condemn the experiments as they think that even if the purpose was a good one, the scientists should not have defied the natural law. For example, the shark specialist criticizes the scientists' actions by telling them: “You've taken God's oldest killing machine and given it will and desire. You've knocked us to the bottom of the goddamn food chain” (Harlin 1999, at 00:48:00-02). This statement is interesting because his words do not take into consideration the wellbeing of the sharks or how they may cope with their new brain functions, but he focuses on how the experiment may have lethal consequences for humans as they stop being the main predator to become the sharks' prey. Besides, as an expert in sharks he should be aware that sharks are not killing machines but lifeforms that have evolved to become predators in their habitat –a habitat that humans invade for its resources. This is quite an anthropocentric response, and sharks are just seen as objects without thinking about how the alterations may affect them or how this new type of shark can have catastrophic consequences for their habitat as their behavioral patterns have been altered. Another character, the main investor, offers a more critical view on the scientists' behavior when he seems to imply humans are evil by nature: “Nature can be lethal. But it doesn't hold a candle to man,” as showing some ethical awareness towards the experiments performed in the base.

As an indirect effect of the monstrosity of these modified sharks, these creatures are also attributed some kind of agency, probably because of the development in their intelligence levels. This is fore example illustrated when they are able to recognize weapons, as one of the characters points out, and when they somehow disconnect the cameras so that the workers in the base cannot see what they are doing. Therefore, because of the enlargement of the sharks' forebrains the modified specimens are not only capable of producing more protein, but their ability to reason allows them to make decisions. This way these sharks become the apex predator in the film as they are not only (presumably) as intelligent as humans, but they can also survive underwater, while humans cannot on their own. For example, in one of the most striking scenes in the movie we see how the sharks manage to grab the stretcher

³ It would be interesting to explore the figure of the mad scientist in *Deep Blue Sea*, as we can find many examples of mad scientist in Gothic works, where once the scientist plays God –as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*– decides to abandon its creation and/or not take any responsibility for their actions.



where the hurt scientist lies and take it underwater to throw it against the glass wall of one of the laboratories, provoking its shattering and thus the facility to become flooded. Although we may think sharks are taking their revenge on the staff at the base—as one of the characters says referring to the main scientist: “She screwed with the sharks and now the sharks are screwing with us” (Harlin 1999, at 00:48:40-44)—there is a moment when one of the characters observes that everything sharks are doing is with the aim of becoming free and swim into the ocean: “That’s the answer to the riddle, because that is what an 8000lb mako thinks about, about freedom, about the deep blue sea” (Harlin 1999, at 01:26:12-16). Nevertheless, these sharks’ behavior, as when they provoke humans by using the harmed scientist as a tool to flood the base, proves their intelligence and their ability to reason. This enhanced intelligence seems to include a degree of wickedness thus making spectators wonder if these sharks show human traits such as gratuitous violence and a desire to cause harm as a revenge. On the other hand we may allege that the only reason why these sharks attack humans is because these humans represent the only impediment to their complete freedom. If the scientists and other members of the base staff die, then the sharks will be free to move around, no more constrained to the base and no more subjected to experiments.

By implying that these sharks are intelligent and able to reason they are being attributed some kind of agency, as usually reason is only associated with humans. This is an interesting movement as it places the modified sharks in a kind of limbo as they are no longer non-human animals as such since their decisions are not made by instinct but rather by what seems some sort of “rational—and thus exclusively human—deliberation” (Alaimo 2010, 143). In fact, Stacy Alaimo points out that precisely the lack of agency that has traditionally been ascribed to the more-than-human world has justified the exploitation of natural resources because non-human animals and the environment have been seen as passive entities at the mercy of human interests (2010, 143). In the film *Deep Blue Sea* we see how the sharks use the intelligence they have been granted to plan their escape from the marine facility, attacking any human they encounter. Besides, by creating intelligent sharks, the spectators’ anguish increases as “it combines the uncertainty inherent in all maritime adventures with the fears raised by predators emerging from unfathomable depths” (Costantini 2017, 103). These sharks are not only lurking in the dark depths of the ocean—even though they are limited by the base perimeter— but they are aware of their situation and we can see in the film how their main purpose is to escape the base and become free. As spectators we may wonder if these sharks would end up taking revenge on humans by using their intelligence to hunt them down, or if they would just live free in the middle of the ocean, as ordinary sharks do.

In *The Meg* we encounter different marine species, but the one which plays a protagonist role is the megalodon. As commented above, the first time the megalodon appears is just as an unknown entity attacking a submarine, we do not realize which type of specimen it is until some scenes later. When the creature actually appears in its habitat attacking one of the mini submarines, Suyin, the female protagonist and expert on marine biology exclaims her surprise at finding that megalodons still exist, even if it is only in this new submarine world. This first real encounter with



the megalodon proves that Jonas was not wrong when at the beginning of the film he defended that there was a giant creature attacking the submarine his team was rescuing:

[Suyin:] My God! It's a shark. It's like 20, 25 meters.

[Jonas:] It's a megalodon.

[Suyin:] Impossible.

[Jonas:] I'm so glad I'm not crazy. (Turteltaub 2018, 00:32:53-33:08)⁴

Although megalodons are believed to be extinct by trespassing the thermocline the human protagonists have temporarily altered the temperature of the ecosystem so two megalodons have found a way to travel from their submarine realm to our ocean, with the danger that entails. From an ecogothic perspective we could say that by trespassing the thermocline humans have opened the door to another world, a world of unknown monsters that destabilize our reality. The megalodon can be truly described as a sea monster as its size is huge and that makes it a horrifying sight: "Between 70 and 90 feet. 21 to 27 meters. The megalodon was the largest shark that ever existed. It feared nothing. It had no predators" (Turteltaub 2018, 00:40:20-29). Although it is impossible to ascertain if the megalodon "feared nothing," as fear is part of the survival instinct, the fact that it had no predators implies that humans should be afraid because—as it happens in *Deep Blue Sea*—the megalodon occupies the top position in the food chain.

The monstrosity of the megalodon is reinforced throughout the movie as when Suyin's daughter says: "There's a monster and it's watching us" (Turteltaub 2018, 00:45:20-23), after she sees something lurking in the depths of the sea. There is another scene that portrays the megalodon as a cruel monster and that is when it kills a female whale and its offspring. At the beginning of the movie, we can see a whale and its calf approaching one of the base's glass walls and the marine biologist even jokes about her special relationship with whales: "I might have lured them with some whale songs" (Turteltaub 2018, 00:07:10-13). She even refers to the whales by human names and spectators can perceive their bond, as sometimes it seems they can communicate with her. However, the whales meet a tragic ending, being eaten by the megalodon, thus making spectators feel special hatred towards it. In a way, this is a very simple contrast because the megalodon killing the whales is probably just a question of survival as the whales mean food, but the fact that we are first exposed to them in such a moving way reinforces the meg's cruelty and voracious appetite and

⁴ At the beginning of the film the submariner Jonas is described as having suffered pressure-induced psychosis by some characters because of his affirmation that there had been a sea monster attacking the nuclear submarine his team was asked to rescue. This portrayal as a mad man may remind spectators of that of police officer in the film *Jaws* (1975), when no one believes him when he says there is a shark attacking Amity Island. Another similar example, also in the context of horror-science fiction movies would be the protagonist in *Aliens* (1986) when she warns the Weyland-Yutani Corporation about the existence of the aliens in a planet where they have established a colony.



thus its portrayal as a monster, instead of simply acknowledging its predatory nature. This is interesting as the only reason why the megalodon is there, and thus ends up eating the whales, is precisely humans' interference by trespassing the thermocline. Besides, by establishing this contrast between whales and the megalodon we perceive how some non-human animals are better considered than others. In the case of this film we see how the whales are portrayed as closer to humans –perhaps because both species are mammals– and there even seems to exist some form of communication between them. However, the megalodon –which is not a mammal but a fish– is presented as detached from the human world, as part of another place –or time– from where only monsters come. This situates the megalodon as a monster coming from another world, following the Gothic tradition, but at the same time proves that there is still inequality regarding how other-than-human species are perceived by humans.

Even though most of the film consists of humans hunting the megalodon to prevent it from approaching populated shores, there is an interesting event when they are looking for the sea creature and the protagonists find the rests of what used to be a ship together with human limbs and dead sharks without their fins. They assume the megalodon attacked the shark poachers as if it actually knew what it was doing, as a kind of revenge against humans killing sharks: “Looks like the meg evened the score” (Turteltaub 2018, 00:48:09-12). Including this scene is interesting because it does not only make most spectators feel momentary sympathy towards the megalodon, but also because it implies the meg is able to reason to some point, attributing some sort of agency to it.

If we analyze the behavior of the human characters regarding the newfound marine ecosystem and the megalodon we can find two different sides. Although most of them show respect towards nature and a certain non-anthropocentric understanding of the natural world, there is another group of characters driven by capitalism and thinking of nature as a resource to be exploited. For example, after trespassing the thermocline we can see a new marine habitat, a new and unknown world at a glance while hidden from us which awakens in the characters the mixture of fear and desire of Gothic fiction: “This ecosystem is completely cut off from the rest of the ocean by the freezing cold thermocline. We should find all sorts of species completely unknown to science” (Turteltaub 2018, 00:12:28-37). While we can see in these words what seems to be a sincere scientific interest, another character, the wealthy man who has paid for the facilities, interprets the discovery in a different way: “Sounds like a good investment” (Turteltaub 2018, 00:12:38-40). Thus, instead of thinking of the fascination towards an unknown world in Gothic terms, he seems to think only of the profits he may make after the discovery of a new underwater world, of its exploitation in economic terms. This capitalistic approach is later on reinforced when, after discovering the megalodon, he wants to take advantage and start taking action, whereas the scientists think that it is better to proceed cautiously. The protagonist, Jonas, who based on his experience seems to know that the sea cannot be controlled, seems especially angered at the idea and says: “You ever think that Mother Nature might know what she’s doing? The thermocline might just be there for a reason?” (Turteltaub 2018, 00:42:15-23). These words are interesting from an ecocritical perspective as they presuppose that nature has some kind of



agency that allows for ecosystems to function correctly. Besides, it seems to imply that the thermocline exists to avoid the contamination between two different worlds that coexist in the same place, and so the film consists mainly of re-establishing the original balance, which is in the end achieved by killing the megalodon.

Even though we can see how the sharks from *Deep Blue Sea* and the megalodon from *The Meg* are portrayed as sea monsters, both movies also imply a warning message regarding the dangers of manipulating nature in any of its forms. In *The Meg*, for example, the character that has paid for the base and who insists on hunting the megalodon for possible profits celebrates they survive an attack from the creature saying: “That was a serious man vs. nature moment. I’m just glad things went our way” (Turteltaub 2018, 01:04:27-32). This is interesting as we can see how he is clearly detaching himself for nature, as if we humans were not part of the environment. However, another character answers him back referring to one of the members of the team that had previously died: “It didn’t go our way. Not for Toshi. And not for science. We did what people always do. Discover and then destroy” (Turteltaub 2018, 1:04:34-44). I think this statement –which echoes one from *Deep Blue Sea* reflecting on human’s inability to not alter the balance of nature– illustrates the general tone of the movie, the idea that human actions may have unforeseeable consequences for the ecosystem and for humans themselves. Both in this movie and in *Deep Blue Sea* some characters highlight the dangers of playing with nature, emphasizing how humans seem to be corrupted by nature. Interestingly enough, in both movies the characters that show disrespect for the environment and for non-human animals end up being killed by the sea monsters, but the sea monsters also die at the end because their survival would have devastating consequences, and the balance needs to be reinstated. As in many Gothic works, at the end the natural order is re-established once the monster is killed or the mystery is solved, but in this case the endings are significant as the monsters –genetically modified sharks and megalodons– appear because of human actions. Just as with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, the creators do not take responsibility for their creations.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, *Deep Blue Sea* and *The Meg* offer an interesting depiction of the marine ecosystem approached from a mixture of science fiction and horror. They are not the only examples of narratives that explore the anxiety derived from being lost at sea and/or attacked by sea creatures, but what they highlight is that these sea monsters are human creations, whether through genetic modification or as a consequence of manipulating the ecosystem. Together with the sea monsters the movies show other features typically associated with the Gothic genre, as suffocating and darks spaces –in this case submarine vehicles and bases instead of castles or ancient monasteries– and a constant tension and sense of foreboding. However, these works go beyond this Gothic characterization and incorporate what we may interpret as an ecocritical warning regarding the dangers of manipulating and trying to control the natural world. This ecological message serves to prove that human



exceptionalism is an invention of anthropocentric thought as in these movies we see how humans struggle to survive against creatures that are either huge and strong—as the megalodon— or dangerous and intelligent—as the sharks in *Deep Blue Sea*. This is for example illustrated in one of the final scenes in *Deep Blue Sea* when the female scientist that has modified the sharks wants to kill the last specimen and says: “She may be the smartest animal in the world... but she’s still just an animal.” This way of thinking is highly speciesist as the marine biologist should be able to notice the similarities between human and non-human animals, but she still sees the sharks as detached from her, as opposed to the whales in *The Meg*, or to other sea creatures such as dolphins, and this attitude can be related to Estok’s ecophobia, which sanctions the objectification of non-human animals through our hyper-separation from the natural world. Following Estok’s arguments regarding ecophobia, we can see that it may be produced by nature’s agency, since it is discomforting to exploit something that we may refer in agentic terms, and this is perhaps the reason why some non-human animals are better considered than others, because their agency suits us and does not make us feel uncomfortable. However, when we talk about hyper-intelligent sharks and megalodons, we see our status challenged and we can justify their extinction as they are threatening predators with humans as their prey.

Both films seem to imply that nature cannot be tamed or mastered, and that human actions “continually fray into unforeseen consequences” (Keetley and Sivils 2018, 3) that affect both humans and the non-human world. Besides, the sea monsters may be interpreted as a warning against certain attitudes that are portrayed in the movies at different moments, and which characterize most of the western world: “capitalistic greed, mass consumerism, imperialism, and anthropogenic environmental degradation” (Costantini 2017, 102). The sea monsters’ existence is precisely provoked by human’s attempts to do a greater good—either finding a cure for Alzheimer’s disease or discovering the world beyond the thermocline— but then humans end up threatened by their own “creations.” If we read this message in ecocritical terms, these more-than-sharks embody environmental degradation and prove that that our lives are interconnected with the lives of those that surround us. The oceans illustrate our general feelings towards the environment, a mixture of fear and awe towards the unknown, because the deep blue sea still remains unexplored territory.



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