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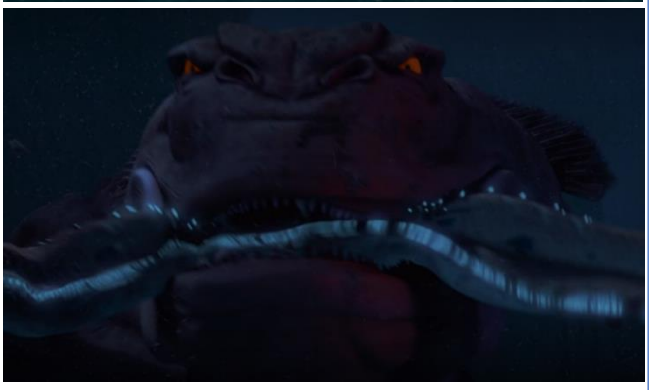

SACRED BEASTS OF THE ECOPOCALYPSE

Man, Monster and Ecological Colonialism in Contemporary Cinema

Esther van Amstel

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12-8-2022

15465 words

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Introduction

Fear of the dark, deep bodies of water and the space under the bed; who has never been afraid of what they cannot see? Stories of monsters in the closet, cryptids hiding in the forest, and aliens on the dark side of the moon certainly do not distract the imagination from the idea that something is out there, just beyond our perception. Storytellers of yore already conceived almighty entities to explain what human minds could not understand and creatures to populate the unknown space beyond civilization. To this day, cinema ventures to capture the unseeable and to visualize the inconceivable.

In stories and mythologies, monsters are the undefinable other. Though nature itself contains many creatures humans would describe as 'unnatural', the concept of monsters pushes these boundaries beyond the normative scope or even the viable planet. Pondering the existence and representation of the monster in *All Thoughts Fly*, directors Sasha Litvintseva and Beny Wagner return to the linguistic root 'monere', which means 'to remind' or 'to warn'.[1] By discussing the monster's history with taxonomy in the 18th century they explore the monstrous as something that is beyond classification, inherently not fitting inside the human-made system. It exists on the edge of articulation and definition, and reflectively can unveil something about the system it evades. Their imaginings are, like most monstrous research, based on scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seminal collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996). His own contribution to this collection, *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)* , influences how the monstrous is defined and discussed in media studies to this day.[2] He perceives the monster to be an immortal cultural body that patrols the borders of the possible and inspires fear and desire. It reflects the human anxieties of its current context and brings to question the distinction between categories through its typical nature as a composite. To discuss the monster, Cohen argues, it should be understood as an embodiment of difference and through movement between the other and the self. He blames the cultural fascination with monsters on the 'ambient fear' that permeates day-to-day life, which creates a desire to name what cannot be apprehended and disempower what is threatening.

Understanding of the anxieties caused by the other and what is beyond human perception is also explored by philosopher Mark Fisher in *The Weird and the Eerie*. He speculates the modes of the weird and the eerie stem from a fascination for the outside, which

[1] Sasha Litvintseva and Beny Wagner, *All Thoughts Fly: Monster, Taxonomy, Film (*Amsterdam: Sonic Acts Press, 2021), 16, 39 & 49.
[2] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), viii.

he defines as "…that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience."[3] In his reasoning he builds on Sigmund Freud'sFreud's considerations of the *unheimlich.* According to Freud's musings, the *unheimlich* is an affect or mode that describes a preoccupation with the strange beyond standard perception or cognition, representing the strange within the familiar space. It is often equated with the weird and eerie, but Fisher departs from this concept by arguing the weird and eerie allow us to see the inside through the outside; that is, the weird brings something that does not belong to a familiar space, but cannot be brought together with it. Understood as a form of montage, the weird combines things that do not belong together. The fascination with the strange, though not always distressing or scary, creates a tension and feeling of apprehension. Questions of agency are fundamental for the resulting eeriness: who is acting here? Is there an agent present? How does their agency align with or differ from human understanding? More often than not, these questions are to be raised when dealing with the non-human, often even the immaterial and inanimate. Fisher discusses two main sources for eeriness: the failure of absence and the failure of presence. In the case of failure of absence, something is where there should not be anything. The agent is undisclosed, its image and intentions unknown to those present. In the failure of presence, there is nothing where there should be something. The absent agent leaves a lack of even indifference. Whether what was previously there has disappeared or those present are convinced something ought to be there, the missing presence raises the question of how this can be.

Litvintseva and Wagner explore the representation of the unknown through the medium of film.[4] They identify a strong relationship between the monstrous and cinema. Chiefly because the cinematic monster is birthed through the technology itself, reflecting the anxieties of developing media technologies. The ability to alter time and space gave life to Godzilla and King Kong, and these possibilities are only increasing with the development of CGI. Secondly, the monster's inherent creation through assemblage resonates with film's creation through montage. Ultimately, in addition to being conjured through media, the monster itself is a medium that is able to materialize the liminal space between transmitter and recipient.

Fantasy and science fiction cinema has a long-standing tradition of exploring unknown (outer)
spaces, confronting its human viewers with unexpected presences.[5] The appearances,

[3] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and Eerie* (United Kingdom: Repeater Books, 2016), 8-10, 61 & 117-119.
[4] Litvintseva and Wagner, *All Thoughts Fly*, 37-39.
[5] Gwyneth Jones, "Aliens in the Fourth Dimension," in: *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 360-365.

comprehensibility and relation of aliens to humans vary, but they are always an exploration of different realities and circumstances. More often than not, they are treated by the humans as something that is 'other', something from the outside. But what if, instead of outer space, aliens appear to us from our very own oceans? Though it covers over 70 percent of the earth, 80 to 90 percent of the deep sea remains undiscovered.[6] Not only is the ocean an alien and inhospitable environment to humans, the rules of physics are not the same as those we experience on a daily basis. [7] It is no wonder that the sea is the source of many imaginary creatures, beautiful and monstrous alike.

In *Oceanic Feeling* scholar Erika Balsom discusses at length how the ocean forges connections between people and the world.[8] She extends Freud's move away from the theological interpretation of 'oceanic feeling', which he defines as "…the sensation of an unbreakable bond between oneself and the outside world."[9] Through this metaphor, she discusses how the feeling of limitlessness and interconnectedness it describes reflects on what it means for a human to belong to the world at large in a time of ecological emergency. This feeling, like the sea itself, is ungraspable. Nautical monsters, then, serve as a physical entity that represents the sea as a physical body, as well as the ecosystems that live in it. Alternately, Balsom emphasizes the role of the sea as a vessel for colonialism, both being used for and suffering strongly from the impact of colonial capitalist expansion.

The ecological effects of colonialism become evident in what scholars call the Anthropocene.[10] The Anthropocene is understood as the geological era in which humans are the main influence on the environment of the earth. The term has been rightfully criticised for its universalism, as it suggests that every human is equally responsible for the deterioration of the planet, when in actuality it is primarily the capitalist human. Additionally, it reaffirms the anthropocentric sense of self-importance that humanity truly is the dominant force on earth. However, as ecology scholar Amitav Ghosh states in his book *The Great Derangement*: "Global

[6] Depending on the way the percentage is calculated, the numbers vary. Sources vary between 80 and 95 percent.; https://oceanliteracy.unesco.org/ocean-exploration/ ; https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220111-why-nasa-is-exploring-the-deepest-oceans-on-earth
[7] Jon Hackett and Seán Harrington, *Beasts of the Deep* (Bloomington: John Libbey Publishing, 2018), 111.
[8] Erika Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling: Cinema and the Sea* (New Zealand: Govett-Brewster, 2018), 9.
[9] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling*, 9; The notion of oceanic feeling was originally proposed by Romain Rollard, who viewed the sense of interconnectedness devoid of autonomy or mastery as the basis of religious sentiment.
[10] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 207-209; Jamie Uy and William Brown, "Cancelling the Apocalypse: Pacific Rim as Chthulucinema," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 18, no. 4 (2020): 387. https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2020.1801311.

warming is ultimately the product of the totality of human actions over time."[11] The effect of capitalism and its spread through colonization is that every human just by existing under this system is a contributor to the impact the Anthropocene encompasses. Postcolonial scholar Ania Loomba establishes in *Colonialism/postcolonialism* that colonialist notions of exploration and development ultimately lead to extraction and exploitation, with the conquest and control of other people's land as the end goal.[12] With capitalist objectives, globalization and resource management become imperialist ventures with ecological consequences. As the scale of ecological devastation is impossible to grasp, it would be most appropriate to instead shift the focus from human culpability to those (human, non-human, and environment) that are most vulnerable to the impact of colonial and capitalist destruction.[13] Colonial legacy, ecological devastation and the sea itself find common ground in their inarticulability scale. Cinema aims to represent their effects through affect and lived experience. It only needs a comprehendible medium.

Studying the monster in film

After Cohen, the study of monsters in popular media has become a more prevalent method for considering cultural anxieties, containment of the other and the psychoanalytical expression of fear.[14] The study of sea monsters has specifically been explored in Jon Hackett & Seán Harrington's collection *Beasts of the Deep,* in which they address the sea in relation to monstrosity.[15] The contributions to this collection take the mythical resonance of the sea and its creatures into consideration in relation to the contexts from which they emerge. This thesis seeks to extend this research to the realm of science fiction and the intersection between colonialism and ecology. This intersection has been explored by Rob Latham in regardto science fiction and is reinforced by Ghosh's insights on the capitalist impact on ecological decline, as well as Loomba's discussion of the capitalist effects of colonialism. Balsom reiterates the connection of the sea to colonialism and media scholar Erin Suzuki states the capitalist undertow of cinematic representations of the oceanic ecosystem. The following discussion will derive from Cohen's theses, considering the musings of Litvintseva and Wagner

[11] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 113.
[12] Ania Loomba, Colonialism/postcolonialism (Routledge, 2015).
[13] May Adadol Ingawanij, "Cinematic animism and contemporary Southeast Asian artists' moving-image practices," *Screen* (London) 62, no. 4 (n.d.): 549. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjab057.
[14] Hackett and Harrington, *Beasts of the Deep*, 1; Harrington and Hackett name a list of monographs and edited collections amongst which Kearney (2003), Asma (2009), Wright (2013) and Hunt, Lockyer & Williamson (2013). Additionally, as the sources for this thesis show, the monster is a common scope for the study of a film or director.
[15] Hackett and Harrington, *Beasts of the Deep*, 1-2.

and using Fisher's concepts of the weird and eerie to analyse monstrosity and explore its uses in cinema.

Like the sea provides perspective on the space between worlds, cinema can provide perspective on the space between the human and non-human. The way these spaces are bridged through their interactions can, from an anthropocentric point of view, provide insights into human relations to the world at large. Though the monster can serve as a symptom or warning for many things, in this thesis their warnings will be considered in relation to ecology and colonialism, both of which are inherently tied to the sea. I argue that using the sea as a unique angle on the exploration of humanity's connection to the non-human provides a containable yet intangible structure for the monster to exist. Its ability to contain multitudes both physically and in meaning allows for a connecting common ground between entities and theories. Thus, using the sea as a connecting force between human and monster, as well as between ecology and colonialism, insights can be generated on the anthropocentric perception of the world and how, perhaps, humanity should reconsider its position. Ultimately, the aim of this thesis is to consider just how the interactions between nautical monsters and humans in contemporary fantasy films reflect the impact of colonialism on humanity's relation to the earth and its ecologies.

Cinematic case studies

To generate these insights, a selection of films that feature nautical monsters in a cultural setting that is greatly influenced by colonialism will be analysed. Analysis of the films will not focus as much on the plot and characters, but rather on the creation of the world and the place the unknown and monstrous have in it. This includes the way the characters interact with them as evidence of their in-world function and the experience of the viewer when confronted with these in our world. This follows Cohen's observation that the monstrous embodies difference, thus is best analysed through the gap and movement between the human and the non-human.[16] Rather than considering them a representation of specific anxieties of the time, the way humans treat the monstrous reveals humanity and human relationality. The aim of this analysis is not to reach a definitive statement about all monsters in all films in general, but rather to generate insights from this very specific subset of films to hopefully apply these to similar cases and popular culture as a whole.

The first (series of) film(s) to be analysed are the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, in particular the second film, *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (2006), and the third,

[16] Cohen, *Monster Theory*, viii.

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End (2007).[17] The world of *Pirates* represents a perspective of the monstrous as part of the world we know, as the fantasy elements are only an addition to a basis of real locations and semi-real events. Monsters like the kraken, mythological figures like the Flying Dutchman and the actual physical end of the world are intertwined with an adventure narrative loosely set in the time of the Golden Age of Piracy. To the audience, the monstrous is an invasion of the world they know.

In *Star Wars* there are always monsters lurking behind every corner. The films represent a perspective of a world where the monstrous is common. Yet to the viewer, these monsters are unknown and unexpected. These monsters do not represent a grand unknown in its universe as they would in our world, rather, they are a constant part of its ecosystem. Analysis will be focused on the original six films created and (mostly) directed by George Lucas under 20th Century Fox and Lucasfilm before its acquisition by the Disney Corporation, of which specifically *Star Wars IV: A New Hope* (1997, dir. George Lucas) and *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) will be assessed.[18] Furthermore, the grand scale of the growing multiverse of *Star Wars* media will provide different angles of consideration for the monsters it features.

The monsters in *Pacific Rim* (2013, dir. Guillermo del Toro) are very clearly and forwardly discussed and visualised as aliens.[19] *Pacific Rim* builds upon a long legacy of mecha and kaiju films and media, most notably harkening back to the original *Godzilla* (1954, dir. Ishirō Honda).[20] Rather than outer space, the creatures invade from the depths of the sea. Though they are the ones out of place, they make humanity seem like outsiders. Like *Godzilla*, del Toro utilizes the outside force to comment on human greed and disrespect for the earth. The kaiju are an unknown force that actively threaten mankind and must therefore be destroyed. As a sci-fi invasion narrative, the monsters exhibit a conquering mindset that indicates a recognizable intelligence and agency. The film showcases a key concern of the eerie: a realisation that we are indeed connected to something beyond our knowledge.

[17] *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, directed by Gore Verbinski (Walt Disney Pictures, 2003), 2 hr., 23 min., Disney+; *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest*, directed by Gore Verbinski (Walt Disney Pictures, 2006), 2 hr., 30 min., Disney+; *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, directed by Gore Verbinski (Walt Disney Pictures, 2007), 2 hr., 49 min., Disney+; specific films will from hereon be referred to by their subtitle (eg *At World's End*), *Pirates of the Caribbean* will refer to the series as a whole.
[18] *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas (20th Century Fox, 1999), 2 hr., 13 min., Disney+; *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, directed by George Lucas (20th Century Fox, 1977), 2 hr., 1 min., Disney+.
[19] *Pacific Rim*, directed by Guillermo del Toro (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2013), 2 hr., 12 min., HBO Max.
[20] *Godzilla*, directed by Ishirō Honda (Toho Co., 1954), 1 hr., 36 min.

The films discussed in this thesis represent a specific perspective: they are all made in the United States and feature a predominately white cast and crew and white male main characters. They are also all produced by big film studios on a large budget. To a certain extent they reflect American popular culture and its anxieties in their respective times. Their lasting relevance in popular culture shows they are still relevant for current anxieties and can provide insights into the lasting effects of colonialism and anthropocentric impact on ecological decline. Analysed from a white European point of view in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, this discussion of alternate worlds, alternate histories and alternate futures can provide insights into humanity as a whole's connection to our world and the entities we share it with.

Here be monsters: *Pirates of the Caribbean* and the multifaceted ocean

When described by Elisabeth Swann, one of the main characters in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films, in the age of piracy "…waves are not measured in feet, but as increments of fear, and those [bold captains] who pass the test become legend."[21] This disposition emphasizes the recurring association of the sea with freedom and the invocation of the ocean as a space without rules and regulation. The almost sentimental view of the seas as a boundless space of possibility indicates a very human desire for a greater purpose and deeper meaning, possibly to be found in the unknowable depths of the ocean. Erika Balsom observes two sides of the ocean: the ocean as sublime, showcasing the humility of humans, and the ocean as a means of global circulation and a vessel for colonialism. This human-ocean relation is explored in many popular films, amongst which the *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

To date, five *Pirates* films have been released, of which the first three are considered the 'original trilogy' by fans.[22] *The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), *Dead Man's Chest* (2006) and *At World's End* (2007), all directed by Gore Verbinski, share the same cast of major characters and cover a somewhat cohesive narrative. Produced by Disney and loosely based on Disneyland's *Pirates of the Caribbean* darkride, the *Pirates* films are responsible for popularizing pirate media in the early 2000s. Popular media often romanticises history, of which the depiction can be problematic, particularly of environments such as colonialism.[23] Evidently, *Pirates of the Caribbean* idealizes piracy and by extension the colonialist culture it takes place in, exchanging the darker implications of a history of exploitation for daring tales of swashbuckling adventurers. This aestheticization is perhaps reinforced by the inclusion of the monsters and myths that assign the films to the fantasy genre, properly placing the story and setting outside of its historical context and implying that more things are fantasy than intended. The film intentionally blurs the line between history and fantasy by including well-known historical figures, locations and actors such as the East India Trading Company, alongside clearly fictional colourful characters like Captain Jack Sparrow and monstrous interpretations of pirates like Davy Jones (The Flying Dutchman).

[21] *At World's End,* 00:14:10 – 00:14:18.
[22] As Gamerant writer Victoria Rose Caister eloquently put it: "The worst thing that ever happened to the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise was extending it past the original trilogy."; Victoria Rose Caister, "The Original 'Pirates Of The Caribbean' Trilogy Is Better Than You Remember," GameRant, https://gamerant.com/original-pirates-of-the-caribbean-trilogy-better/.
[23] Dijkstra, "Treasure, Swordfights, and Plantations: Romantic Pirates and the Postcolonial in Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag," (Dissertation, 2020), 4.

What we know to be myth and what is actual history is treated and presented the same. It is up to the audience to consider what is fact and what is fiction. These romanticised narratives impact the viewer's perception of the colonialist past depicted in the films. Their view is influenced by and aligned with the Western 19th century colonial values that are not only depicted in the film, but underlying it as well. Considering the colonialist facts depicted in the film alongside a variety of fantastical outliers, an examination can reveal various perspectives on the relation to the ocean. Pirates, imperialists and merchants all relate different meaning to the sea and by extension treat its creatures differently. The two sides of the ocean perceived by Balsom can be considered through *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s characters' interactions with oceanic monsters, primarily the kraken.

(Re)considering the ocean

As Balsom extensively argues, the incomprehensibility as well as the connectedness of the sea provides a frame for considering humanity's connection to the world.[24] She reconsiders Freud's concept of 'oceanic feeling' which he defines as a feeling of belonging in the world; "a quasi-sublime state in which the integrity of the self is lost, limitless, unboundedness and interconnectedness."[25] This can be read as a being part of something greater in our insignificance. Balsom redefines this concept as "…what it means to belong to the whole of a world in our time of ecological, humanitarian and political emergency."[26] Here, Oceanic feeling is understood as a connection and belonging to the sea and the external world as whole. The nuance here is the centric of the self and the human in its connectedness to the world, rather than its absorption into it. The human subject is a universal object, connected to, part of, and responsible for its environment.

In opposition to Roland Barthes, who famously stated that the ocean's blank space paralyses the production of meaning, Balsom argues that the sea bears message and signification.[27] In fact, the ocean is a container for many disparate meanings humans project on it, mirroring our complicated relation to the earth as a whole. On one hand, the ocean's scale, its depth and the human inability to inhabit it for a prolonged amount of time means that it is often perceived as something that cannot be impacted by human influence. The otherness and inconceivability of ocean ecologies create an idea of the sea as a space that is too big and

[24] Balsom, *An Oceanic* Feeling, 10.
[25] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling,* 9.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 11; In *Mythologies* (1957) Barthes argues that the traceless void of the ocean paralyses the production of meaning. In contrast to the land on which there are many messages for semioticians to perceive, he notes, the sea in its muteness bears no message. In its great emptiness are no markers of culture.

powerful to be harmed by humanity, even when we dump whatever waste we produce into its depths.[28] This is in accordance with human inability to grasp the effect of the climate crisis at large, let alone the role we play in it. On the other hand, the ocean is something to be used for humanity's advancement. The sea is a global space of circulation and trade perceived as a support for human endeavours.[29] It is a substance to be dominated, both a vessel for and the object of colonialism.

The ocean's problems of scale and representability (and its ability to mean anything and nothing at the same time) is confronted by cinema. Balsom states that the sea is an archive, captured in cinema; the vast expanse of water has born witness to horror and trauma alongside wonder and romance.[30] It is the duty of cinema to capture this witness in traces of the world, outside of human control: it is inherently a reflection of the world as traces of it are always visible. Grounding it in the natural world is what provides transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction. Yet often the sea is either created digitally or shot in a controlled environment. Like the impossibility of capturing the fantastical monster in the natural world, the sea is too unpredictable and immeasurable for most films to capture in a natural way. This simulation of the sea in cinema represents the human desire for total algorithmic control of reality (and its predictability). Like monsters in taxonomy, everything in the world must fit a system. The key difference between the real sea and the one engineered to be on screen is that the sea can never fully fit an algorithm as, just like the monster, its inability to fit a mould is one of its essential qualities. Basically, cinema proves the sea itself is as monstrous as the creatures that inhabit it.

The tentacled terror of the kraken

The more humanity succeeds in the exploration of the deep sea, the more we are confronted with creatures that look just as incomprehensible and fantastical as our predecessor's imaginary sea monsters. Arguably, the actual workings of squid (particularly their giant variants) and other polypi are more abnormal than anything man could come up with.

In the nineteenth century, mentions of the Kraken popped up in literature internationally, perpetuating its status as a staple in culture. The accounts are fantasies based on scientific speculation, weaving fact and fiction into a poetic creature both in origin and function.[31] Its

[28] Erin Suzuki, "Beasts from the Deep," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017):23. https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2017.0002; Ghosh, T*he Great* Derangement, 8.
[29] Balsom, *An Oceanic* Feeling, 37.
[30] Ibid., 14-22.
[31] Richard Maxwell, "Unnumbered Polypi," *Victorian Poetry* 47, no. 1 (2009): 8. https://doi.org/10.1353/vp.0.0043.

mythological origins date back to the beginning of civilization when there were already stories about giant polypi taking down ships and scaring fishermen.[32] Tales of kraken sightings appear in scientific literature from as early as the 1750s. The fantastical horror stories intersecting with very real appearances of giant squid made it hard to distinguish between fact and fiction, leaving scientists to speculate on the monster's existence. Subsequently, the stories and descriptions became increasingly spectacular. Or as Jules Verne puts it in his sceptical discussion of the kraken stories in his novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*: "When it's an issue of monsters, the human imagination always tends to run wild."[33] Additionally, the ocean's unpredictability and mutability challenges values of human subjectivity.[34] Surely, the occasional encounters of mariners with similar creatures were enhanced by their fear; the ocean's depths were unknown and unknowable, and the nocturnal nature of giant squid led them to be associated with evil and the horrific.

The kraken has also had its fair share of cinematic appearances, most notably in adaptations of Verne's novel. True to Verne's scepticism of sea monsters, in Walt Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* (1954, dir. Richard Fleischer) the monster is a giant squid in a dark cavern.[35] In cinema, a gap in knowledge provides an enjoyment of ambivalent mystery.[36] A confrontation with something beyond the realms of known science in a setting that allows for cynicism is compelling and unthreatening. The close-up defamiliarizes the phenomenal world, as enlargement of natural creatures makes them seem monstrous and the inability to see them fully makes them seem unfamiliar. The transformative power of enlargement renders the familiar strange and evokes fascination and repulsion. As some sceptics have argued since the beginning of the kraken mythos, most nautical monsters are just regular sea creatures seen in weird sizes or in part. Their cinematic representations are speculation made flesh, to which the limits of our knowledge are the centre, the exposure of which creates great tension.

Like most mythologies, the mere possibility that it might be real or present is enough to perpetuate the kraken's reputation. In many of its features the kraken does not even appear, its presence never extending past a tall tale or a metaphor. In the series *Our Flag Means Death*, a comedic series loosely based on the adventures of Stede Bonnet, the existence of the kraken is

[32] "The Kraken." *Skeptic* (Altadena, Calif.) 16, no. 3 (2011): 67-68.
[33] Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*, translated by William Butcher (Oxford University Press, 1998).
[34] Balsom, *An Oceanic* Feeling, 29; Mark Fryers, "Songs of the Sea," in *Beasts of the Deep*, ed. Hackett and Harrington, 188.
[35] *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, directed by Richard Fleischer (Walt Disney Pictures, 1954), 2 hr., 7 min., Disney+.
[36] Balsom, *An Oceanic* Feeling, 30-33; Hackett and Harrington, *Beasts of the Deep*, 39.

briefly discussed.[37] The infamous pirate Blackbeard claims to have seen it take his father's life right before his eyes. It is later revealed that this was a mere horror tale he tells to disguise the fact that he was in fact the one who committed the murder. The kraken story is a mythical cover-up for the unspeakable truth and the manifestation of Blackbeard's unprocessed feelings of guilt and fear. Simultaneously the kraken becomes a metaphor for his murderous side, as he ends the first season claiming: "I am the kraken," before he sets out to continue his cruel reign of the seas. Interestingly, it is Blackbeard himself who points out early on that for people to cower at the sight of Blackbeard's ship, he does not even need to be present on it. The same goes for the kraken in *Pirates*: it is not the physical presence of the monster, but rather the possibility of its presence that instils fear in those who fare the seas.

In *Pirates of the Caribbean: Deadman's Chest*, the kraken is everything one would expect from an unfathomable sea creature. Its massive size, enough to easily break a ship into tiny pieces, is enough to instil fear in characters on screen and audience members alike. It is a combination of its predecessors, building on stories of large tentacles and shipwrecks. Though it was digitally created, it is assembled from parts of existing creatures tracing back to the natural world: the flurry of tentacles with large suckers of an octopus and the teeth of giant squid, though both have been enlarged and multiplied. The kraken is never seen fully, making it seem more unfamiliar and spectacular. Additionally, the kraken's scenes are both the loudest and most silent. Between the violent noises of breaking, the lack of score creates a pregnant pause as both the characters on screen and the viewers hold their breath. The elusiveness of its presence creates a constant tension. Once one knows it exists, the possibility of its appearance hangs over the film at any given moment at sea. The mere fact it could appear at any time is an advantage the sea monster has over most of its land-based counterparts: the impenetrable and expansive ocean covers its approach. The ensuing tension evokes what Mark Fisher describes as an eerie feeling: an indescribable sense that something is wrong.[38] Traces of the supernatural or mythical often produce an eerie affect which in the case of the kraken is reinforced by its failure of absence: there is something where there should not be.

Mythologies of man and monster

To the humans in the world of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the myths and monsters beyond the established system are a warning sign. Barbossa, a skeleton crew's captain, says it best: "You're

[37] *Our Flag Means Death*, season 1, episode 6, "The Art of Fuckery," directed by David Jenkins, aired March 10, 2022, on HBO Max, https://www.hbomax.com/nl/nl/series/urn:hbo:series:GYf3LzwJV98JifQEAAAAO.
[38] Fisher, *Weird and* Eerie, 61 & 97.

off the edge of the map mate, here there be monsters."[39] By going beyond the mapped known, one is sure to run into things beyond their imagination sooner or later. And these things are not always friendly.

Throughout the five films released so far, the characters have encountered curses, mermaids, Poseidon's trident and the literal end of the world. Despite this, most characters are cynical of the existence of supernatural or mythological beings like sea monsters. Even the pirates, most of whom have been in contact with these creatures, seem to have a hard time believing anything they have not seen before exist. Those who do spend their time searching for legendary treasure or eternal life. Knowledge of mythical existences exist in the world, but it is restricted to those who fall outside of the imperial system: pirates, powerful ones in particular. It is implied that to find what is beyond current knowledge, one should break some rules.

To most commoners in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, pirates themselves are the monstrous ones. The pirates are the 'other,' they do not fit in the system and therefore must be ended.[40] But the films are not actually about piracy. The image of the pirate has shifted, especially over the course of the 3 films, from obtaining wealth and starting fights to the value of abstract desires like freedom and comradery. [41] But this desire has consequences: encounters with the monstrous (and even becoming one yourself) seem inevitable for pirates. Though Sparrow comments that the true goal of becoming a fearsome pirate is the freedom to go wherever you want, true freedom always comes with a price, if it even exists at all. To break free from imperial rule, one must become an outlaw. To obtain riches, one risks getting cursed.

Monstrosity as a consequence of one's own actions is visualized in *Dead Man's Chest* in the form of Davy Jones. Foregoing his promise to help lost souls cross over to the afterlife, he uses the immortality and power bestowed upon him to terrorize the oceans. Somehow, he manages to control the kraken: a monstrous pet for a monstrous man. Because of these deeds, he slowly turns into the monster he acts to be, causing himself and his crew to grow tentacles,

[39] *Curse of the Black Pearl*, 1:52:00.
[40] In *The Curse of the Black Pearl* a crew has been cursed to be undead; they are skeletons in the moonlight, are unable to eat and cannot die. Though an in-depth examination of their monstrous nature is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that because this crew are the first active pirates the viewer sees pirates as a whole are immediately established as a monstrous cursed lot. With the exception of Captain Jack Sparrow, the pirates in the first movie are presented as fearsome and unnatural, even before their curse is revealed.
[41] Eurgen Pfister, "'In a world without gold, we might have been heroes!' Cultural Imaginations of Piracy in Video Games," in: *FIAR* Vol. 11 No. 2 (Sep. 2018): *Encounters in the 'Game-Over Era': The Americas in/and Video Games*, 34.

claws and other misshapen limbs that make them sea creatures as much as people. Jones is cursed to become one with the sea, perhaps through his own choice.[42]

Humility and hubris

As a visualization of the agency of an unknown force, the kraken is the agent of the monstrous, the unnatural, and the ocean at large. Out of the three characters to directly interact with the kraken, Captain Jack Sparrow is the most unlucky. In *Dead Man's Chest* he is told "Jones's terrible leviathan" will come for him, because he did not keep a promise to Davy Jones.[43] In his attempts to escape this beast, Sparrow is not above sending others to their death to save his own skin. Proceeding to act in his own interest, Sparrow is eventually devoured by the kraken. Though warped, the kraken's actions bring a sense of justice on behalf of its master and the sea itself; protecting their own from the humans that try to upset the balance.

In the kraken's final scene it becomes evident the existence of the monster can only be grasped by approaching it from a human perspective.[44] Whether the kraken itself has agency in these actions or is merely compelled to do so by its master is questionable, but it moves its tentacles with purpose and applies tactic to its attacks. Proof that it has been holding back is shown in the main characters' final confrontation with the kraken. After their attempt to blow it up, it feigns defeat. They soon realise it will return, as from their human perspective they conceive: "We just made it angry." Once again they (and the audience) are faced with the tension of its lack of presence as they flee the ship. When the kraken returns, Sparrow is the only one left, involuntarily sacrificing himself so the rest can escape. After all, the other characters realise, it is him the kraken wants. As the kraken rises from the water alongside the boat, the audience gets its first glance at the monster's giant mouth full of fangs. Once again we are confronted with its massive scale. Sparrow poses as a scale comparison to the kraken's mouth; only a part of the beast but already large enough to fill the entire screen and make the human standing next to it seem tiny. Not only is the beast shown cut off by the close-up; most of the scene plays out in slow motion which makes the monster's movements seem even more unnatural. In the final moment the kraken seems to exhibit some semblance of human-like agency, as instead of simply dragging Sparrow down with its tentacles like it has done before, it waits to go head to head with him and swallow him whole.

[42] Jones's proclamation of "I am the sea," seems to indicate he is at least at peace with it. *Dead Man's Chest,* 1:39:08.
[43] *Dead Man's Chest,* 0:10:07.
[44] *Dead Man's Chest*, 2:14:32.

A less forgiving mindset becomes more evident in the actions of Lord Cutler Beckett, governor of the East India Trading Company, as his role shifts from side antagonist in *Dead Man's Chest* to the main antagonist in *At World's End*. After gaining control over Davy Jones, who until then was the main antagonist, he orders him to kill the kraken. Beckett's control over the monstrous is quickly evident: Jones is now unable to appear the unpredictable threat he was in the previous film and the kraken is not even deemed worthy of an on-screen death. Instead, the audience first learns of its death through a throwaway line. This treatment further shows how little the kraken in all its massive threat means to Beckett. It is a testament to the Company's power that they are able to slay the beast that terrorized every other entity in the previous film so easily. By contrast, when the pirates learn of the kraken's death it, is by being confronted with its massive dead body stranded on an island, looking imposing but out of place. Its death is met by reverence and arguably even mourning on the pirates' side as they lament that the world used to be a bigger place. Or, put differently: "The world is still the same. There is just less in it."[45] Its death is meaningful besides signalling the end of an era for piracy: it expresses the shift of power from Davy Jones to Beckett and the East-India Trading Company. They have shown to have tamed the undefeatable beast, taking its place at the top of the food chain. To them, the ocean's monsters that pirates feared and revered are mere pieces to bargain with.

Who owns the sea?

On both the sides of the pirates and the empire, attempts and claims are made for the control and ownership of the oceans. Throughout the film, Beckett and the Company attempt to conquer the uncontrollable depths of the sea. It is not only used as a means for colonization through trade and travel, but as a space to be controlled in itself. Davy Jones's notion of control is based on supernatural power and the ability to instil fear. This falls short compared to Beckett's business-oriented approach of negotiation and exploitation. Jones and his monster are not enough to defy the system they ought to deviate from. Evidently, the consideration of ownership is fulfilled through the establishment of trade routes and patrol: control in every way that matters. Can one ever truly own the sea? Beckett eventually dies at the hand of the combined forces of multiple pirates and a very angry goddess, inevitably punished for his hubris. Yet the supposed ownership of the sea is not returned to the sea itself, but rather to the pirates or the monstrous forces that govern it. Additionally, despite his death at the hand of monstrous forces,

[45] *At World's End*, 1:02:12.

Beckett's impact remains: the empire is still widespread and the ecological damage has been done.

Sparrow and Beckett provide two different human perspectives on the sea through the encounter with its monster. Sparrow's actions and ultimately his defeat showcase the humility of humans in proportion to the sea.[46] His attempts to escape the monster and his ultimate failure emphasize how some things are simply too big to be conquered, proving the inadequacy of a single human's actions. But this notion, that the monster (and ultimately the sea) will right itself, is problematic in that it dissolves humans of guilt. The humility that Balsom describes reinforces this construct of the ocean as an untouchable entity, disregarding its vulnerable ecosystem and susceptibility to human action. This is exemplified through Beckett's eventual annihilation of the kraken. Though Beckett is a single human, he is part of a system of power that is able to conquer and control (parts of) the sea. Beckett and his fleet have upset the balance between the sea's ecology and its inhabitants, human and non-human alike. His actions ultimately change the ecosystem of the ocean: aside from the disruption of culture and resources that are inherent to colonialist ventures, he is singlehandedly responsible for the extinction of a species.

Throughout the films the anthropocentric view of the ocean as an asset continually resurfaces. This reinforces the notion that underlies most of mainstream narrative cinema: that the non-human entities (both the sea and the monsters) are only as important as the role they play for the human characters. They are devices at the whims of human agency. In this way, even Balsom's perception of the functions of the sea takes away from its agency by limiting the possibilities for its being. Examination of the interactions in regards to these functions, then, also reveals how *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s narratives reduce the non-human to a medium for human action.

[46] Balsom, *An Oceanic* Feeling, 43.

Always a bigger fish: *Star Wars* and the earthly Anthropocene in a galaxy far far away

Though it is set "a long time ago in a galaxy far far away," the world of *Star Wars* is closer than one might think at first glance.[47] In this fictional universe, space has similar functions as the sea; most importantly as the no-man's land that is the vessel for exploration and colonization. In his extensive examination of what he calls the *Star Wars* Multiverse, media scholar Carmelo Esterrich discusses the role war plays in the franchise: it is unrelentingly connected to imperial power.[48] The legacy of the galaxy's subjugation by the Empire is the spread of empire as an ideology, a regime and a colonial undertaking. The perpetual state of war requires a simple world view to which the establishment of binaries is central – us versus them, ally versus enemy. *Star Wars'* seeming lack of moral ambiguity curiously contains itself to the films, as the extended universe does concern itself with morally difficult circumstances and does not shy away from depicting beloved characters as complicated and flawed persons. It is easy to speak of a black-and-white world of good and evil, but the films and particularly the extended media prove it is not just that. There is no such thing as fully good and fully evil people, which makes it more interesting to consider the agents on the side-lines, their portrayal, and whether this same courtesy is extended to the more monstrous creatures.

For how central active imperialism is to the plot of *Star Wars* films, Esterrich argues the colonialist nature lies more in the background: "Films like *IV: A New Hope* and *V: The Empire Strikes Back* are not really about war; they're more about living in an imperial, authoritarian society and attempting to resist it."[49] While war is the quintessential backdrop for every *Star Wars* film, a lot of it focuses on the effects of imperialism and living with it, rather than outright warfare. Prevalent in every *Star Wars* medium are the effects of war and the legacy of colonialism: the Empire's campaign is expansion of territory for the extraction of resources. *Star Wars* never focuses on the complications of colonial economics, but it occasionally inserts into its narrative indirect references to settler colonialism and mercantilism.[50] The galaxy seems to exist in a constant state of acquisition, appropriation, and subjugation. Though the exploitation of resources, the transformation of populations into laborers, and the environmental disasters that may follow are a little harder to find in *Star Wars*, they are definitely there.

[47] Quote from the opening scroll of (nearly) every piece of *Star Wars* media ever made.
[48] Carmelo Esterrich, *Star Wars Multiverse* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 69.
[49] Ibid., 68.
[50] Ibid., 84-85.

The *Star Wars* galaxy is not very concerned with the ecological state of its planets. Clearly, the well-being of a single planet is not as important when it can be blown up with the press of a single button and the galaxy is this big. The human(oid) impact on and ruination of planets is rampant. The mining of specific crystals and other resources under the empire destroys the land without regard for the planet and its inhabitants, causing pollution and toxic environments.[51] Commercial organisations exploit resources and enact territorial control, such as spice mining and the horrible conditions that come with that. The galaxy is plagued by interterritorial disputes and the paradigmatic colonial project of territorial control. Less technologically developed planets are subjugated by the ruling power assigning their culture as primitive or animalistic. For the most part, imperial objectionable ethics and economic gain are separated, shying away from what would be an uncomfortable reflection on the ideologies that underlie US capitalism: separation of empire's objectionable ethics and economic gain for the most part. Even so, late capitalism as a mode of production is fundamentally dependent on growth, expansion and infinite resources.[52] The cultural effects of the insistence on and perpetuation of this economic advancement follow. Moving out of earth when it is used up and simply creating a new earth, as science fiction media are all too willing to portray, seems easy. But according to the current state of known science, other planets are inhabitable to humans and other solar systems are simply too far away to ever achieve the fantasy of unlimited expansion. Let alone the fantasy of infinite resources. *Star Wars* does not indulge this fantasy. Exploitation and expansion are not without sacrifice. The willingness to empty planets and extract their resources without regard for the population is a reflection of earthly capitalism that is, while hardly ever in the foreground, a consistent tension.

The recognizability of these tensions and colonial legacies is no coincidence as *Star Wars* is as otherworldly as it is familiar. It is only seemingly, fictionally, in a galaxy far far away. As an undeniable American cultural product, it portrays very particular notions of empire, democracy, and authoritarianism that reflect our own world. For example, the sentient beings that inhabit it are gendered and racialized in specific Western ways; some are socially privileged, others are marginalized, and the human is always at the centre of the action.[53] In examining how the world works, we acknowledge that it is made up from elements of our own. Esterrich argues for the spectacular character of the multiverse, the aim of which is to thrill and

[51] Ibid., 86-88.
[52] Gerry Canavan, *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (Wesleyan, 2014), 5.
[53] Esterrich, *Star Wars Multiverse,* xi.

wow.[54] *Star Wars* is a franchise built for commercial success, and the spectacle it consists of still originates from our (Western) world; our ideals, our ideas about race and gender, our experiences with war and empire and our culture and history. How, then, does *Star Wars* reflect the earthly Anthropocene? And how is this particularized by the presence of the monsters of the galaxy and human interaction with these monsters?

Something that lacks representation in this regard is the presence of water. For the size of the galaxy, *Star Wars* spends very little time on planets with significant bodies of water. The substance of outer space fills this gap, as this is what connects different worlds and enables travel and trade as the earthly ocean would. Yet there are still bodies of water that house monsters, their presence as surprising to the audience as they are to the characters. Additionally, *Star Wars* has another unknowable entity that connects the universe and enforces a sense of connection: The Force. Similar to Erika Balsom's definition of oceanic feeling, those who are connected to this force experience a loss of integrity of the self in favour of interconnectedness.[55] In becoming part of something greater, their insignificance is emphasized. The Force raises questions about what it means to belong to the greater expanse of space in a state where every action can influence the fabric of existence. Moreso than the humans, The Force is concerned with a near ecological awareness of connection to the universe and its fickle balance. When the planet Alderaan is blown up by the Empire, every practiced Force user feels this disturbance. Users are able to communicate with animals, and sometimes even feel the echoes of past events. This connecting force does not distinguish between man and non-human and even the non-sentient, as it is present in humanoids and monsters alike. In this way, man and monster are connected by the sea, space and The Force.

Monstrous wildlife

In order to discuss monsters in *Star Wars* one must first ask: when is a creature a monster? In sci-fi, this distinction is not so clear-cut. To our earthly human eyes, Wookies like Chewbacca and Gungan like Jar Jar Binks seem monstrous, strange and alien.[56] In the *Star Wars* universe, however, they are just another species that can be argued, interacted and fought with. Diversity in *Star Wars* is a way to portray a multicultural and multispecies galaxy, depicting the interactions and daily lives of the beings that live in the universe. The scope of diversity in *Star Wars* becomes particularly clear when watching scenes like the Mos Eisley cantina scene, in

[54] Ibid., 30-31.
[55] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling,* 9.
[56] In fact, the Quarren are a species that do not look dissimilar to Davy Jones but are considered no more monstrous than any other species in the galaxy.

which different species are shown in a shared environment, enjoying a drink and music.[57] These diverse creatures are a reminder for the audience that they are not in our universe. Though the environments are multispecies and multicultural, they are still constrained by complex social hierarchies. The presentation and distinction of life forms are inevitably informed by western ideas of civilization and culture. It is a reflection of our world both in prejudice and stereotype, as well as non-hegemony and variety.

Particularly in science fiction films that contain non-human species (aliens), distinguishing what ought to be labelled as 'monster' or not is complicated. In contrast to for example *Star Trek, Star Wars* never portrays anything as 'new' or 'unexplored'; most beings are well-known, and have been in contact since before the camera lays eyes on them.[58] A way to examine the monstrosity of alien species is whether or not the film treats them similar to the way it treats or would treat humans: whether they portray civilization, speak a language and exhibit agency that is similar to humans. The ability to speak 'Basic' (English), for example, is a marker of otherness. The ability to make own choices borne from a sense of logic signifies agency.

Terryl Whitlatch and Bob Carrau's *The Wildlife of Star Wars: A Field Guide* details the biology and living circumstances of various beings in the universe.[59] *Wildlife Guide* establishes a difference between general 'beings' like Hutts and Ewoks, who have their own exploits and civilizations, and 'other creatures' which it perceives as animals: "The ones that live alongside us and, because of their inability to speak, perhaps, or maybe an instinctual lack of ambition, don't necessarily make it into the history vapors."[60] The guide also makes an (unclear) distinction between species and creatures as inhabitants of a planet: for Tatooine, it lists humans, Jawas and Tusken Raiders explicitly in its overview, but every animal creature after is also labelled a species. This further exemplifies the blurry lines within the universe between species and creatures. As the mere existence of a 'Wildlife Guide' implies, *Star Wars*' monsters are not unnatural: at least not to that world. They are attempted to have at least some biological workings and, like most of the worldbuilding, are based on animals from our universe. They are as much a part of the galaxy as the humans and other species are.

[57] Esterrich, *Star Wars Multiverse*, 32-34.
[58] Ibid., 60-65.
[59] Though *Wildlife Guide* was never officially recognized as canon (like most guides; canon until disproven by whatever the director for a new film decides is better) it was written by creature designers on the original films and has yet to be contradicted by any content. In my consideration, this makes it as established and thorough a source as one can get in the Star Wars multiverse.
[60] Terryl Whitlatch and Bob Carrau, *The Wildlife of Star Wars: A Field Guide* (Chronicle Books, 2001), 6-8.

Our previous understanding of the monster as a particular entity that refers only to itself seems to reject such a thing as a *Wildlife Guide*, as taxonomy or categorization universalizes the individual. [61] However, as the monsters to be discussed are not seen in conjunction with others of their species, in the films they still function as a singular entity. To the viewer, they are still as unknowable. To the characters, they are as unexpected.

So, when is a creature a monster according to *Star Wars*? When it is perceived to be so and treated as one by those living in the same galaxy far far away. For the duration of the films, we trust the guidance of the native humanoids over our own. Central to their judgement is the monster's primary function in the film: to pose a threat to the characters.

The danger of the dianoga

The first nautical monster encountered in a *Star Wars* film is the dianoga. During soon-to-be Jedi Luke Skywalker, rogue pilot Han Solo and Chewbacca's attempt to rescue princess Leia from the Death Star in *Star Wars IV: A New Hope*, they flee through a chute and end up in a garbage compactor.[62] Though they have temporarily escaped the stormtroopers chasing them, they went from the frying pan into the fire. Not only can they not find a way out, a sudden roar indicates that "…there is something alive in here." The first glance the audience gets of the creature is a thick tentacle with veins and suckers that is instantly reminiscent of cephalopods like the kraken. Wandering shots of the debris-covered water emphasize the characters' inability to see the creature, until an eyeball pops up and looks straight into the camera. A small tentacle wraps around Luke's leg and pulls him down, leaving the other characters unable to find him. After a moment of the characters and audience fearing for Luke's life he reappears, claiming the creature suddenly let go of him. We soon find out why when the walls of the garbage compactor are starting to move, the monster having fled to safety to avoid getting crushed.

Though very little of it is visible in the film, the garbage monster is described in the Wildlife Guide and other sources as a large mollusc not dissimilar to the kraken.[63] The dianoga has long tentacles, a mouth on the bottom of its body and an eye on an ocular stem protruding from its body. Its origin is believed to be the planet Vodran, but they can be found throughout the universe. Like the dianoga in the Death Star garbage compactor, the creatures are often used in sewage treatment.

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[61] Litvintseva and Wagner, *All Thoughts Fly*, 97.
[62] *A New Hope*, 1:19:39.
[63] Whitlatch and Carrau, *Wildlife Guide*, 157.

Part of the appeal of the dianoga in the aforementioned scene is the same as that of the Kraken: its invisibility promises a permanent threat. The inability to see the full creature creates an eerie tension, further reinforced by the unexpectedness of its presence. Mark Fisher describes this as a failure of absence; there is something there where there should not be.[64] Luke eventually manages to escape its clutches but the dianoga sets a precedent for the rest of the films: the audience, as well as Luke himself, has no idea what else is to come and what might be out there in this universe we know so little about.

Despite its unexpected appearance, the monster is never presented as something unnatural. After all, in our world as well we find creatures in unexpected places. If anything, it is the human's thoughts of what should and should not belong in a certain place that creates friction. Though the dianoga's role in the film is small, it provides a glimpse into how the way humanoids in *Star Wars* treat monsters is not dissimilar to ours. For a different perspective, one must turn to the extended universe.

From another point of view

Star Wars is a multitude of universes and forms of narrative: films, television shows, novels, comics toys, theme parks and, interestingly, fan-produced material.[65] Particularly the novels played a big part in allowing further exploration of the universe and going beyond the cinematic narratives, providing a broader scope of perspectives from which events are experienced. Esterrich considers the slowly blurring distinction between canon and what Lucasfilm designated as 'legends' (non-canon) similarly to how most mythology and epics are known in different variants, sometimes contradictory. Different accounts of the same story create layers of interpretation. One such different account is an anthology released for the first film's 40th anniversary: *Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View*.[66] This collection of short stories reimagines moments from *A New Hope* through the eyes of a supporting character. By doing this, it provides different insights into the events from the film. Though it can hardly be considered canon, at the very least the book provides an alternative way of considering the characters, creatures and events the audience knows from the films.

In "The Baptist" Nnedi Okorafor retells the events in the garbage compactor from the dianoga's perspective.[67] In this story the monster is a dianoga female named Omi, who is kidnapped from a swamp on her home planet. The reader learns she is force-sensitive when she

[64] Fisher, *Weird and Eerie*, 61.
[65] Esterrich, *Star Wars Multiverse*, 1 & 11-13.
[66] Elizabeth Schaefer, ed., *Star Wars: From a Certain Point of View* (New York: Del Rey, 2017).
[67] Schaefer, *From a Certain Point of View*, 317-332.

receives visions of the Death Star's destruction and uses it to fight stormtroopers. After being dumped in the garbage compactor, she makes herself at home in the swamp-like environment.

The story provides the monster with an agency that is not usually given to it. The dianoga has thoughts and feelings about her life and even makes active choices based on objective information. It allows readers to imagine another way of being, temporarily inhabiting a monster's mind.[68] From the monster's perspective the player can clearly see how humankind's interventions in natural systems can have negative effects on the life-forms that inhabit it. But the view is still anthropomorphized: it is translated into human focus. Her sentience resembles a human more than an animal, responding to questions of agency: why does she act the way she does? And how does she interact with the unknowable agency of The Force? Like most aspiring Jedi she spends time building a connection to it, but unlike most, she does so unquestionably and completely gives herself over to it. She senses Luke is connected to the same force and attempts to baptise him according to her people's beliefs by pulling him underwater. This gives a new perspective on the monster's actions: rather than animalistic feeding instinct, she acted out of goodwill, connection and belief. Of course, this interpretation is hypothetical. Projecting a human-like consciousness on the monster also implies that every creature in the universe must have a similar way of thinking in order to be considered worthy of living. Or, at the very least, useful.

What Omi's story also tells us is the way humanoids treat creatures like her. Not only was she taken from her home by force, but she was taken in order to provide labour. In other words, she was extracted to provide services.[69] As previously established, the systems of power have no problem destroying habitats for economic profit. Clearly in their version of our Anthropocene, it is common practice to displace creatures to clean up human mess. In a way, she is a representative of those who are impacted by capitalist human action, her story pointing the human audience to events that are a reality for some.

But, true to *Star Wars*, the story has a hopeful ending. Despite her misfortune, she learns to adapt to her new surroundings. She strengthens her connection with The Force, showcasing an urge for self-improvement that once again appeals to human sensibilities. Nevertheless, she is powerless to stop the destruction of the Death Star and her new home as it is once again taken from her for the greater human good. In her final hour, she wonders how she will be reborn: perhaps as a humanoid she will finally have control over her own fate. Or perhaps she will live

[68] Hackett and Harrington, *Beasts of the Deep*, 178-180.
[69] Loomba, *Colonialism/postcolonialism*, 8.

in one of the other swamps in the galaxy. Either way, she has found oceanic feeling in The Force.

The surreal sando aqua

A monster that inhabits one of the few bodies of water shown throughout the Skywalker Saga is the sando aqua monster. The monster makes its cinematic appearance in *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, when Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn, his padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi and their companion Jar Jar Binks make their escape from the underwater Otoh Gunga in a spaceship-like submarine.[70] As they leave the city and proceed to navigate through the underwater tunnel system that makes up Naboo's core, they are soon chased by an opee sea killer. This part fish part crustacean manages to capture the ship in its mouth but is soon picked up by a much larger creature. After which Qui-Gon wisely proclaims: "There is always a bigger fish," while the sando aqua monster tears the opee sea killer in two like it is nothing. Their first escape is short-lived, as they are confronted with a colo claw fish, an eel-like fish with giant jaws and claws. This creature is also easily captured and devoured by the larger monster, which does not seem to show much interest in the ship itself. Our heroes have been rescued by an uncaring third party and the sando aqua monster has been fed.

Measuring above 200 meters in length, the sando aqua is the second largest creature in the *Wildlife Guide*, second only to the giant space slug. The *Guide* describes the monster as: "The most feared and mysterious of all Nabooian creatures, legendary to the point of being mythical."[71] Most inhabitants of Naboo would sooner consider the monster a myth than reality. They have strong feline bodies, hunting by stealth and surprise. They have huge mouths with razor-sharp teeth, able to devour any other creature in their habitat easily. However, they are very rare and thus sensitive to extinction. Darth Vader is the only person on record to have killed one, raising the probability of their extinction by a significant number.[72]

The sando aqua teaches an important lesson: every predator can become prey. The monster functions as a warning sign to the characters and humanity at large. No matter how powerful and untouchable one thinks to be, there is always a bigger fish. Literally. The relevance of the sando aqua's habitat lies in its scale. The growing size of the monsters in Naboo's waters is dangerous to the characters and exciting to the audience. The innate obsession with animals that are larger than life crosses the line between the potential of nature

[70] *The Phantom Menace*, 0:17:55.
[71] Whitlatch and Carrau, *Wildlife Guide*, 90.
[72] "Sando Aqua Monster," Wookieepedia, accessed on August 9, 2022, https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Sando_aqua_monster#cite_note-MM-8.

and the boundlessness of imagination. As mentioned in regards to the kraken, it seems to be easier for humans to believe in giant sea monsters because the real-world examples we know of are already unimaginable. But it is also built on scientific fact: the largest creatures we've observed on our planet are mostly aquatic. [73] The deep sea's combination of a larger space for habitats and less resources makes bigger size a more efficient evolutionary strategy. Additionally, deeper underwater the limits of physics are different from land, causing a phenomenon called deep sea gigantism. Hence why huge sea monsters are more believable than those on land: it genuinely is more plausible. Even in sci-fi, the size of the monster needs to stay within the comfort zone of the limits of biology, as there is a very fine line between believability and the breaking of immersion.

The sando aqua's unexpected appearance is a reminder of the presence of much older and much greater creatures than humans can comprehend. The insight into its hunting and feeding techniques shows how a different habitat has different rules, and an environment unsullied by human influence has a culture of its own. All our heroes (and Jar Jar) can do is simply continue on and hope they do not become the next prey. For once, human(oid)s are not at the centre of the environment.

Rebellions are built on hope

Esterrich notes that "…even though the most repeated sentence in *Star Wars* is 'I have a bad feeling about this,' optimism permeates the multiverse." [74] Repeatedly, a key theme in the films is an optimism that good will win out. *Star Wars* pairs the threatening presence of war and destruction with a partiality for happy endings. The franchise is not afraid to depict the more unpleasant impact of war and empire, but it never becomes pessimistic. Despite the many issues in the galaxy, ultimately the narrative is one of hope. This focus allows for an optimistic worldview when compared to our own: the good guys will always win, the effects of disaster can be worked through, the relationships between species can be refigured and balance will always be restored. Additionally, the hero narrative and the power lend to the Jedi (and other users of The Force) reinforce the notion that a singular person can have a significant effect in creating or reversing disaster. But, while Luke is the one to fire the final shot to destroy the Death Star, he could not have done that without the support and system of the Rebel Alliance. *Star Wars* portrays a surprising amount of nuance for how systems of power and oppression

[73] Naturalish, "There is Always a Bigger Fish: Love for the Star Wars Sea Monsters," Medium, October 25, 2016, https://medium.com/applaudience/theres-always-a-bigger-fish-love-for-the-star-wars-sea-monsters-3a767ed61d9b.
[74] Esterrich, *Star Wars Multiverse*, 131.

influence life on planets and are perpetuated by societal structures. There is, after all, always a new Empire waiting to gain power.

Rather than conquering, containing or killing them, a confrontation with monsters in *Star Wars* usually leads to the protagonists fleeing them. Whether this is because of an advanced anti-colonialist awareness that they are trespassing on the creature's habitat or the monsters are just too big to be confronted, their function in the narrative is mainly to flesh out the world and increase the threat level of the film. In a situation where everything is good versus evil, us versus them, these giant creatures remain (mostly) unaffected. They do not take a side. They do not have complicated motivations other than to survive. Most are so big and likely old that in comparison, human problems seem small. They provide a larger perspective on the world of *Star Wars*: there is more present than just the enemies you see on the surface, there's life in unlikely places, and there's always a bigger fish. Scope and scale are major points in these realisations. The occasional confrontation with one such monster reminds the viewer of the largeness of the universe and the smallness of man in comparison and the occasional futility of their efforts.

Fans often joke *Star Wars* would have been shorter if Luke had really died in the garbage compressor at the hands of the Dianoga. If it was not a film, this would have been a real option. Like The Force itself, its creatures do not care about whatever petty fights the humans are having as long as it does not affect them.

Any fictional universe must adhere to the logic of cause and effect. As the *Star Wars* universe reflects our own, it reflects the effects human action causes. The greater size of the universe makes the planets, resources and creatures seem more expendable. Yet the opposite is true. Though capitalist ideology will persist on never-ending economic growth, narratives of space exploration contradictorily reiterate the limitedness of resources they were supposed to be a solution to.[75] From an earthly perspective, the colonization of space seems expansive. But from the perspective of outer space colonies, life is a constant risk of a lack of resources and the threat of the void outside. The harsh environments to which life has to adapt are a stark contrast to the boundless riches of the colonizers imaginations. Not even in the entire galaxy are there enough resources to build the Death Star without destroying habitats and communities. *Star Wars* shows that the effects of human action on foreign environments have a larger impact than ecological degradation.

[75] Canavan, *Green Planets*, 5-7.

Conqueror turned conquered: *Pacific Rim* and the alien ecological colonist

In the opening monologue of *Pacific Rim* main character Raleigh describes a fascination with alien life. "When I was a kid," he says, "whenever I'd feel small or lonely, I'd look up at the stars. Wondered if there was life up there. Turns out I was looking in the wrong direction. When alien life entered our world, it was from deep beneath the Pacific Ocean."[76]

In *Pacific Rim*, the outside threat comes from inside the earth itself. From the bottom of the ocean come aliens, known as kaiju. Their point of origin is 'The Breach', which turns out to be a portal between our dimension and theirs, which is located alongside ours. This film not only combines the alien threat with the ocean as a source, but mirrors colonialism and its ecological impact with the entire human race as the colonized. The first minutes of the film recap the first years of the invasion. Seemingly out of nowhere, a monster appeared from the ocean, destroying multiple cities in a matter of days. After four monster appearances and thousands of lives lost, humanity finally realised the invasion was not going to stop. In response, they created monsters of their own: giant robots named Jaegers. These Jaegers are so big that they are piloted by two people who share a neurological connection in a process called 'drifting'. In response to these human developments the kaiju, as the film labels the monsters, started evolving.

Pacific Rim is a mix of Japanese mecha (robot) film and Japanese monster cinema, a 'geek' blend of science fiction genre conventions and Guillermo del Toro's own authorial flavour.[77] The film exhibits del Toro's love for monsters, which the director traces back to an obsession since childhood. Del Toro's creations are often highly referential, drawing from a love of cinematic monsters that evoke the sense of being a guest in an oversized world and the idea that large powerful beings are out there.[78] His monsters, a recurring element in most of his repertoire, are based on his 'geekish' obsessions.[79] This could mean that his monsters are not intended to have any meaning aside from their inspirations. Alternatively, it means they can mean anything. *Pacific Rim* is inspired by the 'versus' variant of monster films, featuring a

[76] *Pacific Rim,* 0:02:10.
[77] It is however hard to define just what this authorial flavour is. Del Toro's multifaceted approach to his art (director, screenwriter, comic fan, horror guru) defines containment within traditional categories that define a filmmaker. Most scholars already make a clear distinction between his Spanish and English language films. *Pacific Rim* is such a far departure from his previous work it may be questionable to even compare it; Niamh Thornton, "Pacific Rim*:* Reception, Readings and Authority," in *The Transnational Fantasies of Guillermo Del Toro,* ed. Ann Davies (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 122-123; Davies, *Transnational Fantasies,* 3.
[78] Davies, *Transnational Fantasies,* 58.
[79] Ibid., 26-27.

clash between monsters taken from different film series. Just like the monsters, the film itself is assembled through what Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes as "…a process of fragmentation and recombination."[80] Like editing in a film, the kaiju are a montage consisting of a pastiche of different creatures and references.

The kaiju monster-mash embodies the transgression of categories by crossing organic borders.[81] In addition to a physical threat, they present a cognitive threat; the kaiju violate the dominant culture's conceptual scheme of nature. In other words: humanity does not understand what they are and that challenges the foundation of the culture's way of thinking. The monster becomes a scapegoat for the impurities that society needs to cast out.

In this film, humanity is considered as one collective people against the alien invader. This is evident in the international character of the organisations originally assembled to combat the threat and the remaining rag-tag group that calls itself the resistance. Even the opening narration makes notice of the global coming-together: "The world came together, pooling its resources and throwing aside old rivalries for the sake of the greater good."[82] Additionally, when television footage is used to illustrate a large event happening, this footage seems to be recorded and aired on many different places around the world. A significant difference between *Pacific Rim* and the previously discussed films is the cultural background of the director and diversity of actors. The diversity clearly ends with the inclusion of East-Asia, Russia and several non-American Anglophone countries, but is enough to disrupt Hollywood's racial hierarchies and indicate the global impact of the events.[83]

With this global initiative the film imagines humanity taking collective responsibility for anthropogenic climate change.[84] As many scholars have pointed out, anthropogenic climate change is an effect of humanity's very existence and dominance as a species: "Every human being who has ever lived has played a part in making us the dominant species on this planet, and in this sense every human being, past and present, has contributed to the present cycle of climate change."[85] Though in some discussions it is important to distinguish between the different measures of impact different groups have contributed, ultimately the collective of human action over time has contributed to the acceleration of global warming. Since in *Pacific*

[80] Ibid., 14.
[81] Ibid., 30.
[82] *Pacific Rim,* 0:03:40.
[83] Thornton, "Pacific Rim," 125.
[84] Chakrabarty, *Climate of History,* 209.
[85] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement,* 115.

Rim humanity as a whole has to live with the consequences of their (unintended) actions, humanity as a whole is held responsible.

Like other monsters, the kaiju embody the 'other' that makes humanity a collective by contrast. Typically the alien in American science fiction embodies anything that is unfamiliar or un-American: everything that is not the standard. [86] Its otherness poses a threat to national order and cultural hegemony. The other functions not only as an external threat, but also as an outward projection of what is repressed within the culture in order to annihilate it. The encounter with the monster is a fight for 'our' homeland and we are invited to cheer for the home team. In other words: the kaiju represent and expose the dark side of a dominant culture and in defeating them humanity will have conquered its collective proverbial demons.

Rob Latham describes sci-fi that features the invasion of earth as 'reverse colonization': human empire is forced to experience how it feels to be a native tribe under attack by technologically superior colonizers.[87] Reconsidering the impact of colonialism from the perspective of the invaded can provide insights on human culpability. And this threat even comes from the bottom of our own sea. How can the confrontation with the effects of colonialism through kaiju invasion make the human audience reconsider its own ecological impact?

Tribute to the king of monsters

Pacific Rim is inspired by and a tribute to the original Godzilla films (directed by Ishiro Honda), and its influences are obvious. Both the kaiju and Godzilla are identified as dinosaurs from the Jurassic period in an exposition that explains the monsters' background. In both films, international experts set out to find a way to defeat the threat and both films use mass media to depict large events and masses of people fleeing the monster. Though *Pacific Rim* was released almost 60 years after the first Godzilla film, their monsters serve a similar function representative of their time. Erin Suzuki establishes that Godzilla "…functions as both a metaphor for post-war anxieties about nuclear weapons and a parallel between his destructive powers and the destructive powers of human invention."[88] In *Pacific Rim*, the kaiju similarly function as a metaphor for ecological anxieties as well as a mirror of human colonial endeavours.

[86] Charles Ramírez Berg, "26. Immigrants, Aliens, and Extraterrestrials: Science Fiction's Alien "Other" as (Among Other Things) New Latino Imagery," In *Film Genre Reader IV* edited by Barry Keith Grant (New York, USA: University of Texas Press, 2021), 155; Jones, "Aliens in the Fourth Dimension," 366.
[87] Latham, "Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 487.
[88] Suzuki, "Beasts from the Deep," 22.

Disaster takes form in these monsters. Like Godzilla's rampage was a consequence of human action because they disturbed him with hydrogen bomb tests, the Kaiju's appearance is a consequence of human (in)action leading to ecological disaster. Initially, the kaiju are indicated to be an unstoppable force similar to a natural disaster or an act of God. Technological enhancement put an end to this: "In a Jaeger you can fight the hurricane. You can win."[89] Of course humanity's response is to beat every threat to the ground, firmly believing in technology's superiority over nature. Yet fear for the untameable character of the ocean remains.

As the name implies, the sea is as much a central element in *Pacific Rim* as it is in *Godzilla*. The kaiju originate from the bottom of the Pacific Ocean and despite most of the film taking place on land, most of the important battles take place in the water. The opening scene as well as the final confrontation all take place in the depths of the ocean, which for the duration of the conflict is considered the kaiju's territory. The kaiju are clearly made to function well underwater as most of them are derived from sea creatures: some resemble hammerhead sharks, others have giant claws reminiscent of crabs and some are even able to propel themselves through water by virtue of a flexible finned tail. As living creatures, they all consist of organic shapes that are a stark contrast to the harsh lines of the Jaeger robots. The kaiju even have phosphorescent features, a trait that is mainly seen in sea creatures. By grounding the monster's appearance in the natural world, they are believable as a piece of reality. Attempts to categorize the unknown monster build on comparing it to familiar creatures which support speculation of a creature's origins by its characteristics.[90] The kaiju seem at home in the earthly ocean. The Jaegers, by contrast, look out of place under the water. In addition to the claustrophobic feeling of human inability to breathe underwater, it limits view significantly for both the pilots and reporters. The added complication to recording and reporting under water adds to its danger and mystery.[91]

Suzuki argues that it is no coincidence that Godzilla and *Pacific Rim*'s kaiju are tied closely to the ecology of the Pacific Ocean as well as the history of nuclear tests on the Pacific Islands. [92] These monsters from the deep bring to the surface anxieties about the disruption or destruction of the transpacific structures that facilitate global economic circulation. They are also an effect of the colonial legacy that is the basis of these structures, indicating the

[89] *Pacific Rim*, 0:04:06.
[90] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling,* 22; Maxwell, "Unnumbered Polypi," 16.
[91] Davies, *Transnational Fantasies,* 129.
[92] Suzuki, "Beasts from the Deep," 13-23.

environmental and cultural damage they created. The ocean itself is turned into capital by turning its biomaterials into resources, constructing an image of the ocean environment as a biodiverse source of renewable biotechnologies. Its boundlessness reinforces the notion of the infiniteness of these resources. The ocean is often perceived as something that cannot be impacted by human influence, yet ocean and human environments influence and shape each other drastically. The alien otherness of the ocean's inhabitants reinforces the conception that the ocean is a space too big, powerful and full of life to be vulnerable to human harm. This understanding often results in dumping garbage, sewage, weapons, toxic chemicals and other harmful waste into the ocean, believing it will just be washed away and effectively disappear, unable to touch us.[93] Humanity is not only afraid of the ocean, it purposely distances itself from its connection to it.[94] This self-induced distance from the ocean and its connection to humanity perpetuates the idea of the untouchable ocean which removes human culpability.

The grand and curious: Pacific drift

Pacific Rim introduces a way to bridge the gap between the human and the sea monster: drifting. Similar to the suggestion of studying Godzilla for its resistance to radiation, scientists in *Pacific Rim* also believe there is more merit to studying the kaiju. Dr. Newton 'Newt' Geiszler, proclaimed a 'kaiju-fanboy' by his colleague, advocates for studying the kaiju up close both to find their weaknesses and to understand them better. He proposes to use the technology used to neurologically connect two Jaeger pilots to drift with a half-dead kaiju brain which would allow him to temporarily become part of the kaiju-hivemind. Drifting as a concept invokes oceanic imagery and breaches the distinction between monster and man. To drift means to accept the unknown into your own mind as well; the connection goes both ways. While understanding the monster through a different perspective is certainly not an exclusive concept in cinema, *Pacific Rim*'s drift activates a trans-corporeality that shapes awareness of the exchanges between the human body, nonhuman bodies and the world at large.[95]

The main goal of gathering information from the kaiju is a greater understanding of how to fight them, but for Newt a big part of his motive to persevere it is an intrigue with these creatures that he has had for years. His obsession with the monsters and their unknowability is precisely what persuades him to potentially give himself over to the kaiju and in the process give up part of his humanity. To illustrate the struggle between cautious intrigue and curious fear Harrington quotes Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "He who fights with

[93] This, of course, also happens in outer space, where debris is stuck in earth's orbit and threatens satellites.
[94] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling,* 67.
[95] Suzuki, "Beasts from the Deep," 24.

monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."[96] While drifting with the kaiju not only is Newt able to see into their mind, but they can see into his. And in their attempts to save humanity, the heroes stray toward increasingly inhuman tactics. Consequently, in their attempt to defeat the alien invaders, humans are drifting further away from humanity.[97] Yet perhaps they are drifting into a greater whole.

Balsom discusses oceanic feeling as a method to forge connections between the human and non-human with the sea as its guide: the site of the ocean provides for forms of relationality that break beyond the individual and beyond the binary between nature and culture.[98] Essential to this is a sense of interconnectedness of both natural ecologies and society. If drifting provides this connection, it opens up a new dimension of thought about the other and the self. Eventually, this connection to the other forges a larger connection to the world.

The scientist's drift approach, Suzuki proposes, provides another potential means to dealing with alien otherness: rather than suppressing what is 'other', it acknowledges a shared risk to all parties involved.[99] In a post-colonial society, this shared risk means reconsidering how supposed global coalition tends to allocate risk following a racial and colonial logic, disproportionately affecting those peoples that have been marked as 'other' and perpetuating economic inequality. Applying this drift approach requires an openness to otherness and the potential for chaos that in turn builds up resilience to uncertainty. By confronting the way human cultural structures and environment influence each other, accepting otherness can create a stronger sense of shared responsibility.

Inconceivable invasion

Another way of feeling the effect of our actions is cinema's ability to put the viewer in another's position. By connecting to the monsters humanity finds out their goals are not unfamiliar: the kaiju are directed by alien colonists to conquer the earth and extract its resources. 'Discovering' a planet and bleeding it dry is not unfamiliar to the genre of science fiction either, as it has since its origin been rooted in imperialism and colonialism.[100] Typically the stories are colonial adventures that shaped American 20th century culture, mirroring the European 'discovery' of the New World through 'first contact' stories. The focus on technological progress reflects the importance of technology as a governing force in the colonial occupation and subjugation of

[96] Hackett and Harrington, *Beasts of the Deep,* 29.
[97] Uy, "Cancelling the Apocalypse," 384.
[98] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling,* 10-11.
[99] Suzuki, "Beasts from the Deep," 25-26.
[100] Latham, *Science Fiction Criticism,* 365, 439 & 487.

territory. But they are not considered invasions, because they are written from the perspective of the invaders. In stories that depict Latham's concept of 'reverse colonization', it is humanity that is being invaded. They witness first-hand the unstoppable force of territorial expansion sometimes known as 'progress'. Sci-fi disaster stories, then, are the opposite of the usual "…celebratory narratives of exploration and discovery that formed the Official Story of colonialism."[101] Instead, catastrophe explores the anxieties of unbalanced power. They invert existing power relations and by placing them in another time and setting they expose the imperialist ideology and colonialist way of thought. The colonizers themselves are suddenly put into the chaos and destruction and transformation that they have caused upon others. In *Pacific Rim*, the alien colonists come from the ocean to consume our world. And, as Newt tells us, humans are no more than vermin to them.

The kaiju and their alien masters too reflect cultural anxieties of contemporary society. Sci-fi invasion typically reflects anxieties about the increased presence of military power in the American landscape.[102] It is no coincidence that in most alien invasion films the military plays a big role in defeating the invading force. But this takes a twist in *Pacific Rim*, where the initial military program to defeat the kaiju is discontinued in favour of simply building a wall around the coastlines. With limited people and resources, it is left up to individuals to solve the problems. This indicates growing distrust in the current systems of government, which have in recent times proven themselves incapable of handling global threats. The kaiju present a threat that is connected to ecological disaster and defies the anthropocentric image of the world.

Moreover, Newt learns that the aliens have come through the breach before, during the time of the dinosaurs. Apparently, the planet was not conducive to life for the kaiju, so they waited until humanity terraformed the right environment for them through ecological decline. [103] Usually, an ecological effect of colonialism is the modification of an ecosystem through the invasive species brought along and spread by the colonizers.[104] In this case they did not have to do this: we did it ourselves. Though in the case of the kaiju, it is also a prerequisite to sustaining their life on earth, the destruction of the ecosystem is a consequence of colonialism deeply rooted in colonialist mindsets. A parallel can be seen to how the Europeans, as Latham describes, had to "…disassemble an existing ecosystem before they could have one that accorded with their needs, with the outcome at times resembling a toy that has been played with

[101] Ibid., 487-488.
[102] Though the film makes it an international issue, the first kaiju attack taking place on American territory is likely no coincidence.
[103] Uy, "Cancelling the Apocalypse," 387.
[104] Latham, *Science Fiction Criticism,* 496.

too roughly by a thoughtless colossus."[105] Introducing deforestation, domestication, invasive species and diseases to an environment is a more effective way of conquest than weaponry ever could be. Enforcing European ways of what constituted a proper use of the environment led to competing with the original inhabitants' ways of cultivation, usually eliminating the latter entirely. The aliens aim to rearrange the existing ecosystem to suit their own needs.

Another important aspect of the observation that the kaiju have visited us before is that rather than from outer space, they came from inside the planet where they have been all along. Mark Fisher describes the reason for the awe and horror that monsters invoke as "…an irruption into this world from the outside."[106] But as Fisher also establishes, the outside in this case is a mere reflection of the inside. In this case, the weird and what lies beyond human comprehension helps the film diverge from the anthropocentric conception of the world. If the kaiju have been here all along, in what way is the earth 'human territory'? Their presence within our planet questions the boundaries of what we consider 'the world' and discloses that our perception of the planet is limited: apparently there are dimensions of our planet that are invisible to us.[107] They challenge the anthropocentric concept of division. Ultimately, their ancient presence exposes that the distinction between the inside and the outside is a man-made one to distinguish humanity from the rest of the world.

The shocking revelation that humanity has been sharing the earth with a species that is potentially superior shatters the anthropocentric illusion that the earth is ours. The kaiju's appearance reminds us that there are creatures living on earth than we are unaware of, with the deep sea being the most likely habitat, and forces humanity to consider the existence of other realities besides our own. The realm of their origin is beyond human experience and comprehension.[108] But while in a typical monster/sci-fi film these incomprehensible creatures inevitably take over humanity, del Toro depicts a more hopeful alternative of humans fighting back. Moreso than simply depicting technology saving the world, the collaborative nature of the undertaking combined with quieter moments of human connection show humanity, compassion and connection at the centre of efforts.[109] Del Toro cultivates a more humanist approach to horror and monsters. In *Pacific Rim*, connection between humans, between Jaeger pilots and even between monsters and humans saves the day.

[105] Ibid., 492.
[106] Fisher, *Weird and Eerie*, 20.
[107] Uy, "Cancelling the Apocalypse," 385-387.
[108] Davies, *Transnational Fantasies*, 47-49.
[109] Ibid., 136.

Conclusion

The ocean has an inexhaustible capacity for sides and meanings, only some of which can be discussed within the scope of a single paper. As a physical body of water, the role of the sea in these films is to provide an origin point for the monster that is both familiar and unknowable to humanity. As a metaphorical concept, it carries an oceanic feeling of connection between landmasses, humans and the non-human. As a vessel for colonialism, it is both exploited and an instrument of exploitation. As a mode for considering human perception of ecological decline, it absorbs and reflects (faulty) perceptions of human impact on the world. Ecology and colonialism are both very pressing contemporary issues with much in common. As research has shown the values and systems that underlie the colonial ideology perpetuated in popular media are inherently tied to anthropocentric ecological impact. Scale in understanding colonialism, ecological effect and the sea itself are personified in giant monsters. Cinema is the vessel to help humanity understand and reflect.

In *Pirates of the Caribbean,* the different ways human characters interact with the Kraken and the other monsters are in line with the two sides of the ocean perceived by Erika Balsom. The case of Captain Jack Sparrow, who flees, fights and dies at the hand (or tentacle) of the kraken, is evidence of the humility of humans in the face of the grand ocean and the creatures it harbours. Lord Cutler Beckett, who is the most literal embodiment of colonialism in this film, represents the exploitation of the sea and its creatures as a vessel for colonialism. Going beyond Balsom's theory however, an ecological focus reveals two other sides of the ocean prevalent in human perception of it. Sparrow's evident humility and death reinforce the notion that the sea cannot be influenced by human action. In Beckett's case, the idea that the ocean is something anthropocentric, something to be owned. Despite being punished for his hubris (again reinforcing the idea that the sea will right itself) the supposed ownership of the sea is never returned to the sea itself. Like acres of land characters in *Pirates of the Caribbean* lay claim to and bargain with parts of the sea, whether trade routes or pillaging territory, and the creatures that inhabit it. With these creatures as representatives of the oceanic ecosystem, the films exhibit a human-monster interaction that lies beyond Balsom's perception. Thus, they reveal not truths about the sea, but truths about the perception humans have of the sea and consequently how they act towards it. The film perpetuates these notions by repeating them and reduces non-human entities to devices for human enrichment.

The abundance of unusual creatures in *Star Wars* makes it harder to distinguish monster from regular alien. Those which are considered monsters are treated as unusual animals at most:

it is their unexpected presence and the characters' lack of knowledge about the species that prompt responses of fear or flight. In presenting the monsters as a common part of the universe *Star Wars* breaks with the sci-fi trope of framing creatures as weird and new and something to be discovered by the human protagonists: these characters would rather do anything but spend more time with these creatures. The films do, however, perpetuate another colonialist notion common in sci-fi: the capitalist extraction of resources which leads to the destruction of the habitats of creatures and peoples. Despite the expanse of the universe, resources are finite and human action impacts the state of planets beyond repair. When considering these factors, the galaxy far far away looks an awful lot like our own planet.

The kaiju and their alien creators in *Pacific Rim* expose what the worst effects of human colonialist action look like from the other side. Disaster films force the human viewer into the perspective of the conquered. But, the conqueror does not come from outer space, but rather inside of our own planet. This shifts the anthropocentric perspective of the earth to one that considers what lies beyond human comprehension, extending over the man-made distinction between inside and outside. Drifting proposes a way to bridge the gap between man and monster: accepting otherness is an essential step towards knowing ourselves and taking responsibility.

Though all films have a reflection of colonialist practices through interaction with the monstrous in common, their treatment of the relation between the human and non-human differ in fundamental ways. *Pirates of the Caribbean*'s projects to reform, disregarding the kraken and other creatures as expendable resources, are signs of ecological colonialism.[110] As is the case in *Star Wars.* In *Pacific Rim,* on the other hand, ecological transformation is a prerequisite for colonial occupation. The differing role of the monster in the films is mostly an effect of the division of power and how much the human is at the centre of this power. *Pirates*' anthropocentric conviction frames the monster as something expendable, an inevitable loss in a war for territory. *Pacific Rim*'s kaiju are the originator of this war and the humans are as expendable as vermin. Where the consideration of the kraken and kaiju as something unnatural seems to emphasize difference, *Star Wars*' inclusion of the monstrous in its regular fauna indicates a greater sense of connection.

The differing subjects and contexts of these films construct a differing treatment of the monster. Still, they are all big-budget blockbusters made in the US, thus they must have an inclination for a positive outlook underlying it all. Evidently, they all centre a small group of

[110] Latham, *Science Fiction Criticism,* 496.

rebels that function outside of or even against the system in power, allowing the films to explore ways of acknowledging the monstrous that differs from the dominant culture in their respective worlds. Though like in most sci-fi films it is the accumulation of knowledge about the monster that allows the humans to defeat it, the ways in which this knowledge is obtained are unconventional. Ultimately, the discussed examples prove that presenting hypothetical situations of other interactions with monsters as a representation of the non-human entities of the earth offers different perspectives and possibilities for humanity to relate to the world. Even if these possibilities are as abnormal as the monsters themselves.

Subsequently, this perspective outside of the predominant system questions culture's obsession with knowing and mapping everything. In *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End* Captain Jack Sparrow notes that mapping the world only makes it seem smaller.[111] The diversity of flora and fauna in *Star Wars* shows that categorizing everything leaves little space for wonder and development. *Pacific Rim* proves that assuming infallibility of anything only lowers the resilience for the unexpected. Perhaps paradoxically, colonization does not actually like exploration when it threatens the established systems.[112] New discoveries have the potential to upset the status quo. Thus, the monster needs to be seen, drawn and contained. What is unseen is ungraspable, thus threatening. Through taxonomy, the individual can be universalized, making an end to the particularity of the monster. Classification opens it up for comprehension within the system. To curb human fear of the unknown, speculative fiction about the future, outer space and the deep sea can be a warning sign as well as a beacon of hope.

Perceiving the world through the lens of the other, the incorporation of life under capitalism becomes even more clear. In mainstream cinema, humanity remains the centre of the universe. The perpetuation of the dominance of capital and the ideology of individualism have precipitated the ecological degradation of our planet.[113] As many articles discussing the Anthropocene conclude, the terms we created to discuss these effects are not enough to capture and convey the full impact this has.[114] Even a term like 'climate change' is a stand-in for anthropocentric damage to the planet, yet does not begin to denote the scope of this damage adequately. The massiveness of such an event, which has no fix, can be impossible to grasp. Perhaps it is too abstract to imagine that earth has a right to rest as well. Eco-cinema is occupied with the task of imagining and conveying these problems and creating affect for the planet. But

[111] *At World's End,* 1:00:45
[112] Litvintseva and Wagner, *All Thoughts Fly,* 37, 48 & 97.
[113] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling,* 72.
[114] Canavan, *Green Planets,* 243.

mainstream cinema can also play a role in reframing unfathomably big themes like the effects of colonialism, the Anthropocene and climate change. As examined in this thesis: the monster can be the vessel to fathom the sea as an entity, and the sea itself can be a metaphor for the world at large. As something that refers both to itself and outside itself, the monster functions as a mirror and a representative to which humanity can relate. Cinema, with its relation to traces of the physical, is in a position to reconvene humanity with the presence of the non-human. Recognizing the existence and immediacy of non-human entities and the interdependence of human and non-human life, is connecting to an oceanic feeling of being part of something greater.[115]

Of course, this research only scratches the surface. The proposed examples are mere representatives of larger tendencies and genres. The analysis is by no means exhaustive and shaped by the socio-economic context it is written in. As more research is done within the field of ecology and on the role cinema can play in this, different perspectives, entities and voices must be considered. There is much to be done. Visualisation of the Anthropocene remains a struggle. Discovering different perspectives by decentring the human from this narrative seems virtually impossible. Creating human understanding of non-human agency is a paradox. The goal of research such as this thesis contains is inevitably to gain knowledge about the relationship between the other and ourselves, which in itself is anthropocentric, a human desire and construct. As the discussed examples (as well as many other films in their genre) show: when the monster is understood, it becomes defeatable. Perhaps the knowledge gained through cinema can be used to fight the biggest beast that has ever threatened the planet: human ruination.

[115] Balsom, *An Oceanic Feeling*, 75.

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