



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

Swinburne University of Technology

Julian Novitz

From Eco-Thriller to Eco-Horror: Eleanor Catton's Birnam Wood as an Antipodean inversion of Bram Stoker's Dracula

Abstract:

With its emphasis on the transgression of “natural” boundaries, the Gothic has always been a powerful medium for ecological themes. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) focuses on a clash between civilised Europe and the wilderness on its fringes. Published at the height of Victorian techno-optimism, it shifts genres from Gothic horror to thriller as its protagonists apply modern science to determine the limits of the titular Count's supernatural powers. The novel ends with the victory of their scientific-rationalist mindset and the taming of the dangerous natural world represented through Dracula's uncanny hybridity.

Stoker's *Dracula* has had an enormous impact on horror and thriller genres, but Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood* (2023) presents a notable inversion of both its central conflict and its structure. In *Birnam Wood*, the wild fringes of rural New Zealand are threatened by the civilised centre, represented by American tech-mogul Robert Lemoine. The novel gradually shifts from thriller to the horror genre, as Lemoine's rationalistic mindset leads him into atrocity. His predations are enabled by his technological hybridity, through which he exerts an almost supernatural influence over his environment. *Birnam Wood* provides an intriguing model for contemporary EcoGothic narratives, using the subversion of thriller and horror structures to foreground contemporary ecological anxieties.

Biographical note:

Julian Novitz is a senior lecturer in Creative Writing and Literature at Swinburne University of Technology.

Keywords:

EcoGothic, climate change, horror, Anthropocene, technology

Introduction: *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* as EcoGothic narratives

Given the differences in context and period, the similarities between Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood* (2023) may not be immediately apparent. *Dracula* is a late 19th century Gothic horror novel and primarily concerned with the supernatural threat posed by its vampiric antagonist. *Birnam Wood* is a contemporary New Zealand eco-thriller, which details the unlikely entanglement of the titular "Birnam Wood" (a collective of "guerrilla gardeners" who pursue environmental activism through covert produce plantings on unused land), and Robert Lemoine, a ruthless American billionaire.

When examined as distinctively EcoGothic narratives, however, thematic and structural parallels become apparent. The term "EcoGothic" has become increasingly popular in ecocriticism, both as a genre label and as a mode of analysis that highlights challenging and unpleasant aspects of the relationship between humanity and the natural world (Parker, 2020, p. 16). The Gothic is often considered a subversive mode of fiction because it generates its uncanny tension through the transgression of boundaries and proprieties. EcoGothic works specifically challenge the divide between human and non-human aspects of the environment to create a sense of fear or dread (Smith & Hughes, 2013, p. 2). In doing so, EcoGothic approaches expand on the Gothic's traditional preoccupation with nature to consider non-human and non-anthropomorphic forms of agency and identity (Del Principe, 2014a, p. 1). Both *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* can be viewed through an EcoGothic lens to explore the ecological anxieties that arise from the changing conditions of their respective periods.

In *Dracula*, the titular vampire count is associated with the wild, mysterious nature at the fringes of civilisation and seeks to extend his supernatural influence into the heart of the British Empire by purchasing properties in London (Donmez, 2015, p. 21). Jason Colavito (2007) observes that scholarship on the text has often focused on psychosexual and queer interpretations to the exclusion of other themes (p. 88). However, a growing number of ecocritical readings emphasise how the turn-of-the-century Gothic horror in Stoker's *Dracula* is informed by distinctly Victorian anxieties about nature.

It is generally agreed that the Anthropocene (a term denoting the historical period within which human activity has become the primary driver of climate change) began in the late 18th century with the Industrial Revolution. As early residents of the Anthropocene, Victorian writers and thinkers were increasingly alert to the changes that human activity caused to the wider environment, and how environmental shifts could dangerously intrude on human spaces (Adams, 2018, pp. 18-20). In *Dracula*, The Count's animalistic qualities, uncanny control over flora and fauna, and association with extreme weather reflect this mounting uneasiness (Del Principe, 2014, p. 26). The EcoGothic terror of *Dracula* resides in the awareness that the contractions of the modern world – its transcendence of boundaries, borders and distances – may work against the quintessential project of modernity, which, according to Bruno LaTour (1993), is to increasingly partition the human world from nature (as cited in Ghosh, 2016, p. 68).

Moving to 21st century New Zealand, *Birnam Wood* begins with a broadly similar premise: a mysterious and powerful foreign interloper uses a real estate deal as cover for a sinister plot. In Catton's novel, Robert Lemoine offers to purchase a former sheep farm that borders the (fictional) Korowai National Park to conceal his illegal mining operation in the area. This scenario similarly reflects the contemporary ecological anxieties of its setting and period. While New Zealand has previously been cast as peripheral and inconsequential, the climate crisis has made its isolated rural land suddenly desirable to international billionaires (O'Connell, 2018). Stoker's late 19th century novel focuses on the threat posed by a monster associated with the wild, and increasingly unpredictable nature that lurks on the borders of the "civilised" world. Catton's 21st century novel is concerned with how an equally monstrous representative of a civilised global elite may now act upon and exploit fringe territories.

Perhaps most crucially, however, both novels deal with questions of plausibility, and focus on characters who struggle to overcome their disbelief at seemingly implausible events and situations. This psychological experience of disbelief is a persistent feature of Gothic literature, where suspenseful tension is often constructed out of characters' uncertainty (Colavito, 2007, pp. 43-44). As I will argue, this makes the EcoGothic useful in addressing the experience of having to shift understandings of what seems plausible or possible due to the changing conditions of life in the Anthropocene.

Plausibility, disbelief and the "complex discovery plot" in Gothic and horror fiction

As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2017) observes, awareness of the Anthropocene challenges one of the fundamental assumptions of Western political thought – that humans and nature operate in distinctly separate spaces (p. 39). Marco Caracciolo (2021) argues that recognising the increasingly complex enmeshment of human and non-human processes in the Anthropocene will require us to relinquish understandings of the world that assume the centrality of human growth, development and progress, and embrace modes of thought that afford greater agency to non-human aspects of the environment (pp. 60-62). This connects to Sverre Raffnsoe's (2016) earlier notion of the "human turn" in environmental philosophy, where humanity is no longer seen as separate and singular, but as integrated into diverse ecological relationships. Human structures can affect great environmental changes but are also open to be acted upon by non-human processes in increasingly sudden ways (p. 30).

As Amitav Ghosh (2016) notes in his frequently cited essay collection, *the Great Derangement*, one of the assumptions of modernity is that change will usually come incrementally, due to the safe partitioning of human civilisation from nature. As a result, the register of plausibility in contemporary literary realism is increasingly out of kilter with the turbulence of life in the Anthropocene. The 20th and early 21st century literary realist focus on gradual, character-driven change has made catastrophism and sudden, dramatic developments seem narratively implausible (pp. 16-26). For Ghosh, this means that literary realist authors have been largely unable to capture the increasingly "implausible" reality of the climate crisis, noting the general absence of extensive literary treatments of climate disaster at the time of his writing. By contrast, Ghosh maintains that popular genres like science fiction have been more successful.

He briefly notes the Gothic in this discussion, though views it as an insufficiently serious genre (p. 24).

While science fiction can provide insightful speculation on possible climate futures, Gothic and horror genres frequently focus on characters confronting circumstances that initially seem impossible to them. This focus is reflected in the “complex discovery plot”, which Noël Carroll (1990) identifies as being common to the narrative structures of horror fiction (pp.100-1). The complex discovery plot has many variations, but it typically breaks down into four stages. It begins with the “onset” of a monster or threat, where its influence is detectable to audiences, but not yet known by the protagonists. This is followed a gradual or sudden “discovery”, where protagonists are destabilised by a seemingly impossible event or encounter. The next stage is “confirmation”, where the protagonists attempt to overcome incredulity and fully understand their situation. The plot typically concludes with a final “confrontation” with the threat, with the survival of the protagonists being typically determined by their success in the preceding confirmation stage (pp. 99-118).

What is notable about the complex discovery plot is that it specifically emphasises the difficulty of accepting what has previously seemed improbable or impossible. Not only do the protagonists discover a horrific threat, but they must also complete a separate confirmation stage to fully convince themselves and others that it is real. Tension is generated not only from the monstrous danger posed by the narrative’s antagonist, but also from the question of whether the protagonists will be able to accept the truth. This aspect of the Gothic and horror genres makes them well suited to exploring psychological and emotional responses to the shifting boundaries of human and natural worlds in the Anthropocene, particularly the sense of disbelief that may accompany the unexpected threats that emerge from these entanglements. EcoGothic approaches have the potential to explore not only the uncanny and unsettling effects of human and non-human enmeshment in the Anthropocene, but also the process of having to shift or expand understandings of reality.

Both *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* employ versions of the complex discovery plot to structure their EcoGothic narratives and generate tension from the disbelief of their protagonists. Of the two, *Dracula* is considered a definitive Gothic text and crucial to the development of the contemporary horror genre (Hogle, 2006, pp. 31-2). It is notable in that it brings the archaic, supernatural evil of the titular Count into a modern-day world governed by science and reason, rather than setting its sensationalist narrative in the past (Senf, 2017, pp. 271-2). Due to their sceptical mindsets, the protagonists must go through a particularly extensive and rigorous confirmation stage to overcome their disbelief. Once they succeed in confirming Dracula’s supernatural threat, however, the novel’s Gothic uncertainty and horror recedes and their confrontation with the Count ends in total victory.

Catton’s *Birnam Wood* is positioned between literary fiction and thriller genres and is perhaps less explicitly Gothic in its language and imagery. However, its exploration of the uncanny permeation of wild nature by contemporary surveillance technology arguably builds into a EcoGothic confusion of human and natural worlds. Furthermore, it takes Shakespeare’s

Macbeth as an explicit guiding influence (as reflected in its title), with each character in the novel being potentially understood as a Macbeth-like figure (McDougall, 2023). Arguably Shakespeare's most Gothic work – due to its transgressive violence, brooding anti-hero, supernatural forces, and uneasy confusion of humans and nature – *Macbeth* also explores particularly Gothic forms of uncertainty and disbelief. Characters routinely misunderstand prophecies, each other, and themselves, and fail to recognise how they have been entrapped by their own actions. Following this influence, Catton's approach to the complex discovery plot reverses the trajectory of *Dracula*. Her protagonists largely fail to overcome their disbelief and collectively confirm the threat they face. As a result, the novel pivots into a bleak and sudden horror at its conclusion.

The remainder of this article will compare the different stages of Carroll's complex discovery plot as they can be identified in *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood*. Exploring the parallels and discontinuities between these texts will help to illustrate the evolution of EcoGothic approaches to the experience of life in the Anthropocene.

Onset: EcoGothic Uncanniness in *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood*

In both *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* the reader is made aware of the onset of mystery and danger before the protagonists begin their discovery. The opening chapter of *Dracula* introduces this through the EcoGothic uncanniness of the wild landscape encountered by Jonathan Harker as he journeys into Transylvania. Harker notes that the conveniences of life recede the further he travels from the civilised centre of London, and as he approaches Dracula's remote castle his somewhat patronising tone gives way to a muffled sense of unease (Light, 2017, pp. 143-4). Where he had previously been convinced of his essential safety and standing as a representative of Western modernity, he becomes more acutely aware of his isolation and vulnerability at the fringes. The environment he encounters is no longer simply quaint or backward, but imbued with a strange, lifelike agency:

Soon we were hemmed in with trees, which in places arched right over the roadway till we passed as through a tunnel; and again great frowning rocks guarded us boldly on either side. Though we were in shelter, we could hear the rising wind, for it moaned and whistled through the rocks, and the branches of the trees crashed together as we swept along. (Stoker, 2011, p. 15)

The uncanny characterisation of isolated natural environments has been a persistent feature of Gothic literature (Smith & Hughes, p. 2). Harker's travel to Castle Dracula creates an uneasy sense that he is being surveilled by the landscape itself – “guarded” by the rocks and trees, pursued by the wolves running alongside his carriage (Stoker, 2011, pp. 17-18). The atmospheric, Gothic dread evoked by the landscape of Transylvania creates a sense of disorientation and uncertainty in Harker before the Count himself arrives on the page.

Birnam Wood opens in a more subtle manner, but one that nonetheless emphasises the apparent isolation of the novel's setting: the Korowai National Park and its surroundings. The first pages

of *Birnam Wood* describe how a recent landslide has destroyed a stretch of highway and essentially cut the area off from the rest of the country.

The road was cordoned off on either side of the mountains, and traffic diverted – to the west, around the far shores of Lake Korowai, and to the east through a patchwork of farmland, and across the braided rivers that flowed down over the plains to the sea. (Catton, 2023, p. 3)

As a result of this closure, human settlement in region recedes, at least temporarily.

The cafes and trinket shops along the highway frontage began, one by one, to close; the petrol station reduced its hours; an apologetic sign appeared in the window of the visitor centre; and the former sheep station at the head of the valley; described by its real estate listing as the town’s “greatest ever sub-division prospect”, was quietly withdrawn from sale. (p. 4)

Where *Dracula* casts Harker’s journey into a fringe territory as strange and threatening, the isolation of the Korowai region makes it immediately appealing to characters in Catton’s novel. Rather than the landscape itself surveilling and menacing the characters, we get a sense that it is being uneasily observed and coveted. This is initially conveyed through the online research and inquiries into the area being conducted by Mira Bunting, the founder of Birnam Wood.

Mira intends to use the former station at the border of the Korowai Park for a secret large-scale planting. Upon her later arrival at the farm, the reader discovers that Mira herself is being surveilled, via drone and phone hacking, by Robert Lemoine, who has already quietly stepped in with an offer to purchase the farm from its owners, local pest control magnate Sir Owen Darvish and his wife Jill. Lemoine ostensibly intends to use the site for the construction of a survivalist bunker, but this is merely a cover for his plan to extract a payload of valuable rare earth minerals from his illegal and highly destructive mining operation in the Korowai National Park.

Gothic works frequently challenge the division between human and natural worlds (Del Principe, 2014a, pp. 1–2). In *Birnam Wood*, the implication of an EcoGothic threat is established through the gradual revelation that a seemingly pristine and isolated natural space is deeply enmeshed with human technology. Seemingly “natural” events – like the landslide mentioned in the opening of the novel – are ominously revealed to be the work of human agency. The mining operation itself, the surrounding security and monitoring stations, and the network of cameras and surveillance drones within the Korowai region all work to uneasily confuse the boundaries of what is human and what is natural.

To summarise, the onset of EcoGothic horror in *Dracula* develops out of the threatening contrast drawn between a sedate civilised world and the uncannily animated landscape of a fringe region. David Light (2017) argues that *Dracula* is underpinned by a 19th century “colonial geographic imagination”, which places Britain at the heart of civilisation (p. 143). Harker, as an “imperial tourist”, constantly compares Transylvania – unfavourably – to the

standards of his home (p. 140). In this regard, the approach to the wild Transylvanian landscape can be seen as an expression of an “ecophobic” current in Victorian thought, where any form of nature that is not safely subordinated to human control is viewed with suspicion (Donmez, 2015, p. 17).

By contrast, *Birnam Wood* explores the diminishing autonomy of natural spaces in the contemporary Anthropocene. The uncanny sense that the landscape is animated and actively observing the characters comes not from its wild isolation but from its permeation with drones and cameras. The onset of EcoGothic anxiety develops through the dawning realisation that there is now no true boundary between the previously remote fringe and the once seemingly distant centres of civilisation and global power.

Discovery: Count Dracula and Robert Lemoine as EcoGothic Monsters

The plots of *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* both revolve around the schemes of powerful villains who excerpt an outsized presence within their respective narratives. In the case of Stoker’s vampire this dominance extends beyond his relatively sparse appearances in the novel itself and into the field of 20th and 21st century popular culture. Similarly, critical reactions to *Birnam Wood* have often tended to focus on Robert Lemoine as a character who may seem implausible by the standards of literary realist fiction. Lemoine has been variously described as a “Bond-villain” (Millar, 2023) or an “anti-Jack Reacher” (King, 2023), in reference to his extensive resources and calculating nature. His destructive powers and amoral behaviour have also seen him likened to horror movie monsters like Freddy Kruger or Michael Myers (Braunias, 2023). Both Dracula and Lemoine, however, function as distinctively Gothic antagonists whose hybridity conceals their monstrous natures. The approach to Gothic hybridity in each novel can again be read as representative of the ecological anxieties of their respective periods.

The hybrid antagonist or antihero is a common feature in Gothic literature, where their ability to move between different environments, identities and social worlds is framed as transgressive and uncanny (Arcoa, 2020, p. 92). In *Dracula*, the titular Count presents himself as a hospitable nobleman in the opening chapters. However, Jonathan Harker is disconcerted by the animalistic aspects of the Count’s appearance and demeanour. Harker notes his “peculiarly arched nostrils”, “lofty domed forehead” “massive” eyebrows, “cruel looking” mouth with “peculiarly sharp white teeth” and “extremely pointed” ears (Stoker, 2011, p. 20). Later he is surprised when the Count expresses affinity for the wolves howling outside the castle walls and is shocked the next evening, when the Count momentarily loses control of himself at the sight of Harker’s accidentally spilled blood. Judith Halberstam (1993) has observed that these physical descriptions of Dracula potentially reveal an antisemitic undertone, particularly when coupled with the Count’s vampiric nature, which recalls the “blood-libel” myths about Jewish religious traditions in Christian Europe (p. 333). However, ecocritical readings of *Dracula*, have also tended to note that the Count’s appearance emphasises his alignment with wild nature as a dangerous force within the novel (Del Principe, 2014, p. 26; Arcoa, 2020, p. 93).

In *Birnam Wood*, Robert Lemoine's destabilising hybridity manifests through his control of information and surveillance technology. But just as Count Dracula is not only framed as controlling nature but also as being dangerously "natural", Lemoine's responses and reactions can be cast as uncannily technological. The sections related from Lemoine's point of view reveal his algorithmic thought processes. On first meeting Mira, he makes a series of swift judgements about how to approach her based on data he has gathered from her hacked phone. This leads him to partner with Birnam Wood as an additional cover for his presence in New Zealand. Later this same capacity for algorithmic calculation – quickly weighing risk against reward – allows him to engineer a plausible cover-story for Owen Darvish's accidental death. This quality to Lemoine's thinking is unsettling. He is easily able to dismiss the human and environmental cost of his various schemes through zero-sum calculations:

Yes, he had caused the earthquakes that had caused the landslide. Yes, five people had been killed already. But how many died everyday in Chinese rare earth mines and processing facilities... Five dead was nothing, thought Lemoine. Five dead, in the scheme of things, was basically no dead at all. (Catton, 2023, p. 83-4)

Later, this same capacity for dispassionate risk assessment leads Lemoine to commit murder without any qualms or hesitation. His technological hybridity in the novel goes beyond simply controlling and manipulating information technologies; he also internalises their data-driven processes. This is presented as threatening in the novel, not only to the natural landscape that he seeks to control and exploit, but also to other human characters.

The structures of *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* follow multiple characters through their individual discoveries of the true, monstrous nature of each novel's antagonist. In each case, they experience varying levels of success in overcoming their disbelief at the implausibility of what is occurring. The opening chapters of *Dracula* revolve around Jonathan Harker's gradual discovery of the Count's vampirism. Tension is built through his initial reluctance to accept the truth. Although Harker is witness to Dracula's monstrous transformations on various occasions, he doubts his own senses:

At first I could not believe my eyes. I thought it was some trick of the moonlight, some weird effect of shadow... (Stoker, 2011, p. 35)

Later, the epistolary form of the novel shifts to accounts of other characters who undergo separate discoveries of Dracula's supernatural evil. The psychiatrist John Seward and Harker's finance Mina Murray similarly struggle with the apparent implausibility of Count's hybrid nature. In an ecocritical reading of these moments of denial and disbelief in *Dracula*, Terry Adams (2018) explicitly links them to Ghosh's (2016) characterisation of the obfuscation of the climate crisis in contemporary literature. The first instinct of the characters when confronted with troubling phenomena is to seek alternative explanations that conform to their preexisting views. This mirrors the tendency to avoid direct confrontation with the changing realities of life in the Anthropocene by otherwise rational and thoughtful writers, as identified by Ghosh (Adams, 2018, p. 21).

In Catton's novel, the discovery plot is largely driven by Tony Gallo, an aspirant journalist and former member of Birnam Wood who breaks away when they accept Lemoine's offer of a partnership. He travels to the Korowai region himself to investigate the construction of Lemoine's bunker and stumbles upon evidence of the mining operation. Nonetheless, even he initially struggles with the apparent implausibility of what is occurring. For example, when he encounters one of Lemoine's armed mercenaries, he immediately doubts his senses in a similar manner to Jonathan Harker in *Dracula*.

Had he just imagined it?... The harder Tony tried to picture it, the more ludicrous it seemed... Of course he'd only imagined it. This was New Zealand, for heaven's sake; people didn't carry guns. (Catton, 2023, p. 164)

The other characters in *Birnam Wood* discover Lemoine's monstrous nature more slowly as their suspicions of him are tempered by the allure of his wealth and celebrity. The Darvishes are ambivalent about Lemoine but nonetheless eager to partner with his corporation for the local prestige this will bring. Mira maintains the façade of a combative and sceptical attitude but is also flattered by Lemoine's attention. Similarly, her close friend Shelley is initially wary of Lemoine's intentions, but later aligns with him as her relationship with Mira frays.

Early in the novel, Lemoine confesses to Mira how "easy" it is to succeed as a member of the global elite, and this is born out in the novel itself (p. 198). Just as *Dracula's* vampirism transforms other characters into his thralls, Lemoine's wealth (denounced by Tony literally as "blood money") and global stature seem to have an almost mesmeric effect on the New Zealand characters. They are willing to accept his mundane explanations for bizarre or horrifying events and meekly follow his seemingly reasonable suggestions to their own detriment. It therefore becomes increasingly easy for him to prevent, delay or reverse their discovery of his monstrous nature. This similarly reflects the frequent experience of life in the Anthropocene as identified by Adams (2018), where unthinkable or unimaginable truths are easily pushed to the periphery of thought (pp. 21-22). The trajectory of Catton's novel makes it clear that the wealthy elite, as represented by Lemoine, directly benefit from prolonging disbelief and uncertainty.

Where the animalistic Count threatens to infect the civilised world with the wild, uninhibited nature associated with fringe territories in *Dracula*, Lemoine's technological hybridity furthers the continued expansion of civilised global capitalism and its logic of rationalistic self-interest into previously peripheral spaces. This ultimately proves more destructive and insidious. The 19th century techno-optimism of Stoker's novel enables its protagonists to eventually unite to confirm their experiences and determine a plan to subdue the wild nature represented by the Count. The more pessimistic contemporary exploration of the EcoGothic in Catton's novel sees its antagonist largely succeed in preventing this kind of unity, utilising his mastery of technology to spread disinformation and isolate the other characters. This allows him to continue to brazenly permeate, exploit and control the wild fringe of the Korowai Park, with inevitably horrific consequences for both landscape and human characters.

Confirmation: technology, adaptation and connection in *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood*

As previously noted, the presence of the confirmation stage in Carroll's complex discovery plot speaks to the psychologically taxing nature of Gothic and horror narratives for their protagonists. Typically, the threat or monster in these works is so challenging to conventional understandings of reality that it requires additional confirmation to avoid regressing into disbelief. Information must be shared and re-examined to overcome persistent scepticism and denial (Carroll, 1993, p. 102).

While Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is mainly remembered for its iconic antagonist, its continuing influence on the horror genre can also be felt through the structural emphasis that it gives to the confirmation stage in its narrative. After the principal characters discover the supernatural threat, and individually wrestle with its implications, they unite to share their experiences and collectively understand them (Colavito, 2007, p. 89-90). Classic Gothic narratives typically maintained suspenseful uncertainty up until their dramatic conclusion and tended to focus on helpless, mystified or dissolute heroes, who often required an unexpected revelation or outside intervention to confirm the truth of their situation (p. 51). In *Dracula*, the protagonists all proactively contribute their experiences and knowledge to the confirmation of the threat.

This structural innovation in *Dracula* – where the confirmation stage of the plot is explored in detail and fully equips the protagonists to confront the monster on a more hopeful or even advantageous footing – has become a familiar feature of the horror narratives that succeeded the earlier Gothic tradition. In a variety of supernatural and mundane horror narratives across the 20th and 21st centuries, the confirmation stage of the complex discovery plot does not just reaffirm the protagonists' understanding of their situation. Rather, it sees them apply logic and knowledge to adapt what they have discovered and attempt to not only confront but also outwit their antagonist (p. 38). This common structural device can arguably be traced, in part, to the 19th century scientism and techno-optimism that inform the progression of the complex discovery plot in Stoker's influential *Dracula*.

It is therefore significant that Catton's 21st century eco-thriller, despite its parallels with *Dracula*, reverses this common trajectory. While the characters in *Birnam Wood* discover various aspects of Lemoine's plans and character, they are unable to effectively share their observations and experiences, and their confirmation of Lemoine's evil remains incomplete and ineffectual. In many cases, Lemoine deliberately uses his mastery of information technology to disrupt communications between the New Zealand characters.

As an EcoGothic narrative, *Dracula* is framed, to at least some degree, as an epochal conflict. The aristocratic vampiric Count is associated with the superstition and untamed nature of old Europe, where the virtuous, predominately middle-class alliance who oppose him represent the very best of late 19th century urban civilisation (Dümling, 2016, p. 181). They are sufficiently modern and open minded to be swayed from their initial scepticism by sufficient evidence, and they use the emergent technology of their period to assemble and circulate vital information. At a critical juncture, Mina transcribes copies of the diaries of the various characters – and

assembled secondary sources – using the relatively new technology of the typewriter. This allows the vampire hunters to quickly read and circulate these accounts as a dossier of information, confirming their individual discoveries and suspicions (Seed, 1985, p. 73). As Anne DeLong (2019) argues, this use of technology in *Dracula* violates the personal privacy of these characters, but also works to deepen their social bonds (pp. 109-110). Allowing their personal diaries to be copied and read is a profound act of trust. Later, this technological copying helps to preserve vital clues when Dracula destroys Dr Seward's records.

As the assembled vampire hunters determine how they will resist Dracula's incursion, they continue to use technology (like telegrams and railway transport) to gather information and counter the vampire's abilities. In this approach, they are guided by the adaptive, scientific mindset of their leader Professor Van Helsing. Van Helsing is not presented as adhering blindly to religious or folklore traditions in his approach to the supernatural. Rather he employs ritualistic measures against the Count (crosses, holy water and wafers, garlic, etc.) because he has proven that they work via forms of experimentation, and he is equally open to incorporating modern medical and social science into his practices (Dümling, 2016, p. 192). He employs blood transfusions on several occasions to slow the spread of vampirism and is delighted by Mina's suggestion that they consider the Count as a psychologically "criminal type" (Stoker, 2011, p. 317) and pursue him as such.

By contrast, Count Dracula cannot match the adaptive and creative thinking of the more contemporary vampire hunters. Despite his age and malevolence, the Count is characterised by Van Helsing as having a "Child Brain" (p. 281) in his attempts to utilise the technology of the day and exercise his powers in modern London. The Count's inability to quickly change proves to be his undoing. When he infects Mina with his vampirism later in the novel, she and Van Helsing turn his powers against him, using the physic link created by his domination to spy on the Count as he flees back to his castle in Transylvania. As Eric Brownell (2010) argues, this essentially sees Mina being willingly used as a form of surveillance technology in the final section of the novel, demonstrating the vampire hunters' creativity and adaptability as ascendent modern professionals, in contrast to the powerful, yet essentially static Count. Indeed, Mina's technological hybridity in the text – where she alternates between acting as an equal member of the alliance in dialogue and discussion, and as a set of technical functions that can be used by the other members – is presented as entirely beneficial in the novel, in contrast to the negative characterisation of Dracula's hybridity with nature.

While the metaphor of vampirism is often employed in discussions of historical and contemporary capitalism, Dracula in Stoker's novel is essentially an anti-bourgeois figure, attempting to restore his ancient aristocratic privileges in a modern world of industry and enterprise (Seed, 1985, p. 62). Where Dracula's close affinity with nature frames him as the representative of a barbaric, unpalatable past in Stoker's 19th century EcoGothic work, Robert Lemoine is the herald of a menacing and uncertain future in Catton's 21st century novel. Due to his technological hybridity, he is the character in the novel who demonstrates the quickest and most adaptative thinking. In his immediate response to the accidental death of Owen Darvish we see him becoming quite literally far-sighted, rapidly anticipating and considering

future scenarios. Furthermore, he employs both this foresight and absolute mastery of technology to progressively isolate the other characters.

Where late 19th century communication and information technology works to strengthen social bonds and foster cooperation in *Dracula*, the irony in *Birnam Wood* is that 21st century networked technology is repeatedly employed to keep characters disconnected from one another. Throughout the novel, Lemoine's use of technology is one-sided and generally unimpeded. His drones allow him to exert a disembodied influence over the Korowai area that recalls Dracula's supernatural control of flora and fauna. This network of surveillance is used to trap Tony in the park later in the novel, leaving him unable to physically escape or communicate his discoveries. Furthermore, Lemoine routinely accesses the devices and accounts of other characters to monitor their communications and block, remove or alter their messages. He maintains a regular, ghostly presence on the phones of both Mira and Shelley, which helps him stay alert to their movements. Through his manipulation of communication and information he keeps other characters blind to his activities, or even misdirects their suspicions, such as when he causes Jill Darvish to doubt the faithfulness of her dead husband.

The only way for characters to resist or counter Lemoine is to conceal themselves from networked systems. Tony uses the cover of the foliage in the Korowai Park to hide from Lemoine's surveillance, in a movement that may recall the soldiers who cloak their approach to Dunsinane with tree branches in *Macbeth* (Dimick, 2023, p. 9). To prevent his data being hacked, Tony uses an analogue camera to capture images of Lemoine's mining operation and retains them on a physical roll of film. Later, when Mira becomes aware that Lemoine is tracking her via her compromised phone, she stores it in a metal thermos to conceal her movements. In *Birnam Wood*, information technology is so deeply embedded in systems of power and exploitation that it provides no opportunity for resistance. Unlike the vampire hunters in *Dracula*, characters in *Birnam Wood* are unable to cleverly turn Lemoine's own powers against him. Their only recourse is to reject networked technology entirely.

The speed of communication and rapid access to information afforded by contemporary networked technology ultimately facilitates Lemoine's exploitation of the Korowai region and his manipulation of the other characters. *Dracula* demonstrates the techno-optimism of the late 19th century, where the uncanny powers of the antagonist can be resisted with modern technological competencies and rational adaptation. *Birnam Wood* presents a pessimistic 21st century inversion of this trajectory. Contemporary networked technologies uphold and reinforce the antagonist's power rather than providing a means to counter it. They are used to obscure the truth and foster division and isolation, in ways that enable the profit-driven predation of natural spaces in the Anthropocene. As Lemoine is largely successful in using his technological mastery to prevent the other characters from confirming his threat, they are unable to effectively confront him. This sees the novel shift genres from eco-thriller to EcoGothic horror in its final movements.

Confrontation: horror and the Anthropocene in *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood*

Despite its blockbuster status within the horror genre, the last third of *Dracula* is not particularly scary. Stoker does little to maintain the earlier atmosphere of dread and disorientation, and the novel shifts to a more conventional thriller or adventure narrative as the Count is driven from London and chased back to Transylvania (Clasen, 2012). Once the vampire hunters have confirmed Dracula's threat, he remains on the defensive for the remainder of the novel.

Though his titular villain has come to dominate popular imagination, Stoker gives more attention to the cooperative network that forms to fight him. Where Dracula represents ancient, aristocratic forms of power that are deeply tied to land (he must literally import crates of dirt from his homeland to survive in London), the vampire hunters embody the seemingly more flexible and innovative arrangements of modern capitalist society. Mina describes their initial assembly as if it were a company board meeting:

When we met in Dr Seward's study two hours after dinner, which had been at six o'clock, we unconsciously formed a sort of board or committee. Professor Van Helsing took the head of the table, to which Dr Seward motioned him as he came into the room. He made me sit next to him on his right, and asked me to act as secretary; Jonathan sat next to me. Opposite us were Lord Godalming, Dr Seward, and Mr Morris – Lord Godalming being next the Professor, and Dr Seward in the centre. The Professor said: -- 'I may, I suppose, take it that we are all acquainted with the facts that are in these papers.' (Stoker, 2011, p. 220)

Following this, the final chapters of *Dracula* emphasise the seamless cooperation and efficiency of vampire hunters and the superiority of their modern, meritocratic practice. While the characters defer to Van Helsing as their leader, each contributes specialised knowledge. Harker's legal experience in conveyancing and Lord Godalming's connections as a liberal aristocrat prove essential in tracking down Dracula's properties in London. As a psychiatrist, Dr Seward provides a scientific perspective on the behaviour of vampirism. Mina's former occupation as secretary has equipped her with prodigious technical and research skills, and an encyclopaedic knowledge of railway routes and timetables. In the final chase by horseback to Dracula's castle, the American cavalryman Quincey Morris ensures that they are properly equipped and takes the lead. The novel begins with a slide into the suspenseful uncertainty of Gothic horror but ends in a reassuringly straightforward adversarial conflict between Dracula's anachronistic powers and an alliance of creative and adaptive modern-day professionals.

Following this extended pursuit, the final confrontation with Dracula's EcoGothic threat is resolved anticlimactically. The vampire hunters catch up with Dracula's retinue at the gates of his castle and quickly slay the Count, albeit at the cost of Quincey Morris's life. The speed of the novel's conclusion demonstrates the efficiency and competence of its united protagonists. *Dracula*'s epochal conflict ends with the conclusive victory of the modern world over the past and the safe containment of the wild nature associated with the Count. This is reiterated in a brief coda, where Jonathan Harker describes returning to Transylvania seven years later:

In the summer of this year we made a journey to Transylvania, and went over the old ground which was, and is, to us so full of vivid and terrible memories. It was almost impossible to believe that the things which we had seen with our own eyes and heard with our own ears were living truths. Every trace of all that had been was blotted out. (Stoker, 2011, p. 351)

The previously wild nature of this fringe territory is now sedate and can be comfortably enjoyed by the former vampire hunters as triumphant tourists. *Dracula*'s shift away from the horror genre culminates in a resolution that arguably typifies some of the ecophobic attitudes that emerge from the Victorian awareness of the early Anthropocene. The solution to the uncanny, destabilising dangers that emerge from the enmeshment of human and non-human processes is the continued subordination of nature to modern human agency. The novel seems to end with the assurance that once seemingly impossible threats are discovered and confirmed, modern science and reason will be sufficient to confront them.

More than century later, the conclusion of the complex discovery plot in *Birnam Wood* serves as rebuke to *Dracula*'s Victorian techno-optimism. The confrontation stage in Catton's novel is characterised by a sudden descent into violence and destruction, following Lemoine's continued success in maintaining confusion and disunity. As B.D. McClay (2023) observes, *Birnam Wood* is from its outset fixated on the gaps in knowledge that exist between characters. Catton often shifts perspectives mid-scene to illustrate how poorly they understand one another and their own situations. Despite its oft cited "principles of unity", the Birnam Wood collective is already splintering at the opening of the novel and Lemoine's machinations serve to only deepen these divisions and further isolate the characters, rather than providing them with an impetus to unite against him. This precipitates the abrupt shift from blackly comic thriller to fatalistically bleak eco-horror in the novel's final pages.

Birnam Wood suddenly ends after a seemingly hopeful development, when Tony finally connects with Mira and convinces her to help him escape the Korowai region. However, this is quashed when they are discovered by Lemoine's drones. Once Tony and Mira are entrapped by Lemoine in the novel's final pages they are unable to take any steps to escape. Tony is too injured and exhausted from his ordeal, and Mira is stunned into an indecisive passivity. She remains almost unwilling to believe what is happening, torn between her suspicion of Lemoine's explanations and her inability to fully accept Tony's account. They are unable to stop the successful execution of Lemoine's final scheme, where he poisons the Birnam Wood collective, intending to frame Tony as a perpetrator and use the horrific event as cover for his final extraction and transportation of rare earth minerals. This is only partially undone by the belated arrival of Jill Darvish, acting on her suspicions following her husband's death. She shoots Lemoine and rescues Tony, before being slain by one of Lemoine's bodyguards, but is too late to save Mira, Shelley and the other members of the collective, who all die gruesome deaths.

The novel ends with Tony, as the final survivor, wounded and fleeing through the bush. In a desperate attempt to reveal what has occurred, he elects to set fire to Lemoine's mining

operation in the Korowai Park, consuming the forest canopy in flames. The bleakly destructive ending of *Birnam Wood* aligns it with the tendency identified by Jason Colavito (2007) towards expressions of “the horror of helplessness” in post-1990s literary engagements with the horror genre. Colavito argues that these works tend to emphasise the dawning awareness of the protagonist(s)’s entrapment and the impossibility of their victory or survival (p. 364). In these works, the confirmation stage either progresses too slowly or comes too late. Narratives that engage with the horror of helplessness often examine characters who are caught in systems of power that they cannot adequately confront or escape. This aligns with Sarah Dimick’s (2023) observation that the millennial characters in *Birnam Wood* tend to operate from positions of hopelessness and anxiety. The economic and political developments that contribute to the perpetuation of the Anthropocene have also entrapped them with debt and financial insecurity and leave them almost paralysed with climate dread (pp. 6-7). Late in the novel, Tony despairs at the “late capitalist degradation not just of the environment, not just of civic institutions, not just of intellectual and political ideals, but... of what he even felt was possible anymore...” (Catton, 2023, p. 332-333). Earlier, Shelley is described as resigned to always being on “the losing side” (p. 251). In one scene, members of the Birnam Wood collective casually discuss the futility of even speculating on the possibility of a better or fairer world when they live in the shadow of a climate apocalypse: “‘It’s all beside the point anyway,’ Jessica cut in. ‘We talk about the future like we’re going to be here to see it. We’ll all be dead. We’ll be so fucking dead. We’ll be on fire.’” (pp. 266-267)

This horror of hopelessness eventually comes to pervade all attempts at resistance. The Birnam Wood collective is understood as an activist movement that “aims to operate as much as possible outside a capitalist framework” (p. 113), highlighting alternative and cooperative approaches to food production, and critiquing the understandings of land ownership and property rights that have contributed to the climate crisis (Dimick, 2023, pp. 4-5). However, the trajectory of the novel sees it co-opted into the exploitative systems that it was established to resist, first cultivated by Lemoine as part of his efforts to obscure his operations, then callously destroyed as a final distraction. Even Tony’s attempts to expose Lemoine’s scheme ironically culminate in even greater environmental devastation. Where the conclusive confrontation in *Dracula* ends in the restoration of order through the safe containment of previously wild nature, the bleak climax of *Birnam Wood* is a hopeless, irreversible slide into chaos and macabre violence. In Catton’s novel, the EcoGothic threat that emerges from the enmeshment of human and natural processes cannot be easily confirmed and confronted because the exploitative systems that have given rise to it prove to be inescapable for the New Zealand characters.

Conclusion:

Examining the EcoGothic approaches to human and non-human relationships in *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* further demonstrates the value of popular fiction forms and structures in addressing the Anthropocene. Rather than being seen as implausibly escapist – in contrast to the traditional, grounded incrementalism of literary realism – the fast-moving, dramatic plots of popular fiction may provide useful models for representing our turbulent contemporary

reality. “Real” life in a time of climate crisis increasingly recalls the extreme premises of dystopian science fiction, the tangled conspiracies of a white-knuckle thriller, or the experiences of awful, often belated, realisation that characterise effective horror stories. The differing approaches to the complex discovery plot in *Dracula* and *Birnam Wood* are revealing when considering the psychological experience of confronting seemingly impossible EcoGothic scenarios.

In *The Ecological Thought* (2010) Timothy Morton suggests refocusing ecocritical discussions on a “dark ecology”, which views human/nature relations in a much more pessimistic light. Ecocritical approaches that consider the “ugliness and horror” found in our relationship with nature will help to put “hesitation, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking” (Morton, 2010, p. 16). The instability of the Gothic as a mode of fiction can clearly contribute to this movement, through its frequently transgressive and ambivalent interrogations of the divide between humanity and nature. However, EcoGothic approaches to evoking terror and anxiety have shifted over time, due to changing political, social and technological circumstances, and the human/natural boundaries that they contest and transgress have been reconfigured.

At the turn of the 20th century, against the background of the emerging Victorian awareness of the Anthropocene and corresponding anxieties about the confusion of human and natural boundaries, *Dracula* expresses an ecophobic fear of the wild, fringe nature represented by the Count. EcoGothic dread and uncertainty is established through the strange animation of untamed landscapes and Dracula’s monstrous hybridity, which signals his affiliation with a dangerous and mysterious natural world. The shift away from the Gothic horror genre following the confirmation stage of the novel signals a late 19th century confidence in modern science and reason, and a belief that EcoGothic uncanniness can be resolved through the safe subordination of wild nature. Writing in 2009, Simon C. Estok argues that in focusing on benevolent understandings of nature, the first wave of ecocriticism has overlooked the persistence of the “irrational and groundless hatred of nature” in Western culture. Exploring expressions of “contempt” and “fear”, alongside more positive constructions of nature, will allow for a much richer understanding of how we perceive and relate to the natural world (p. 207). *Dracula*’s ecological themes are therefore worth examining in a contemporary light, as indicative of early responses to an awareness of the Anthropocene.

Arriving in the early 21st century, Catton’s *Birnam Wood* offers a strikingly different approach to the EcoGothic, despite some structural and thematic parallels with Stoker’s *Dracula*. EcoGothic menace is not generated through the implication of natural agency and autonomy, but rather through the discovery that wild natural spaces are uncannily permeated with human processes and technology. Lemoine’s technologically hybridity is presented as threatening and monstrous, in contrast to Dracula’s destabilising hybridity with nature in Stoker’s novel. Indeed, where emergent 19th century technological competencies and modes of organisation enable the successful confirmation and confrontation of the EcoGothic threat in *Dracula* (and see the novel shift genres from horror to thriller), 21st century technological competencies are used to forestall these stages in *Birnam Wood*. Disbelief and uncertainty cannot be overcome,

as the tools, logic and practices of 21st century global capitalism ultimately work to protect the powerful elites represented by Lemoine by obscuring dangers and deepening division. This inevitably precipitates the sudden, pessimistic slide into violent horror and chaos at the conclusion of *Birnam Wood*, as the EcoGothic threat which emerges from human/non-human enmeshment cannot be effectively checked or countered. The various ways in which Catton's *Birnam Wood* reverses or inverts approaches found in *Dracula* can therefore be read as revelatory of the changing experience of the Anthropocene under conditions of late capitalism. As a result, *Birnam Wood* provides an intriguing model for contemporary EcoGothic explorations of ecological anxiety using the structures of thriller and horror genres.

References

- Adams, T. (2018). "To believe in things that you cannot": Dracula and the unthinkable. *Gonvis*, 18(2), 17-27.
- Arcoa, A. M. (2020). Neither animal nor human: an ecoGothic reading of the monstrous hybrid in Dracula, the Beetle and the Snake Lady. *Pangeas. Revista Interdisciplinar de Ecocrítica*, 2, 89–100.
- Braunias, S (2023, 9 February) Eleanor Catton: "fast, thrilling, insane". *Newsroom*. <https://newsroom.co.nz/2023/02/09/catton-by-steve-braunias/>
- Brownell, E (2010). Our lady of the telegraph: Mina as medieval cyborg in Bram Stoker's Dracula. *Journal of Dracula Studies* 12, Article 2.
- Catton, E. (2023) *Birnam wood*. Granta.
- Caracciolo, M. (2021) *Narrating the mesh: Form and story in the Anthropocene*. University of Virginia Press.
- Carroll, N. (1990) *The philosophy of horror or paradoxes of the heart*. Routledge.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2017) The climate of history four theses. In Szeman, I. & Boyer, D. (eds) *Energy humanities: an anthology* (32–54). John Hopkins University Press.
- Clasen, M. (2012). Attention, predation, counterintuition: why Dracula won't die. *Style*, 46, 3–4.
- Colavito, J. (2007) *Knowing fear: science, knowledge and the development of the horror genre*. McFarland & Company.
- Del Principe, D. (2014a). Introduction: The EcoGothic in the long nineteenth century. *Gothic Studies*, 16(1). 1–8.
- Del Principe, D. (2014). (M)eating Dracula: food and death in Stoker's novel. *Gothic Studies* 16 (1), 24–38.
- Dimick, S. (2023). Guerrilla gardening: at the intersection of Birnam Wood and Minneapolis. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*.
- Donmez, B.A. (2015) A Gothic ecocritical analysis of Bram Stoker's Dracula. *Journal of the Faculty of Letters*. 32(2), 15–24.

- Dümling, S. (2016) Killing fear by killing time: Stoker's Dracula as an epochal conflict narrative. *Narrative Culture*, 3(2), 180–205.
- Ghosh, V. (2016) *The great derangement*. University of Chicago Press.
- Halberstam, J. (1993) Technologies of monstrosity: Bram Stoker's "Dracula". *Victorian Sexualities*, 36(3), 333–352.
- Hogle, J.E. (2006). Theorising the Gothic. In Powell, A. (ed) *Teaching the Gothic*. Palgrave. 29–47.
- King, R. (2023, 8 February). Eleanor Catton, by Rachael King. *Newsroom*.
<https://newsroom.co.nz/2023/02/08/catton-by-rachael-king/>
- Light, D. (2017). Tourism and travel in Bram Stoker's Dracula. In Crisan, M, M. (ed) *Dracula* (139–156). Palgrave.
- McClay, B.D. (2023, 6 March). Eleanor Catton wants to make plot matter again. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/03/13/birnam-wood-book-review-eleanor-catton#:~:text=In%20%20Birnam%20Wood%2C%20the,what%20lend%20a%20story%20meaning.>
- McDougall, K. (2023, 10 February). Eleanor Catton on new novel Birnam Wood, Booker fallout, good, evil and the “poison” on social media. *The New Zealand Herald*.
<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/eleanor-cattons-new-novel-birnam-wood-dont-let-the-title-fool-you/BF43H5FSMNEGBDXFITWKEWBTGE/>
- Millar, L. (2023, 7 March). A New Zealand eco-thriller where no one gets off scot-free. *Slate*.
<https://slate.com/culture/2023/03/eleanor-catton-birnam-wood-review.html>
- Morton, T. (2010) *The ecological thought*. Harvard University Press.
- O'Connell, M. (2018, 15 February) Why Silicon Valley billionaires are prepping for the apocalypse in New Zealand. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/15/why-silicon-valley-billionaires-are-prepping-for-the-apocalypse-in-new-zealand>
- Parker, E. (2020) *The forest and the EcoGothic*. Palgrave.
- Raffinsoe, S. (2016) *Philosophy of the Anthropocene: the human turn*. Palgrave.
- Seed, D. (1985) The narrative method of Dracula. *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 40(1), 61–75.
- Senf, C. (2017). The evolution of Gothic spaces: ruins, forests, urban jungles. In Crisan, M, M. (ed) *Dracula*. Palgrave. 259–274.
- Smith, A, & Hughes, W. (2013) Introduction: defining the EcoGothic. In Smith, A. & Hughes, W. (eds) *EcoGothic* (1–14). Manchester University Press.
- Stoker, B. (2011) [1897] *Dracula*. Oxford's World's Classics.