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Manifestations of Eco-horror in Carter Smith's *The Ruins*: Unveiling the Enigmatic and Malevolent Dimensions of Nature

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Abstract:

Carter Smith's film "*The Ruins*" explores the complex relationship between nature and the human world. The movie follows two couples vacationing in Mexico, who later joining a traveller named Mathias on a journey to a remote Mayan ruin, lamentably overrun by carnivorous vines. This leads to their tragic fate. This critical study delves into how the vines become an enigmatic and malevolent force. The movie offers an eco-horror perspective by challenging the traditional concept of nature as a nurturing force. Here, nature becomes an unpredictable force that evokes Eco-anxiety, which gives it a mysterious nature. This portrayal also grants nature an autonomous and malevolent identity. This study also views how the visual and sound design enhances the portrayal of nature as a threatening and mysterious force.

Keywords: The Ruins, Eco-horror, Eco anxiety, Traditional, Vines.

Eco-horror elements and the monstrous antagonistic nature of Nature are explored through an eco-critical lens in Carter Smith's *The Ruins*. The movie belongs to the eco-horror genre, which also explores the complex relationship between humans and nature. The traditional approach considers nature as a motherly figure. This act depicts a deliberate act to subdue nature's inherent power making it harmless for selfish human pursuits. Framing nature as the antagonist, allows for an interpretation of the movie within the framework of eco-horror. The critical study also examines how Carter Smith utilises the concept of Eco-horror to show the malevolent dimensions of nature.

The Ruins is a 2008 film directed by Carter Smith, based on a novel of the same name by Scott Smith. The primary setting of the movie is a Mayan pyramid located deep within a forested area, which highlights the mystery and solitude that underlie the story. The place is isolated from the outside world, and even the local natives fear to visit the ruin, thus providing its sense of mystery. Matthias's search for his brother acts as the catalyst for the rising action and their tragic fate. In modern human-centric world, other organisms and natural environment are marginalized and given only a subaltern identity. This critical view shows how nature has a different perspective from the traditional views. Eco-horror is a sub-genre of horror that focuses on environmental themes and human-nature relationships. The uncertainty of nature provides it with a mysterious identity and thus, it paves the way for eco-anxiety. The monstrous vines in the film possess an element of mystery due to its unpredictability, which creates anxiety or fear in the character's minds.

The traditional view of nature is actually of a nurturer or a nurturing force. This concept of giving nature a motherly figure is a recurring theme in many cultures, traditions and philosophies. This metaphor gives the idea of nature as a comfort provider, just like a mother would give to her children. Many cultures also depict nature as a Goddess figure associated with fertility, agriculture, and also as a life provider. Even in the literary sphere, romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge considered nature a source of their poetic inspiration. In his work “The Tables Turned”, Wordsworth writes, “Come forth into the light of things, Let Nature be your teacher”(Wordsworth). John Muir said in his collection *Steep Trails* that “ In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks”(Muir 128). All these poets and writers gave nature an aura of a life provider. They believed that it also possessed healing powers. This view creates a more sustainable and harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Sometimes, this concept serves as a dual-edged sword, as a shield for selfish human pursuits. In the case of *The Ruins*, we encounter a different perspective, both in the horror genre and the portrayal of nature. Here, nature becomes the antagonist, and the sentient vine acts according to its instincts against human intrusion. Apart from the traditional view here, we see a different face of nature as a murderous villain who is bloodthirsty to kill the trespassers. Portraying nature as an adversarial figure, is also a way to escape from the induced vulnerability.

The movie’s horror scenes also help build a strong villainous image of nature. The vines exhibit predatory behavior rather than being protective or life-giving; they actively hunt, mimic human sounds, and make traps for the human invaders. The Mayan ruin, which was initially portrayed as very silent and enchanting, later became a site of terror

and bloodshed. Here nature becomes the source of the suffering rather than becoming the bearer of it. The vines invade Stacy's body, highlighting human vulnerability in the face of ecological dominance (*The Ruins* 01:11:36 - 01:14:10). The human body becomes an instrument that induces horror. Here, the characters become completely helpless. Nature, in the form of malevolent vines and the aggressive locals, traps them in an inescapable environment. This scene also shows the horrific loss of bodily autonomy. Here the vines do not just attack; they assimilate. The Ruins was a place that was once human-dominated, but now it has become overtaken by nature. This shift highlights the authority of nature and its power to wipe out human control. The movie uses eco-horror elements that include the vines, the forest, the human body and natives.

Here, nature also becomes one of the central characters. Even though it is a negative character, it has a more significant impact on the story part of the movie. The vines become the representative that induces anxiety and fear in the minds of the viewers. Jeff, Amy, Stacy, and Mathias are the central characters in the movie, who come face to face with the villainous vines. The characters' inability to comprehend or predict nature prevents them from counteracting, thereby giving the vines a mysterious identity. This unpredictability reiterates the real-world issues relating to natural disasters. Nature becomes unpredictable, and this unpredictability induces ecological anxiety. This anxiety also fuels the characters' fear. They cannot predict what will happen to them in the very next moment, thus making it threatening.

"Eco-anxiety is a specific form of anxiety relating to stress or distress caused by environmental changes and our knowledge of them" (Usher et al.).

Nature becomes dominant both physically and also psychologically. More than being just dominant, it becomes a force of violence or malevolence. The characters are also mentally traumatized by the vine's acts. They become helpless, forced to surrender to the mighty natural force. The falling action of the movie results in the death of most characters, whereas traditional eco-horror movies have a different climax portraying human surveillance against antagonistic forces. *The Ruins* show a different autonomous nature, which is untamable by human activities. Here, only Amy manages to escape after her lover Jeff sacrifices himself, ultimately being executed by the Mayan leader. Here, instead of being a life provider, the plants become inhumane to the exploring human forces. In conventional horror films, the final survivor often represents a victory over the antagonists; however in *The Ruins*, the sole survivor remains bound by fate, putting forward that survival does not equate to true escape. This type of ending shows the inevitability of nature. Traditionally, plants and trees are seen as resources meant for human use; here they emerge as dominant and untamable. The forest, initially portrayed as beautiful and vibrant, gradually reveals its hidden chaos turning nature into a destructive force. The film projects the intense horror scenes through the petrifying actions of the vines. The characters become clueless regarding what they will face next, leading to complete chaos and anxiety.

The movie depicts the Mayan inhabitants as quiet observers of nature's overwhelming force. The narrative presents the characters as passive observers of the vine's horrors. They demonstrate a profound comprehension of nature's autonomy; they choose to contain rather than fight against the power. Their actions convey human insignificance and the consequences of disturbing the natural world, intensifying the eco-

horror themes. One can also observe the unspoken alliance between nature and the natives. Rather than trying to destroy the vines, they prioritize quarantining them to prevent their spread. These actions suggest their fear and respect for the plant, considering it an ancient, uncontrollable force. They stay emotionally distant from the suffering tourists, offering no aid or sympathy. Their behaviour suggests that they are fully aware of the vine's act and accept it as part of nature's order. Rather than casting them as villains, *The Ruins* uses the villagers to represent nature's neutrality- neither good nor evil but existing beyond human control.

In Mayan culture, such constructions are relevant; specific locations are linked to death and are also considered dangerous and prohibited. The tourist's entrapment in the ruins explains the presence of human sacrifice in Mayan culture. Also, in Mayan culture, nature is not just a life source but also a force of judgement. Plants and animals are closely tied to human life and deities, and many cultures believed that certain plants possessed souls or supernatural powers. Also, the plant's ability to invade the human body can be similar to the Mayan myths about nature reclaiming life. The origin of the vines is still a mystery in the movie. This lack of a backstory makes it more primal and ancient and also adds the notion that some aspects of nature remain beyond the reach of human knowledge.

The technical aspects of the movie also help to bring horror and anxiety to the audience. Most scenes in the film take place in an ancient pyramid situated in the middle of the forest. This setting helps to create the atmosphere of mystery. Besides the natural aesthetics, the movie also uses body horror and parasitism, to enhance the horror mood. These all come under the visual effects of the movie. The vines appear unnatural and

mysterious, revealing them to be organic but malformed. It is also overgrown all over the ruins, showing its wilderness and dominance. The movie uses body horror to a high extent; there are close-up shots of the vines penetrating the human body and also growing inside it. The lighting of the scenes is also important; there are shadowy interiors inside the construction, while in the exteriors, there is bright daylight, which contrasts with the dim interior. These visual aspects enhance both horror and mystery.

The movie's sound effects have their relevance. Primarily, the film uses natural sounds from forest such as humming of insects, chirping of birds, to enrich the scenes. These audio effects create a suspenseful and horrifying atmosphere. The vines imitates sounds as a trap to lure and attract the explorers. In the movie, Amy and Stacy go inside the pyramid in search of the ringing sound of a cell phone. This is also a mimicking by the plants to attract the group (*The Ruins* 00:52:40 - 00:54:10). Though the vines produce natural sounds, they sometimes also feel alien. The sounds evoke anxiety about something unknown, even though it is organic. The combination of the visuals and sounds makes the scenes more alive. The unsettling sounds and the movement of the vines enhance the horror throughout the scenes. Overall, the audio-visual aspects enhance the view regarding the dominance and mystery of nature. It effectively conveys the character's emotions directly to the viewers.

The movie effectively uses colour and lighting to employ the theme of eco-horror and isolation. While most horror movies rely on darkness and shadows to create horror, *The Ruins* subverts this common cliché by using bright and natural environments that feel just as terrifying. The juxtaposition of beauty and horror enhances the viewer's psychological unease, transforming nature into unsettling and threatening. The film uses

bright, warm colours to highlight the vibrant greenery, golden sunlight, and clear blue skies of Mexican landscape. These colours evoke a sense of relaxation, giving the characters false security before entering the Ruins. The visual contrast between the tropical beauty and the unfolding horrors creates a sense of inner turmoil. The flowers of the vines are depicted in an oversaturated red giving them an alien and malevolent aspect. This oversaturated use of the red can also be observed in the depiction of blood throughout the movie. The blood-soaked visuals become more vivid, making the pain and suffering instinctive. The purpose of the altered contrast is to make death feel inescapable and reinforce body horror. The film also employs a green tint which increases as the vine's presence increases. Here the green tint suggests corruption and invasion. The blinding sunlight suggests an exposure to suffering and no place to hide. This high lighting exposes the emotions of the characters. The bright light contrasts with the character's increasing difficulties and nightmares, making the horror scenes feel more unreal and horrifying. Also the contrast between the bright daylight and the deep shadows in the jungle also creates a sense of unease.

Camera angles play a good part in portraying the overpowering presence of nature. The film employs low-angle cinematography that highlights the power and dominance of nature over the characters. The tourists are often shot from higher angles, which makes them appear small, powerless, and less important compared to the vastness of nature. The handheld camera works effectively captured the overall chaos and the intensity of the panic scenes; these shaky camera shots increase the exposure of horror by pulling the audience into the characters. The film frequently uses close-up shots which intensifies the emotional and mental trauma of the characters. Through its framing and

composition the cinematography positions nature as dominant and the characters as powerless and vulnerable.

There is an extensive use of psychological terror throughout the movie. The characters are not only physically harmed but also mentally. They are undergoing an existential threat, mainly due to the unpredictability of the vines. The film transfers existential threat from the characters to the audience and also replaces the human-centric perception of power and dominance with a different, powerful form of nature that is uncontrollable. The psychological terror arises from the depiction of humans as vulnerable and powerless to uncontrollable natural forces. When the characters enter the forest, they think the situation is under their control because they are unaware of a powerful force.

Death plays a pivotal role in the movie. The thought of death takes a psychological toll on the characters. The things around them become unpredictable and not under their control. No matter their action the characters are unable to escape their fate or the hopelessness of their struggle. The malevolence of nature is the key factor that induces existential anxiety in the characters. Stacy's words "It's in my head" (*The Ruins* 01:14:45), reflects the psychological and existential terror they had to face in the Mayan temple. Here the vines are not just a physical threat; they also invade and disturb the character's consciousness. They cannot distinguish between themselves and nature. The discovery of a plant growing within her body triggers intense panic, mirroring the real world psychological distress linked to parasitic infections like tapeworms and brain eating amoebas. Like a disease that slowly takes over the body the plant invades silently amplifying the horror. Even if the character escapes from the place, the horror will be in

their mind, which will haunt them forever. The vine's ability to grow inside the human body can be a biological horror trope; reflecting real-life anxieties about parasitic infections. The movie also resonates with the current ecological threats where people become helpless against ecological collapses and climate changes.

As time passes, the psychological condition of the characters also changes. There occurs a psychological breakdown of the characters. They descend into despair and paranoia. Their loss of faith in each other causes blaming, sacrificing, and turning on one another, showing how the ecological crisis can break human bonds.

The movie diverges from the traditional conventions of eco-horror in cinema. Most of the movies from the same genre have a different key idea by considering nature's revenge as a response to human activities and later showing human surveillance. In movies like *The Host* (2006) and *Gaia* (2021), nature becomes the antagonist due to pollution and deforestation. However, in this case, nature is portrayed as a dominant force beyond human control, acting as the antagonist without the influence of human activities. It displays a carnivorous instinct, targeting any explorer who tries to trespass the boundaries. Movies like *The Mist* (2007) and *A Quiet Place* (2018) also show environmental themes, but these movies have some form of escape available. In contrast, *The Ruins* results in the inevitability of fate and the absence of hope. Also, there is no lesson for the characters to learn or any ecological balance restored. In this way, it also steps aside from the traditional ways and the existing eco-horror genre. The movie shows nature as dominant, self-centred, and not a benevolent provider or a vengeful force.

Conclusion

The Ruins provide a new meaning to eco-horror by stepping away from the existing perceptions regarding nature as a benevolent force and depicting its dominant, different, and predatory dimensions. Through body horror and existential anxiety, the film shows nature not as a force that stands against human exploitation but as a force that acts according to its instincts. The movie portrays nature as sentient, which deepens ecological anxiety. The characters are confronted with inescapable terrors from the sentient vines that render them helpless to forces which can neither be understood nor controlled.

Overall, *The Ruins* challenges us to reconsider humanity's relationship with nature, confronting a troubling truth: nature does not seek revenge; it simply reclaims, consumes, and endures, even after humans are gone.

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