



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Animal ownership and ecological consciousness in three American horror texts**

Leeuwen, E.J. van

### **Citation**

Leeuwen, E. J. van. (2023). Animal ownership and ecological consciousness in three American horror texts. *Comparative American Studies*, 21(1-2), 131-146.  
doi:10.1080/14775700.2023.2282262

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4082072>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



## Animal Ownership and Ecological Consciousness in Three American Horror Texts

Evert Jan van Leeuwen

**To cite this article:** Evert Jan van Leeuwen (2024) Animal Ownership and Ecological Consciousness in Three American Horror Texts, *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 21:1-2, 131-146, DOI: [10.1080/14775700.2023.2282262](https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2023.2282262)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2023.2282262>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 23 Nov 2023.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 222



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



## Animal Ownership and Ecological Consciousness in Three American Horror Texts

Evert Jan van Leeuwen

Universiteit Leiden Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden, the Netherlands

### ABSTRACT

This essay explores three popular horror narratives' engagement with the commodification and exploitation of animals within American society. It reveals that the attitude towards animals as commodified products is a natural outgrowth of the modern materialistic American Dream in which possession of private property and the accumulation of material wealth is equated with getting ahead and living the good life. The essay also shows how the films *Burning Bright* (2010) and *Pet* (2016), as well as the comic book *Animosity* (2017–2021) reveal the environmental destructiveness inherent in the ideology of individual ownership as a measure of human wellbeing. In each text values of empathy, co-habitation and plenitude are repressed by human beings in a drive to own, control and exploit both animals as well as other humans. By reversing relations of power and agency, these three horror texts stress a need for what Theodore Roszak has termed the development of an ecological consciousness in the human mind through which humanity's knowledge of the inherent interrelatedness of all lifeforms on earth can be re-awakened and the slow violence (Nixon) of human materialism can be exposed.

### KEYWORDS

Horror; Ecocriticism;  
Ownership;  
Commodification; Plenitude

In *Gothic Nature*, Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland claim that 'fears of the nonhuman world are as rampant as ever' (2019, 1). This essay critically explores three works of popular American horror culture that suggest the opposite: that materialist Western civilization is marked by arrogance and a sense of innate superiority rather than fear of nature, and that this attitude lies at the heart of the current environmental crisis. A key aspect of the dominant ideology that buttresses this hubris is commodification. Both Tim Ingold (1994) and Mary Murray (2011) argue that after centuries of human domestication many animals as well as the products they 'make' for their human owners have 'become a form of property which', like many industrially manufactured consumer items, 'can be owned, inherited and exchanged' (1994, 6). When animals become the private property of a person, as a pet or an object to be exploited, the owner deems it their prerogative to use and

**CONTACT** Evert Jan van Leeuwen ✉ [e.j.van.leeuwen@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:e.j.van.leeuwen@hum.leidenuniv.nl) 📧 Universiteit Leiden Centre for the Arts in Society, Leiden, the Netherlands

📄 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/14775700.2023.2282262>

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

handle this property as they see fit, like a digital device, a car, or a house. If in many Gothic stories nature is indeed 'Other, excessive, unpredictable, disruptive, chaotic, enticing, supernaturally powerful, and, perhaps most disturbingly, alive' (Parker and Poland 2019, 1), the films *Burning Bright* (2010) and *Pet* (2016), as well as the comic-book series *Animosity* (2017–21), reveal that animal ownership through commodification has proven the perfect method to replace this fear with a sense of superiority which allows humans to forcefully tame, control and devitalize the natural world at large, including humans who are as much part of this world as all other flora and fauna.

Each horror text reveals a different facet of the role played by ownership through commodification: in *Burning Bright*, the antagonist's brutal control and exploitation of a wild animal is juxtaposed to his very similar treatment of his family and the workers he employs, revealing the self-destructive consequences of the human penchant to tame and commercialize 'the wild'. *Pet*, as the film's title emphasizes, focusses specifically on how the commodification of companion-animals as consumer products parallels dark developments in human interrelations within the contemporary megalopolis Los Angeles. *Animosity* takes a broader perspective by speculating on how both domesticated as well as wild animals would respond to centuries of human domination of the environment once they are given the agency and powers of mind to fight back against the ideology of ownership.

In America (and in the West generally) ownership is a central feature of the good life, as 'upward mobility' is 'understood in terms of economic and/or social advancement' (Cullen 2003, 9). While few people would ever speak openly about their desire to own another human being, the concept of animal ownership, like home and car ownership, is entirely normalized within American (and Western) notions of the good life. According to Lori Gruen, not only farm animals but also 'companion animals' have become 'commodities' and suffer 'the status of property' (2012, 156). Animal commodification is supported and continually enhanced by a global industry worth '\$261 billion' (Flatt Osborn, Jen 2023). Clearly, the commodification of animal (and vegetable) life, is fundamental to the global free-market economy. A vast commercial media and advertising industry exists that hails humans into expanding their consumerist lifestyle. Cullen warns, however, that this materialist notion of the good life has both 'deeply reassuring and deeply troubling' consequences (2003, 9). *Burning Bright*, *Pet*, and *Animosity* employ the motif of animal ownership and exploitation to confront one of these deeply troubling consequences of the materialist good life: the destruction of the natural environment and human wellbeing by what Rob Nixon calls slow violence: 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2011, 2). In all three horror texts, the commodification of non-human lifeforms as exchangeable property not only fractures human-nature relations but also affects human interrelations in a negative way. For the antagonist John Gaveneau, in *Burning Bright*, animals and humans are merely means to a selfish financial end. In *Pet*, the normalization of companion-animals as products leads the protagonist Seth to believe he can own, control, and train a human being as a companion in the same way, to eradicate his feelings of alienation and loneliness in LA. In *Animosity*, the marvelous trope of

‘awakening’ gives animals power of thought and agency equal to humans, exposing the slow violence that was inherent in normalized human-animal relations and foregrounding the need to acknowledge the inherent interrelations between all life-forms and non-living natural elements on the planet.

Each text represents the human drive to possess and dominate as a consequence of the repression of ‘innate ecological connectedness’ (Roszak 1993, 301). The origins of this repression, Theodore Roszak situates in the incessant demands of the urban-industrial-market-economy to push humans ‘[u]pward and onward toward ever higher levels of production and consumption’ (25). After centuries of technological, industrial, and capitalist developments nature has been redefined as ‘an objectified realm of miscellaneous physical things and events which is outside of and other than’ (Roszak 1973, 7) humanity, and thus nothing to fear. This hollowing-out of the sacredness of life within the ecosphere, especially regarding human-animal relations, is encapsulated in the concept of animal ownership specifically.

In *Burning Bright* animal ownership takes the form of capturing and taming a ferocious tiger for profit. As a circus animal, the tiger has value only as an object of sensational entertainment. But the analysis below reveals that this tiger can choose sides, ethically speaking, capable of protecting victimized humans from a human monster. As such, the tiger is also a fictional beast, an allegorical figure, given a personality and a moral compass that encodes it with a significant ecological message. While the concept of a moral compass is mostly associated with human beings, research conducted by Suzanna Monsó et al. (2018), building on earlier work by Mark Rowlands, provides evidence that animals can be considered moral subjects. As such, denying animals the power of making moral choices is a feature of human exceptionalism that the film challenges through its plot.

The film’s title is taken from William Blake’s poem ‘The Tyger’ (1794). Blake’s evocative lyric has proven meaningful to many readers since its publication; it has become part of Anglo-American popular culture in the form of pop- and rock-song adaptations and references to it in various films. D.G. Gillham’s interpretation of the poem dovetails with the popular understanding of its meaning; the speaker wonders whether ‘[a] universe that contains beasts of prey must be a ruthless one’ (1966, 244). On the one hand, the ferocious tiger ‘represent[s] the presence of evil in the universe’ (1966, 245). On the other hand, it is also a beautiful and majestic creation whose dual nature of menace and majesty symbolizes the sublimity of nature, rather than its destructive potential. To see the tiger only as a ferocious beast is not to see the tiger at all, but to project the human fear of nature’s wrathful power (Estok’s ecophobia, discussed below) onto one of its sacred creations.

*Burning Bright* presents viewers with the disastrous consequences of this human failure to acknowledge the sacred majesty of natural creation. After momentarily being enticed by the tiger’s ferocity, Gaveneau determines to exploit the tiger’s majestic power for material gain, at the expense of both the animal’s and various humans’ wellbeing. *Burning Bright*’s eco-critical theme resides in its explicit encoding of Gaveneau as a monster on the loose and the tiger as the unwitting hero who reveals the ability to choose sides and save the siblings who were supposed to be its prey. The film builds on earlier eco-horrors like *Frogs* and *Prophecy* (see Schell et al. 2015) in presenting

a materialistically motivated human antagonist as the true monster, and the vengeful animal as a heroic beast.

The opening scene foregrounds how economic demands systematically alienate people from nature and from each other. A circus-man aims to sell the tiger to Gaveneau for his roadside ranch. He knows the deal 'is against [his] better judgement' (Brooks, Carlos, dir 2010, 00:06:05) but sighs and concludes: 'ok. let's get to it' (Brooks, Carlos, dir 2010, 00:06:09). The financial benefits of the sale overpower the circus-man's ethical scruples; the tired and cynical demeanor of this man and the nervous excitement of Gaveneau foreground the extent to which both men have been driven to this deal for economic reasons. Both are clearly out of their depth, but also in too deep with respect to their financial arrangement: the sale must happen for both, regardless of how this will impact the tiger's wellbeing.

Gaveneau's determination to profit from the tiger has blinded him to the obvious: if the circus could not tame it, it will be too powerful for him to handle. But he has convinced himself that the tiger needs to be a 'scary animal' (Brooks, Carlos, dir 2010, 00:07:10) because 'that's what the tourists pay to see' (Brooks, Carlos, dir 2010, 00:07:11). While Gaveneau wants a discount, his obsession to own the tiger puts him in a position to be exploited. Viewers witness the circus-man's superior salesmanship. He tells a story about the tiger chasing down and eating a horse alive. By impressing on Gaveneau that this tiger is a spiteful killer, evil in the flesh, he is willing to pay even more than he first intended. This foregrounds the alienation inherent in any financial exchange: both men leave happy because each believes that they have duped the other. Making a profit is all that matters. Gaveneau sees only the destructive power of the tiger as a quality to exploit; he names it Lucifer; hell is indeed about to visit his home.

During the rising action, viewers learn that Gaveneau not only desires to own wild animals for profit. He has also taken possession of the Taylor family's home and its current inhabitants: Tom and his older sister Kelly. After their mother's death (poisoned by Gaveneau), Gaveneau (their stepfather) inherited the property and took possession of the family's savings, which had been earmarked for Tom's enrolment in an educational institute for autistic children (a rushed and awkwardly represented aspect of the film). With this money Gaveneau bought the tiger. Consequently, Kelly is forced to decline a university scholarship to support her brother. Gaveneau's financial scheming shows him firmly in the grip of contemporary materialist ideology. His notion of doing right is to focus on his material welfare no matter who loses out in the process.

Gaveneau's attitude towards the tiger is analogous to his attitude towards the people he is supposed to care for: for as long as they/it are useful, they/it is valuable. This attitude leads him also to exploit a group of illegal immigrants who are building his safari park. A telling frame (Brooks, Carlos, dir 2010, 00:15:26) shows these workers peering worryingly into the cage, with the camera taking the perspective of the tiger. This perspective places the bars of the cage in front of the workers. This frame is interspersed with shots of other caged animals in John's possession, foregrounding the animals' and the workers' mutual position as Gaveneau's captives to be exploited for his personal material welfare, not matter how detrimental this is to their physical (one worker is bitten) and mental wellbeing.

The film overtly links Gaveneau's exploitation of animals, immigrants, and children, which supports Simon C. Estok's argument that 'ecophobia', homophobia,

racism and sexism are ‘thoroughly interwoven with each other and must eventually be looked at together’ (2009, 208). In fact, all three horror texts under scrutiny foreground the necessity of recognizing ‘the simultaneity of identities and categories of difference and inequalities (race, class, gender, age, ability, species, and beings) and their interlocking in structures and processes of injustice and oppression’ (Tschakert et al. 5). The immigrant scene encodes the white American male protagonist as the monster. Gaveneau treats humans and animals alike as tools to shore up his own financial and ontological security.

According to Estok, ‘control of the environment, understood as a God-given right in western culture, implies ecophobia’ (208). Elizabeth Millard explains, however, that a ‘phobia . . . involves significant fear about a specific object or situation that does not pose a threat’ (2022). Despite the object not posing a threat it is ‘actively avoided’, and if it cannot be avoided, it is ‘endured with intense fear or anxiety’ (2022). While Gaveneau’s obsession to control the house, the land, the people, and the animals, may originate from unconscious feelings of ontological insecurity, his words and actions in the film suggest that he does not suffer from a phobia – clinically speaking – but from a severe case of hubris. Rather than actively avoiding the dangerous tiger, he seeks it out, (mistakenly) believes he is its natural master, and is (mistakenly) convinced that it will do his dirty work.

Astutely, Estok explains: ‘ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism on the ethical position that humanity is outside of and exempt from the laws of nature’ (2009, 216–17); this explanation suggests the ‘phobia’ (if that is what it is) shows itself as hubris. The opening scene of *Burning Bright* hints at this relation between fear and hubris: the circus-man knew and feared the tiger’s ferocity and told John to starve it: ‘that’s how you show him who’s boss’ (Brooks 2010, 00:9:11). John indeed proceeds to starve the tiger to realize his material goals. In fact, he is shown ‘to starve’ his kin and employees to get ahead financially. Having bled the Taylor family dry, he releases the hungry beast into the house in the hope that it will reprise its horse-killer role from the circus, with the Taylor children in the role of the horse.

The animal-stalks-its-prey scenes are cinematographically unremarkable, but the film’s horror does not reside in visceral shocks. The horrific climax comes when Kelly discovers that Gaveneau plans to collect \$250,000 in life insurance by feeding her and Tom to the tiger. The children’s plight is identical to that of the animals Gaveneau has purchased for his safari ranch. Their lives are valuable only in so far as they can yield a profit. As such, the film reveals how the widespread belief in material welfare as the standard for human wellbeing leads to the commodification and economic exploitation not only of animals and other non-human lifeforms on the planet, but equally of human beings by human beings.

The film’s representation of Gaveneau as a materialist monster underscores Erich Fromm’s contention that in ‘a culture in which the supreme goal is to have – and to have more and more . . . the very essence of being is having’; consequently, ‘if one has nothing, one is nothing’ ([1976] 2021, 13). Gaveneau’s obsession with possession and control has blinded him to the majesty and beauty of the tiger as a symbol of nature. He could only see the tiger’s ferocity as a tool with which to further his own materialist aims. By harnessing the tiger’s destructive potential for selfish ends, Gaveneau is the typical male overreacher of classic horror stories, punished for his hubris by the so-called

monster he has unleashed on the world in an attempt at domination. In *Burning Bright*, the unpredictability that Parker & Poland define as a feature of ‘Gothic Nature’, is playfully employed by giving the tiger a finetuned moral compass and an understanding of poetic justice: he eats Gaveneau alive.

The final scene follows a cinematographic convention in animal-horror cinema: ‘the power of animals to take us into their sights, and to evade or refuse our visual control’ (Lennard 2019, 138). As Gaveneau sneaks into the doorway with his rifle, his body language is that of a big-game hunter, but the camera does not present the shot from his perspective. The audience faces the muzzle: and thus takes the position of the hunted. The Taylor children are shown treading with care through the house, aware that they are the hunted. As such, the audience is placed in the same position as the children and the tiger, reinforcing the role of Gaveneau as the monster. The tiger’s sudden leap from off screen onto the hunter reveals which of the two was truly in control in this cat-and-mouse game: the tiger had overseen the movements of all three humans and with its surprise attack frees not only itself, but also the Taylor children and the immigrant workers from their captivity at Gaveneau’s safari ranch.

While the horrors of *Burning Bright* play out in a rural setting, the megalopolis has proven equally fruitful as a setting for the horror genre’s exploration of destructive materialism. According to Roszak, urban-industrial zones function like horror monsters:

they suck in the riches off the Earth and spew them back in running streams of merchandise and debris. We can see nothing below us but a vista of parasitic urban agglomerations that eat and eat at the substance of the planet, returning more garbage than the world’s natural cycles can clean away (1993, 218). The opening of *Pet* visually represents Roszak’s concept of ‘City Pox’, a metaphorical virus that describes ‘the appetite for resources and political control that spreads out like so many invisible filaments from the centers, claiming the forests, the buried mineral deposits, the pools of oil, the deep aquifers, the most distant sources of energy’ (1993, 217). *Pet*’s Los Angeles is not a celebrity-friendly, high-society hub, but a concrete jungle through which alienated individuals wander hopelessly in search for meaning and purpose.

The opening shot of the film is a tropical island scene. This turns out to be a wall-to-wall poster above Seth’s bed: his only view of ‘nature’. The urban environment that surrounds him is shot in muted colors, dominated by shades of light brown and light grey. Even his uniform is grey. The external surroundings are closely huddled rectangular structures of concrete and steel, separated by broad dark strips of tarmac. The frames of this lifeless scene are consistently crisscrossed with electrical wires that connect the various buildings with each other. Whether at home, on the street, or at work, it becomes apparent that Seth not only feels but exists entirely alone in this metropolis.

The dog shelter’s interior (Seth’s workplace) mirrors the outside environment. Rows of uniformly square steel enclosures stand along a grey, concrete corridor. Seth gives the dogs food and water, but the cold uniformity of the shelter and his use of a watering can (a garden tool) hints at a demand for efficiency rather than affection. The dominant culture at the shelter is economic not altruistic. While the dogs are kept to be rehoused, they have a shelf-life. When a German shepherd is marked for death, Seth thinks about adopting it; however, his landlord does not allow pets in his apartment. The vet suggests that Seth should find a new place to live, which is impossible on his meagre \$9.00 p/h salary. The doctor is in the veterinary business for the money; he criticizes Seth for a lack

of initiative and ridicules him for working ‘in a shit hole like this’ (Torrens, Carles, dir 2016, 00:07:21) at his age. He advises Seth: ‘If you want something in this life, you gotta take it’ (Torrens, Carles, dir 2016, 00:07:23). The vet’s subscription to the competitive materialist ideology is underscored by the way in which he describes the shelter as a ‘shit hole’ without it affecting his ontological insecurity. As a doctor, he has many career options and feels professionally and financially independent. While not explained in the film, the doctor’s presence could be an act of charity, which would further underscore his professional independence from the shelter’s continued existence.

Seth is a dependant in this establishment. What is more, he seems to be there because he desires to help the animals rather than profit from them. He seems to be thinking about the dogs’ wellbeing as much as his own. Yet Seth’s emotional bond with the dogs hinders his ‘progress’ in LA’s hyper-competitive workaday world. The manager/nurse tells Seth: ‘you’re a sweet guy, but if you can’t do your job, I’ll find someone who can’ (Torrens, Carles, dir (2016), 00:06:26). The shelter is a business not a charity and dogs are the commodity in which this business trades. Jacque Lynn Foltyn’s research into contemporary dog ownership reveals that human ‘devotion’ to their animals can take on grotesque forms when the pet becomes a commodity for conspicuous consumption: ‘[t]he dog is “worn” as an accessory in clothes coordinated with their own’ (2019, 57). As fashion accessories, dogs become ‘expendable objects’ and lose their status as ‘conscious non-human beings that have willingly adapted to living with people’ (60). *Pet* reveals that humans too can become such expendable objects.

Research conducted by Michael B. Beverland et al. (2008) reveals that some people indeed look for ‘mastery’ over their pet, demanding ‘deference’, even developing the habit of ‘dressing up’ their pet like a doll (2006, 493–4) as a sign of control and ownership. The pet industry has developed scientific programs aimed at enhancing various animals’ abilities to please their owners aesthetically. Some dogs are bred for cuteness, like brands of cuddly toys, at the expense of their mental and physical health. This invokes the question asked by *Pet*: whether the human desire to possess and control other lives, animal or human, is ultimately a form of slow violence, the destructiveness of which reaches far beyond the abused and exploited pet. The ideological need to possess and control life develops into a cultural script that normalizes the objectification and exploitation of animals as well as human beings for personal emotional gain; or, as *Burning Bright* explores, purely for profit.

As a dependant, Seth is just as interchangeable as the dogs at the shelter. This underscores Estok’s thesis that there is a direct connection between the shape and quality of human-animal relations and human interrelations. According to Gruen, expressions of closeness or kinship are an unusually prominent feature of the [human-pet] relationship. Pets are given personal names, they are spoken to as if they understand human speech, and they are generally treated as honorary members of the human social groups to which they belong (2012, 140). This is so because pets ‘fulfil social and emotional needs comparable, though not necessarily identical, to those fulfilled by human companions’ (1994, 129). This also explains Seth’s unwitting amalgamation of his love of dogs and his need for human companionship. Gruen explains, however, that unlike friends and lovers, pets often ‘are forced to conform to [their owner’s] rituals and practices’ and ‘are often denied full expression of their urges’ (2012, 156–57). When pet ownership is defined ‘as a condition in which a being is confined and controlled and is reliant on those in control

to satisfy her basic needs' (Gruen 2012, 133), it becomes a form of imprisonment. From this perspective, conflating human-pet relations with human interrelations, as Seth does, can lead to the projection of these unhealthy aspects of pet-ownership onto human friendship.

The outside world, in the film, proves to be as stripped of emotion and authentic human connections as Seth's workplace. The scenes of his commute foreground the isolation that characterizes life in LA. All travelers on the bus are wrapped up in their own thoughts and occupations, as if each seat on a public transport vehicle is a private cubical. On the bus, Seth approaches Holly, a young woman he recognizes from school. Her verbal response and body language highlight her immediate suspicion on being approached by someone else in public. Seth's desire to meet her remains unfulfilled. When Seth asks the security officer at work for advice on how to connect with Holly, the man is similarly suspicious: 'shit man, I don't know you . . . why are you asking me?' (Torrens, Carles, dir 2016, 00:05:40). While you would expect two colleagues working in the same establishment to know each other well enough to exchange some form of small talk, this response reveals that the security officer and Seth work in total isolation from each other. Seth's attempts at spontaneous human communication are experienced by those he approaches as an unwanted intrusion into their almost hermetically sealed private spheres, even when they are in the public realm.

The extent of Seth's alienation becomes apparent when he practices conversational speech in front of a mirror at home. In fact, the film shows him doing the same before addressing the German shepherd at the shelter. He studies Holly's social media to find out what she likes and how she behaves. He plans to pretend to like the same things and behave in the same way to make a connection. Tragically, he is willing to live an inauthentic life to establish a supposedly meaningful human relationship. Seth's desire to 'have' Holly is like the conspicuous consumer's desire to own a pet as a fashion accessory (as highlighted by Foltyn's research). The film's sinister premise is that Seth, consciously or not, has imbibed the vet's advice: he plans to get what he wants by any means possible, even if it means owning a pet like one of Gruen's prisoners, something on which he can lavish all his affection and demand the same in return.

When a desperate Seth follows Holly to a bar in another attempt to establish meaningful contact, Holly responds with the same words spoken by the security officer at the shelter: 'I don't even know you' (Torrens, Carles, dir 2016, 00:20:06). While Seth tries to explain that he is not a stalker but genuinely interested in Holly, his words suggest otherwise to Holly. She did not 'see' him at school and has no desire to 'see' him now. The suspense rises for the audience as Seth begins to show signs of a possessive stalker. Ironically, the reason for Holly's immediate suspicion of Seth is explained later when Seth finds out that she had been stalking and killing strangers in the city long before they met on the bus.

While Seth's initial attempts to connect with Holly seem to arise from a genuine desire to find a friend, his one-way relations with the dogs at the shelter (who are always pleased to see him because he feeds and cares for them) have made him forget that in human interrelations there is always the possibility of rejection and the necessity of give and take, tolerance and empathy. The viewer is shown that Seth wants to have Holly rather than to be with her, in Fromm's sense. Being around dogs all day has led Seth to believe that human interrelations follow the

same cultural script as human-pet relations: prospective dog owners visit the shelter to choose the pet they want, based on their personal preference for the physical and behavioral characteristics of the dog. Only the human has the power to decide whether a relationship will be pursued between the human and the pet. The dog's new master assumes the pet's unconditional devotion for the duration of the relationship. The pet will probably not suffer any material hardships and will likely receive much affection to boot. But it will have no say in the nature of the relationship. Like a prisoner, it must stoically undergo whatever comes its way. By choosing Holly as his pet Seth has unwittingly subscribed to the ideology of possession of property to buttress ontological security. Here, the film taps into the Gothic motif of nature as a disruptive force. *Pet* lays bare the shadow side of this ideological human-animal relation: the potential that owner and pet may seek to dominate each other, to make a lifestyle accessory out of each other, leading to a downward spiral that will turn both into monsters.

The film's horror lies in its successful representation of the shy and introverted Seth, and the troubled Holly as genuine creeps, on the one hand, and a woefully lonely individuals, on the other. He and Holly are both degraded by the harsh materialist creed of the urban metropolis. The film suggests that Seth's and Holly's alienated existence in a materialist and competitive environment has malformed them into possessive monsters. Holly is shown equally down in spirits, drinking with a flat mate, and discussing her ex-boyfriend, Eric. This flat mate is in fact imaginary: the 'ghost' of Holly's best friend Claire. Holly murdered Claire in a possessive rage over Eric, after discovering they had had an affair. This possessive streak in Seth and Holly, their need to own and control their beloved outright, is the slow violence that is invisibly but surely destroying the fabric of the already alienated urban community.

A key moment in Seth's quest to own Holly as his pet comes when he finds her notebook. By holding onto and reading the diary he feels that he owns and controls a very private part of Holly's life: her unspoken thoughts and desires. The diary contains Holly's confession to murdering Claire and various down-and-outs in LA. The power she felt in controlling these worthless people's lives became addictive. As a serial killer, Holly represents the drive to own and control the lives of others as a means of ensuring ontological security, becoming a subscriber to what Fromm describes as the ideology of having. At this point, the metaphorical nature of the film's title is made explicit. Seth has built a cage in an abandoned cellar of the shelter, which is identical to those in which the dogs reside. He sees Holly as his pet because she is a stray he can rescue, master and train to become a friend. During the exposition stage of the plot, Seth seemed like the only altruistic human being in a cold and calculating concrete jungle. During the rising action, however, he has become a predator stalking his prey, revealing a drastic change that has occurred in his character in attempting to get what he wants, by any means, on the vet's advice.

Once Holly is caught, Seth becomes a stereotypical dog owner. He speaks to Holly in imperatives: 'drink ... sit up ... take it easy' (Torrens, Carles, dir 2016, 00:39:28). He exclaims that 'it is important to define our relationship; establish some boundaries' (Torrens, Carles, dir 2016, 00:40:09). He even explains to Holly that she has given him a sense of purpose in life. Like a good dog whisperer, Seth believes he will save Holly from herself by eradicating the savage aspects of her

nature. What he does not realize is that mainstream LA society has transformed him and Holly into ruthless predators who will stop at nothing until one will possess and control the other, even if this involves imprisonment and torture. But unlike a dog, Holly can talk and fight back. Her desires are identical and her drive to dominate more powerful than Seth's.

The final act sees Seth and Holly engage in a battle of wills, each seeking to control and determine the thoughts and actions of the other; they have become each other's dog whisperers battling out whose imperatives will be the most powerful in controlling the mind of the other: they are fighting to find out who is the pet and who is the master. Unsurprisingly, with greater experience in possessing, controlling, and killing others, Holly proves to be the most powerful manipulator. She can turn the tables on Seth to become his master and torturer. Seth's conscience and emotional involvement with Holly proves to be his weakness. The film closes on an apocalyptic note, revealing through Holly's happy triumph in torturing Seth the effectiveness of possessive and heartless cruelty as a strategy to get ahead in LA.

*Pet* reveals that the artificial, urban environment is devoid of empathy and necrotic; it cajoles its inhabitants to develop lifestyles and identities around the possession and display of consumer products that is destructive to physical and mental wellbeing. Alienated from the living earth, the human drive to possess and consume, easily crosses over from homes, cars and gadgets to human-animal and eventually human interrelations.

*Animosity* takes a different perspective on human alienation from nature. It presents a what-if scenario in which all animals in the USA awaken to human consciousness and powers of speech. Revealing equal intelligence and agency, the animals' revolt against centuries of enslavement and exploitation, turning the tables on many traditional human-animal relations. Yet the comic-book is not a misanthropic apocalypse, a revenge fantasy for the voiceless animals in the vein of eco-horrors like *Kingdom of the Spiders* (1977). During their epic journey across the States, the human protagonist Jessie and the animal protagonist Sandor, a bloodhound, develop a nuanced understanding of the inherent complexity of animal-human relations, but also learn how human interrelations and animal interrelations have been profoundly affected by centuries of systemic exploitation and oppression.

*Animosity's* narrative is too vast to discuss in detail. Considering animal ownership, it is important to focus on the marvelous trope that drives its plot: the awakening. This allows the animals to answer Roszak's question: 'How did a psyche that was once symbiotically rooted in the planetary ecosystem produce the environmental crisis we now confront?' (1993, 306). Now that the animals can express themselves, they can finally tell their side of the skewed history of human-animal relations, not univocally, but as a harmonic chorus expressing distinctly idiosyncratic experiences. Giving animals the powers of reasoning and speaking may look like an anthropocentric ploy on the creators' part. It should be understood, however, as an imaginative means to give voice to the voiceless. While using the same alphabet, words and grammar as humans, the animals in *Animosity* (like so many aliens in SF narratives) speak a very different language, metaphorically, by confronting humans with their very different perspective on human-animal relations. Consequently, these new and revealing stories allow humans and animals to enter into a dialogue with each other. Such dialogue leads to the critical

exploration of ‘anthropocentrism and speciesism and how these inform the daily choices we make’ (2009, 217), which Estok argues is a central task of ecocriticism.

Anthropocentric apocalyptic fictions, like *Day of the Animals* (1977), often represent the mute and wild animal(s) as a monstrous threat to humanity, despite the presence of environmental themes like pollution and ecological degradation. The awakening allows *Animosity* to circumvent this pitfall by bringing humans and animals together that hold very different views about the nature of their relationship. They are forced to confront each other’s ideological blind spots and to overcome apparently insurmountable differences to survive together in the chaos created by the breakdown of the old order. While ‘monsters are so defined because they hideously conflate the human and nonhuman’ (Parker & Poland 4–5), the talking, reasoning and philosophizing animals of *Animosity* are never monstrous. In fact, the ‘human’ traits the animals develop more often bring out by contrast the monstrous traits in humanity. The animals’ voices together become the voice of the earth that Roszak claims has been silenced for so long to the detriment of both the natural environment as well as human wellbeing. This makes the animals ‘disturbingly alive’ and as such Gothic beings. But they are ‘supernaturally powerful’ not as a threat towards human civilization, which *Animosity* shows has destroyed itself, but as the embodiment of a collective voice of protest against the status quo and prophecy of a better future.

During their adventures, the inter-species friends Jesse and Sandor, as well as the animals that accompany them in their odyssey across America, encounter increasingly complex hybrid animal-human communities that force them to confront the nature of their own inter-species relationships as well as their overall relation to the ecosphere. Their continual confrontations with the horrors inherent in traditional human-animal relations, defined in terms of master-servant, owner-property, exploiter-exploited, leads Jesse to develop what Roszak calls an eco-consciousness, a re-awakening in humans of their ‘innate ecological connectedness’ (1993, 301) with all other lifeforms. This recognition of how humans are ‘symbiotically rooted in the planetary ecosystem’ (1993, 306) allows Jesse to realize that despoiling one facet of the ecosystem will be an act of self-ruination in the long run for humanity at large. Jesse learns from experience the destructive impact and the need to eradicate the sources of what Nixon calls slow violence, to make possible the chance at a better future. Jesse’s and Sandor’s relationship endures and becomes an allegorical representation of Roszak’s ideal of ‘synergistic interplay between planetary and personal well-being’ (1993, 321). An analysis of some key events in the series will illustrate this post-apocalyptic comic’s commitment to a utopian ecological philosophy.

In volume one, the complex nature of human-animal relations is illustrated by the multifaceted experience of the awakening. While humans are unified in their shock at the animal uprising, the animals respond differently to their awakening depending on their earlier relation to humans. Various urban pets express they have been silent witnesses to human abuses against other humans. An orca at a zoo expresses total devotion to its caretaker, while a group of pandas show suicidal tendencies at coming into consciousness of their captivity. At the climax of the first issue, after American civilization has crumbled, a tiger (escaped from the New York Zoo) infiltrates Jesse’s and Sandor’s hideout. Having only known captivity, the tiger assumes all humans are jailors and exploiters of animals. The tiger represents the eco-apocalyptic motif of nature as ‘an

avenging force, eliminating troublesome humans from the environment' (Tyburski 2013, 147). Sandor has grown up in Jesse's family and has developed a genuine bond with her. Not bearing the same grudge against humans as the tiger, and being a natural enemy of felines, Sandor protects Jessie against this threat. As such, the trope of awakening allows for the representation of nuanced, complex, and diverse human-animal relations that gives *Animosity* a much more philosophical and balanced tone than many of the post-apocalyptic eco-horrors in which 'the natural world . . . seems to reject humanity as expandible' (Tyburski 2013, 147) and takes back control of the planet.

The different stories that make up the comic-book series eschew the traps of misanthropy or the romanticization of human-animal relations. Some animals seek to integrate into the remnants of human civilization. There is a market in Central Park where humans and animals trade wares. There is a separatist group, the 'animilitary', that aims to construct an independent nation. Some humans are unwilling or unable to accept animal-human equality and cling to old patterns of belief, like the Biblical precedents for human superiority (also discussed by Estok as a pernicious androcentric perspective), to sustain their ontological security. A key feature of *Animosity* is that no single perspective is dominant, and the reader is invited to continually reflect on each side's argument, in the process learning how complex human-animal relations are and how significant it is to listen to the yet unheard voice of the earth.

Volume two reflects on the key concept of plenitude, defined by Roszak (following Lewis Mumford) as 'a sense of "enoughness" that can only be achieved when people are encouraged to ask, "wealth for *what*?"' (1993, 254). In the process of awakening, some animals have been able to show their moral integrity, while others have shown very 'human' moral failings: avarice, gluttony, pride, wrath, and envy (see Monsó, Benz-Schwarzburg, and Bremhorst 2018, on animals as moral subjects). The excessiveness attributed to 'Gothic Nature' by humans, according to Parker & Poland, is now projected onto the defining characteristics of the formerly dominant human civilization, characteristics to which animals are not immune after awakening.

In *Animosity*, an acid spewing Lammergeier has erected a cult of death in an abandoned barn in the woods. While it may seem stereotypical to choose a large carrion bird as a villain, the choice of a lammergeier is interesting because it is not native to North America. This crazed cult leader must have been held captive at a zoo and may have learned its powers of persuasion, control, and exploitation by studying its human captors' methods. The vulture can transform docile animals and even herbivores into vicious killers. In a grotesque reversal of industrialized mass-production of meat, the lammergeier's cult has developed an insatiable appetite for slaughter. Their home is an abattoir, visually expressing 'how environmentally unsound meat production really is' (Estok 2019, 217). Here, the comic-book encodes an activist stance into its story that Estok has called on ecocriticism to develop. As such, a close reading of this popular fiction can help develop critical and theoretical approaches to the environmental crisis caused by humans' materialist excesses.

Significantly, the target audience of this comic book is clearly young adults. With the teenage protagonist, these readers learn that it is unproductive to hold onto strict human-animal binaries as if there is an essential difference between the two concepts. The awakening has given 'animals' the powers of 'human' thought and action, but with that they have also been given 'human' flaws and the potential to make the same mistakes in

reasoning and to repeat past ‘human’ atrocities. Humans, in turn, are capable of being as ‘savage’ and ‘mindless’ as the animals they once believed they could domesticate and exploit because of their savage and mindless state. Thinking in terms of opposition and contrast is revealed to be destructive; thinking in terms of relatedness and cooperation is represented as constructive throughout the narrative. The blunt representation of this utopian ethics gives the comic book a didactic tone, which is understandable considering its target audience. Yet such a clear message of interrelatedness dovetails with the activist-scholarly theory of multi-species justice that ‘reject[s] simplistic human-nature binaries’ and recognizes that ‘all bodies and lifeforms, organic and inorganic, [are] “entangled” [. . .] with each other in a myriad of different ways’ (Tschakert et al., 2020, 5). The creators of *Animosity* have done well in adapting such intellectual insights into a narrative accessible to pre-university youths.

In their confrontation with the death cult, Jesse, Sandor, and their fellow travelers, learn that it is impossible to categorize any species as intrinsically good or evil, existing at the center or at the margin of nature’s web. As such, the comic-book challenges an anthropocentric approach to human-animal relations. Within the world of the story, animals, or humans, individually or collectively, and inter-species collectives, can be morally judged only by their (shared) beliefs, choices and subsequent actions performed within specific contexts. The ethics of plenitude, as embraced by the morally responsible animals and humans in the comic-book, ‘challenges us to define our real needs, at first personally, then socially’ (Roszak 1993, 254). Jesse’s inter-species troupe learn about the necessity of plenitude if balance is to be restored to the ecosphere. By contrast, the vulture’s cult represents the irrational excesses of avarice and gluttony, the moral vice of overindulgence in all material pleasures and possessions that function as symbols of status and power. Fromm defined this human moral failing as ‘radical hedonism’ ([1976] 2021, 3) and identified it as one of the major causes of human and ecological degradation. Ironically, the vulture’s death cult resembles a throwback to an all too human reality that the reader can recognize as pertinent to current Western socioeconomic realities. The humans and animals in *Animosity* learn that it is not intrinsically wrong to eat meat; after all, many animals do so to survive. But it is morally objectionable to indulge in killing to excess beyond the limits set by the actual need for sustenance. This excess is not associated with the animal kingdom but definitive of many human and especially Western societies. Currently, the biological experimentation on animals, held in dire living conditions, to enhance the mass-production of culinary luxuries of dubious nutritious value is entirely normalized, but morally questionable in the context of the ideal of plenitude.

Volume three’s story revolves around human farmers who have taken honey and bees from a giant colony in order to pollinate their crops. From the humans’ perspective, they are merely continuing an age-old tradition of working the land, domesticating insects to ensure the best possible harvest. Jesse’s troupe learns that the farmers have not only taken worker-bees and honey from the colony but also the queen. From the bees’ perspective, the humans have destroyed their civilization to rebuild their own. What the farmers understand as the harmless appropriation of natural resources is experienced by the bees as an existential threat. Without their queen, their society is doomed. The bees remember the toxic holocaust of the insect kingdom from before the awakening. They fear the return

of such mass destruction of the environment by the hands of humanity. But having awakened, they are able to prepare for war. Such ‘rebellious nature’, while often presented in apocalyptic eco-horror as ‘a problem to be solved, or a challenge to be met [by humans]’ (Tyburski 2013, 155), in *Animosity* is presented from the opposite perspective: as a necessary action to ensure survival and redress systemic wrongs perpetrated by humanity on animals. Because Jesse experiences the conflict from both sides, she learns how instrumental bees have been to the health of the natural environment as well as to the success of human crop cultivation (see also the [UNEP](#) report on this issue). Jesse realizes that the ‘humans finally pulled a thread in the web of life’ (Bennet 2017–21 vol.3, n.p.). At that moment she realizes the interconnectedness of all forms of life on earth; how the overall health of the flora and fauna on the planet can be ensured only by acting on principles of balance, plenitude, and cooperation, without coercion. Now she has achieved Roszak’s ecological consciousness and has learned what Petra [Tschakert et al.](#) advocate as a key educational goal in today’s ecological crisis: ‘learning to be responsible’ by ‘learning to live together and across difference’ (2020, 6).

Volume five opens with the animals in Jesse’s troupe developing further philosophical insights into their previous state of domestication under human domination. They realize that ‘humans have remade us in their images, as suited their needs. They took us from the wild, selected us, transformed us’. Some animals echo Gruen’s argument that releasing domesticated animals into the wild is not a solution because ‘living a free life may contain all sorts of hardships, and being kept safe, well fed, and protected from danger may promote well-being, even while freedom is denied’ (2012, 143). A house cat pertinently adds: ‘no domesticated species has ever gone extinct’. According to this cat, ‘[d]omestication is safety as much as slavery’ (Bennett & De Latorre 2017–21 vol. 5, n.p.). Of course, the cat had lived a luxurious life in contrast to the many farm animals. But the cat’s argument emphasizes the need to think about definitions and the price of freedom: what are the animals willing to give up to ensure their un-domestication and total independence from humanity, and is total independence from humanity the mark of freedom? Through their arguments about how to move forward in their struggle for survival, the animals develop an increasingly nuanced moral framework regarding the inalienable rights of all planetary life to freedom and justice.

*Animosity*’s conventional quest structure and anthropocentric characterization of animals make its ecocritical philosophy accessible to younger readers revealing an overt support for the advocates of ‘a multispecies justice (MSJ) lens that expands the existing frame of climate justice by repositioning justice to encompass all beings as quintessentially relational’ (Tschakert et al. 2020, 4), as Roszak also argued. The marvelous vehicle of the awakening allows the ideal of interspecies relationality to be expressed in a form accessible to the target audience, which by means of contrast foregrounds the perniciousness of an ideology of ownership that lies at the root of the slow violence destroying the ecosphere. While post-apocalyptic, *Animosity* contains a utopian tendency through its representation of the development of an inter-species community in which hierarchies and conflicts based on species, gender and race are waning. As horror films aimed at an adult audience, *Burning Bright* and *Pet* present a much darker vision of the present. Their narratives

focus more on how the slow violence perpetrated by humanity on the natural world through its materialist ideology of ownership and exploitation is in fact a form of self-destruction through which humanity is undermining its own ontological security and future as an animal species.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Evert Jan van Leeuwen* is a lecturer in English-language Literature and culture at Leiden University, the Netherlands. Since completing his PhD on the figure of the Alchemist in British and American Romantic-era Gothic novels, he has been researching the history and development of Gothic, Horror and Science Fiction in Britain, America and the Netherlands. He has published on authors such as William Godwin, Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Stephen King, as well as on the genres of Graveyard Poetry and Gothic Spaghetti Westerns. He is currently completing a book-length study on Horror Houses for Liverpool University Press and is co-editing a translation of nineteenth-century Dutch author Carel van Nieuvelt's short Gothic and SF stories.

## References

- Bennett, M., and R. de Latorre. 2017–21. *Animosity*. Vol. 6. Sherman Oaks: Aftershock.
- Beverland, M. B., F. Farrelly, and E. A. C. Lim. 2008. "Exploring the Dark Side of Pet Ownership: Status- and Control-based Pet Consumption." *Journal of Business Research* 61 (5): 490–496. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2006.08.009>.
- Brooks, Carlos, dir. 2010. *Burning Bright*. Santa Monica: Lionsgate.
- Cullen, J. 2003. *The American Dream*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Estok, S. C. 2009. "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16 (2): 203–225. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isp010>.
- Flatt Osborn, Jen. 2023. "Pet Industry Statistics – Interesting Numbers of Global Pet Market!" *WAF*. <https://worldanimalfoundation.org/advocate/pet-industry-statistics/>.
- Foltyn, J. L. 2019. "The Dog Walk: Canine Chic, Companion Animals and Consumer Culture." In *Fashion-Wise*, edited by M. Vaccarella and J. Foltyn, 53–64. Leiden: Brill.
- Fromm, E. [1976] 2021. *To Have or to Be?* New York: Bloomsbury.
- Gillham, D. G. 1966. *Blake's Contrary States*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Gruen, L. 2012. *Ethics and Animals: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Ingold, T. 1994. "From Trust to Domination: An Alternative History of Human-Animal Relations." In *Animals and Human Society*, edited by A. Manning and J. Serpell, 1–22. London: Routledge.
- Lennard, D. 2019. *Brute Force: Animal Horror Movies*. Albany: Suny Press.
- Millard, E. 2022. 'DSM-5 Phobia Types, Diagnosis, and Treatment.' <https://pro.psycom.net/assessment-diagnosis-adherence/phobia>.
- Monsó, S., J. Benz-Schwarzburg, and A. Bremhorst. 2018. "Animal Morality: What It Means and Why It Matters." *The Journal of Ethics* 22 (3–4): 283–310. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-018-9275-3>.

- Murray, M. 2011. "The Underdog in History: Serfdom, Slavery and Species in the Creation and Development of Capitalism." In *Theorizing Animals: Re-thinking Humanimal Relations*, edited by N. Taylor and T. Signal, 85–106. Leiden: Brill.
- Nixon, R. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Parker, E., and M. Poland. 2019. "Gothic Nature: An Introduction." *Gothic Nature* 1:1–20. <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.
- Roszak, T. 1973. *Where the Wasteland Ends*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Roszak, T. 1993. *The Voice of the Earth*. New York: Touchstone.
- Schell, J. 2015. "Polluting and Perverting Nature: The Vengeful Animals of Frogs." In *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*, edited by K. Gregersdotter, et al., 58–75. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Serpell, J., and P. Elizabeth. 1994. "Pets and the Development of Positive Attitudes to Animals." In *Animals and Human Society*, edited by A. Manning, J. Serpell. *Animals and Human Society*, 127–144. London: Routledge.
- Torrens, Carles, dir. 2016. *Pet*. Los Angeles: Orion Pictures.
- Tschakert, P., D. Schlosberg, D. Celermajer, L. Rickards, C. Winter, M. Thaler, M. Stewart-Harawira, et al. 2021. "Multispecies justice: Climate-just futures with, for and beyond Humans." *WIREs Climate Change* 12 (2): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.699>.
- Tyburski, S. J. 2013. "A Gothic Apocalypse: Encountering the Monstrous in American Cinema." In *Ecogothic*, edited by A. Smith and W. Hughes, 147–159. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- UNEP. 2022. 'Why Bees Are Essential to People and Planet.' <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/why-bees-are-essential-people-and-planet>.