

“Que son los monstruos?": Borders, Bodies, and Infection in the Post-9/11 Sci-Fi/Horror Film *Monsters*

Casey Walker

Volume 7, Number 1, June 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1112933ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1112933ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Montréal Monstrum Society

ISSN

2561-5629 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Walker, C. (2024). “Que son los monstruos?": Borders, Bodies, and Infection in the Post-9/11 Sci-Fi/Horror Film *Monsters*. *Monstrum*, 7(1), 64–80.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1112933ar>

© Casey Walker, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

“Que son los monstruos?”: Borders, Bodies, and Infection in the Post-9/11 Sci-Fi/Horror Film *Monsters*

Casey Walker

In 2005, newly re-elected United States President George W. Bush vowed to make national immigration reform a priority in his second term. His efforts resulted in the failed Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007, a doomed attempt at legislation that drew intense criticism for its proposed limitations on family reunification visas and for its funding of increased border enforcement, including additional border patrol agents, vehicle barriers, and surveillance towers (The White House 2007). Meanwhile in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Tony Blair outraged many human rights and immigration advocates with his successful attempts to restrict access to asylum, his creation of the Border and Immigration Agency, and his calls for increased border control and biometric documentation for foreign nationals (Somerville, 2019). Already allies in the deadly and controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bush and Blair seemed to be working in unison yet again, this time on stricter immigration limitations and enforcement in their respective nations.

As a response to the horrific 9/11 attacks, Western nations justified both the immigration crackdown and the war on terror in the early 2000s as a dual effort to “take the fight to the enemy” while also protecting national borders from perceived threats (Gilmore 2004). Brandon Grafius recounts how cultures often “build walls and circle the wagons” against real or perceived threats in response to major events, such as the 9/11 attacks (2019, 119). Regarding the many possible meanings of the term “post-9/11,” Kevin Wetmore expands on how it refers not only to the attacks on September 11, 2001, but also “all that has come after,” including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the immigration crackdown at the US-Mexico border (2012, 4). Thus, Wetmore concludes that the term “post-9/11” “refers to a day, an event, a period, a mindset and a cultural shift” (4). Given the environment of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety that followed the 9/11 attacks, Western nations such as the US and UK worked to ensure that terror was at the forefront of their foreign and domestic policy agendas. This climate of fear and terror provided these governments the political capital they needed to sway public opinion in favour of the war on terror and tougher immigration enforcement, a popular support that increasingly waned as the seemingly endless war on terror waged on.

As these Western nations drew criticism for their stricter actions on immigration in the aftermath of 9/11, newly released global science fiction and horror/monster films began to engage with the issue of immigration, criticizing the cruel actions and anti-immigrant rhetoric perpetuated by Western governments. This shift largely began with the release of *Sleep Dealer* (Alex Rivera, 2008), an independently produced film depicting a world where migrant workers are connected to technology that allows them to remotely operate robots that provide necessary labour to the US. This industrialized indentured servitude allows the US to extract what it needs most from the migrants (i.e., inexpensive labour) without having to house them in US territory, which is blocked by a huge border wall. The workers' energy is used up like batteries, before they are discarded with little compensation for their sacrifice. Lauded for its vision and creativity on a small budget, *Sleep Dealer* is credited as the first entry in a new wave of genre films critical of Western intervention on immigration issues.

The equally low-budget, independent British film *Monsters* (Gareth Edwards, 2010) continued this post-9/11 sci-fi/horror cycle, raising important questions about borders, infection discourse, and the exploitation and seeming expendability of the immigrant body. Set in a futuristic North America, the fictional film *Monsters* occurs in the aftermath of a militarized quarantine of the northern half of Mexico after alien “monsters” begin spreading around the US-Mexico border. The film explains that the creatures arrived on Earth after a space probe exploring new life forms broke up over Mexico upon re-entry to Earth's atmosphere. To protect itself from the creatures, the US constructs a giant border wall to isolate the aliens on the Mexican side of the wall and a large portion of the US-Mexico border is labeled “the infected zone.” A couple traveling through Mexico trying to return to the United States encounters the “creatures,” which at first seem as monstrous and destructive as they have been labeled. However, through the course of the film, the couple realizes the aliens are not all that different from humans and are only intentionally harmful when attacked. The film is prescient in depicting a nationalist US leadership similar to that of the former Trump administration, a government that constructs walls and responds violently to immigrants, rather than dealing with an influx of immigrants legally and empathetically. However, horror cinematic depictions of walls that keep out an immigrant or racialized “Other” go as far back as *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933). And immigrant and racialized “Others” appear in horror films even earlier, such as in F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922). So how much of the apparent

foreshadowing in *Monsters* is more likely an instance of history and Western nationalistic tendencies repeating themselves?

Science fiction films have long served as fertile ground for discourse regarding international social and political concerns, but rarely challenge the societal status quo (Sontag 1965; Broderick 1993). According to Christine Cornea, early science fiction films sometimes represented “world-wide anxieties” with an “overwhelming concern with the defence [sic] of the nation throughout this period,” pointing out “the frequent narrative emphasis on confrontation (whether competitive, threatening, or violent) across circumscribed borderlines” (2017, 166). As global migration and border transit surged in the 1980s, a number of US films represented these anxieties, largely through a white male perspective, consistently representing immigrants as “mute objects” and “never fully humanized subjects” (Fojas 2007, 94). Charles Ramírez Berg (2012) explains how these anxieties also intensified in the science fiction film genre in the 1980s, where the extraterrestrial alien often represented the immigrant “Other,” usually portrayed as either a destructive monster who must be destroyed or as a sympathetic extraterrestrial who must assimilate or leave peacefully. While aliens often represented Communists during the “Red Scare” days of the Cold War, the influx of immigration in the 1980s turned immigrants into a new correlation for the science fiction alien. As in real life, these films focused less on the US military stoking fears of a Communist threat, often turning their attention to the expulsion of immigrants from their national borders instead (Fregoso 1999, 170).

As *Monsters* is a hybrid science fiction/horror monster movie, it is also instructive to look at scholarship on the representation of immigrants as horror monsters. Given the “shifting cultural norms and expectations” in the ongoing global study of cultural monsters, Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock advises that we “tread carefully when it comes to broad generalizations” of monsters and genre (2020, 1–2). With that said, noticeable agreement emerges in monster scholarship over the last few decades with respect to monsters as cultural, racial, and immigrant “Others.” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues that monsters are often “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” (1996, 4). According to Cohen, monsters frequently function as a “dialectical Other, [...] an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond,” and a “rebuke to boundary and enclosure” (1996, 7). Richard Kearney refers to monsters as “our *Others* par excellence” (2002, 117) representing “our craving to put a face on a phobia” (121). For Kearney, monsters often specifically represent the immigrant, as he asserts that alien monsters are particularly “liminal creatures” that “defy borders.” He adds that they “travel with undiplomatic immunity ...

[t]ransgressing the conventional frontiers,” “and remind us that we don’t know who we are” (117). With the post-9/11 push by Western governments to crack down on immigration, the national panic over an influx of immigrants presented filmmakers with an opportunity to confront these policies and phobias, in films such as the aforementioned *Sleep Dealer*, *District 9* (Neil Blomkamp, 2009), and the subject of this essay, *Monsters*. Frank McConnell tells us that “each era chooses the monster it deserves and projects” (1973, 17). In the film *Monsters*, the filmmakers chose to depict the monsters as sympathetic (albeit silent) representations of immigrants at the US-Mexico border, thus purposefully engaging in the discourse surrounding the post-9/11 immigration crackdown and hostile treatment of immigrants.

The film’s writer-director Gareth Edwards is no stranger to the monster movie, having worked more than once in the genre. A British filmmaker, Edwards chose to craft the independent film *Monsters* into an explicit critique of the US government’s treatment of migrants at the US-Mexico border, which is why the film’s indie status is such an important piece of understanding how this film was able to so pointedly interrogate the US military intervention at the border. Edwards went on to make two Hollywood blockbuster films, *Godzilla* (2014) and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), both of which have their own political investigations of corrupt governmental structures. Like *Monsters*, *Godzilla* (to a lesser degree) asks the question, “Who is the real monster?” as *Godzilla* represents both a guardian to mankind and the dangers of the Atomic Age. *Rogue One* is a hybrid science fiction and war movie that illustrates the human cost of conflict and sacrifice. Both of these films allow Edwards to frame similar questions to those raised by *Monsters*, but in a more non-descript fashion that forego the focus and precision of the messaging of his first film. The conglomerate structure of the two films’ financing studios (Warner Bros. and Disney, respectively) around tentpole projects potentially contributed to the films’ more sanitized politics. But with *Monsters*, Edwards was able to maintain an autonomy independent of studio oversight and constraints, giving him the freedom to create a filmic appraisal of the worsening treatment of immigrants at the US-Mexico border, and to challenge the characters’ (and the audience’s) perception of the hardships and violence that immigrants face.

In the opening scene of *Monsters*, we witness an impending confrontation between US soldiers and one of the aliens, as a military caravan approaches a site where the creatures have been spotted. The footage of the military personnel in the back of the trucks is hand-held and appears to be shot by one of the soldiers, almost in the found-footage style of other horror/monster films, such as *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) and parts of the aforementioned *District*

9. One of the soldiers sings Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" in an homage to *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), in which the song is used as a battle-cry of sorts. When the soldiers arrive at the site, mass chaos erupts. A man and a woman found at the site are separated and apprehended by the soldiers, as armed service members open fire at the creature towering above them. Footage replicating that of a visual display of a self-guided missile shows a rocket rapidly approaching the creature's head and then the footage cuts to black.

Monsters' opening is interesting for a few reasons. First, it sets the audience's expectation that these aliens are the destructive type described by Ramírez Berg. We see the opening battle from the US military's perspective, and we also see the soldiers possibly save this couple from the creature's destruction. Our allegiance is, at least initially, aligned with the US military. Second, as the audience will later discover, this scene is the temporal conclusion to the film's narrative, providing the ending of the film's timeline to the audience at the beginning, in non-linear fashion. And third, this scene is our introduction to the monsters' shape and form. While the night footage is dark and grainy, the form of the creature is similar to an underwater creature with tentacles, such as a squid or octopus. The creature's tentacles wave furiously, whipping and attacking anything that comes near it. Its massive frame dwarfs the soldiers, and its similarity to a sea creature embodies the antithesis to the human form, resembling something not of this world: an alien "Other."

Scholar Vivian Sobchack offers her own assessment as to why this juxtaposition of the human form and the alien/monster form is important, maintaining that the "articulation of resemblance between aliens and humans preserves the subordination of 'other worlds, other cultures, other species' to the world, culture, and 'speciality' of white American culture" (1987, 297). Accordingly, the radically *non*-human, sea creature character design of the aliens in *Monsters* would subvert the dominant culture and disrupt the subordination of "other worlds" and "other cultures." However, successive scholarship largely challenges Sobchack's assertion, noting that radical otherness often reinforces the centring of humanity and marginalizes alien/animal "Others" as "scapegoats" (Cohen 1996, 11). Thus, the danger of creating the aliens in such stark contrast to the human form, as Ramírez Berg points out, is that comparing aliens to non-human entities (animals, pests, or insects) makes them all the easier to exterminate from the perspective of the audience (2012, 424).

As the film's narrative continues, the reference to the creature's primary habitat (the US-Mexico border) as "the infected zone" also situates the US-Mexico border within public health discourse of an epidemic and disease (Figure

1). Fojas notes that this “confluence of social attitudes that link race, migration, and public health” coincided with anxieties over immigration in the 1980s, when “[i]mmigration was treated as an immunoresistant strain of social illness at a time when the language of disease held sway in public discourse” (2007, 84). The labeling of the area around the US-Mexico border as “the infected zone,” also serves to other the territory around the border, which Rosa Linda Fregoso argues is “symptomatic of a colonialist and racist imaginary” (1999, 178).



Figure 1. Andrew Kaulder (Scoot McNairy) examines a map of the “infected zone” in *Monsters*, directed by Gareth Edwards (2010 Vertigo Films) (Author screenshot)

Reading *Monsters* as sympathetic to immigrants and their experiences, the message of the film is very simply that alien immigrants, as different as they may seem from humans, are not all that different and are indeed something natural. This message is conveyed throughout the journey of photojournalist Andrew Kaulder (Scoot McNairy) and the daughter of his employer, Sam Wynden (Whitney Able), whom Andrew has been tasked by her father with returning to the US. Up to this point, Sam has been travelling below the infected zone in what looks like a war zone. Andrew and Sam are cautious with each other initially. He is more interested in taking pictures of the destruction and carnage around them for his newspaper, while she is more affected by the gravity of their surroundings. Riding with Andrew in the back of a taxi after their introduction, Sam speaks to their taxi driver in Spanish, saying, “Do you feel safe here?” The driver responds, “Where would we go? My work, my family is all here.” His response is indicative of many immigrants’ experiences in other countries. Once they have migrated, where else would they go if their work and family are there with them?

Sam's curiosity is the essence of her character. As she dresses in a hotel room, a nature program plays on a television in her room detailing the fascinating (if not strange) way that jellyfish mate. In addition to foreshadowing the final interaction between the creatures at the end of the film, the nature program on Sam's television also reinforces the film's message that sometimes things that lie outside our experience, that seem strange or fearful to us, are in fact simply different. The other television screens depicted in the film are always tuned to the conflict with the creatures, indicating an incessant media feed keeping all eyes glued to what will happen next with the giant "monsters." The constant media coverage of the aliens is evocative of the media coverage during and after the 9/11 attacks, creating what Tom Engelhardt calls an "on screen spectacle" (2006, 15) of catastrophic events. The media's hyperfocus on the creatures also underscores the centring of the anthropocentric perspective in the film, establishing the non-human aliens as something that are to be observed and feared. Sam is disturbed by the media's attention to the conflict against the creatures and scolds Andrews for taking pictures of the death and destruction they see on their journey. Andrew responds, "You know how much money your father's company pays for a picture of a child killed by a creature? Fifty thousand. You know how much money I get paid for a picture of a happy child? Nothing." Andrew concludes, saying, "Everyone has to earn a living." His exploitative contribution to the fear campaign against the creatures is nothing more than business to him; in his mind, he is only doing his job. This ambivalence is the initial essence of Andrew's character. As Andrew sees more of the people living near the infected zone, and later the creatures themselves, this ambivalence and lack of empathy begin to dissipate. He holds and plays with children along his journey and sees the people's generosity toward strangers despite their destitute living conditions. And when he discovers the corpse of a little girl as they head to the border, presumably killed by a creature, rather than take a picture of it, he covers the body with his jacket out of respect. Through the course of the film, Andrew learns that the immigrant body is not something to be exploited, especially not for personal financial gain.

Andrew's character arc towards becoming more empathetic to the citizens in and around the infected zone does not initially extend to the creatures, however. Andrew and Sam travel by land and boat through the infected zone, seeing downed planes, boats, and cars—damage presumably caused by the creatures. But as Andrew and Sam travel further into the infected zone, they learn that the US government and other forces are bombing the creatures, in many cases with chemical weapons. Gas masks are encouraged in the infected zone, at first out of fear of the creatures, but later out of fear of

inhaling the chemicals dispersed by the US military. An anti-bombing protest sign on the side of a building reads, “Que son los ‘monstruos’ [What are the ‘monsters’]?” (Figure 2). Andrew and Sam question their escorts through the infected zone about their opinions on how the US is handling the creatures. One of the escorts replies, “I think [the] American government are spending a lot of money,” and trails off, but Andrew and Sam understand he is talking about the bombing and the border wall. Andrew replies, “But you can’t fight nature,” followed by Sam making a reference to the wall: “We’re imprisoning ourselves.”



Figure 2. A protest sign near the “infected zone” asking, “What are the Monsters?” in *Monsters*, directed by Gareth Edwards (2010 Vertigo Films) (Author screenshot)

Andrew and Sam are learning that the creatures are in fact part of nature. One of their escorts shows them the physical signs of the “infection,” pointing to egg-like formations on the base of numerous trees. What the US has declared an infection, is actually the reproductive process of the creatures. The eggs shine with a cross between a bioluminescence and bioelectricity. The creatures are attracted to electrical lights and use it to sustain themselves and help them reproduce. This is why the creatures are drawn to vehicles like the ones strewn throughout the infected zone. Their aversion to planes is revealed to be their understanding that planes and their bombs represent a threat to their species, and therefore the creatures are only attacking them to protect themselves. “If you don’t bother them, they don’t bother you,” one of the escorts reveals. Like Andrew and Sam, the audience is learning the US military is not fighting against hostile invaders or an infection. They are in fact fighting against their coexistence with another earthly species, but on the film’s allegorical level, with immigrants. These immigrants only want to do what is natural to them, which

is to co-exist and raise their families. The US military's destruction of the "infection," the aliens' reproductive process, is therefore suggestive of a form of population control of the immigrant "Other." Thus, the border is a site of resistance in the film, a third space between both the US and Mexico; it is what Fregoso calls a *transfrontera* contact zone, where nonegalitarian power relations lead to persistent racial, sexual, gender, and class intolerances (1999, 172). Avatar Brah refers to these border zones as "territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others," making note of the social, cultural, and psychic natures of the arbitrary borderlines that are under constant contestation and conflict (1996, 194–95). While Andrew discovers this inequality and the attempted extermination of the "monsters" within the border zone in the film first-hand, the US military's presence on the American side of the border keeps the truth from reaching US citizens. Fojas tells us this is because borderlands like the one in *Monsters* are "zones of the uncanny, full of buried pasts" (2007, 95). She adds, "Guarding the border is a loose metaphor for guarding history, keeping secrets, staving off the unresolved stuff of the past and making it stay put at the edges of national consciousness" (95).

Andrew's initial apathy and ambivalence yield to acceptance and a new critical perspective. When he reaches the border wall with Sam, he states, "It's different looking at America from the outside." He makes it clear that he does not want his understanding of the atrocities committed in the infected zone and around the border to change. "When you get home, it's so easy to forget about this," he says. The evolution of Andrew's character is the narrative arc of the film, but as powerful and important to the story as his arc is, it repeats a common liberal trope of Hollywood border films: centring the white male perspective. Read in the context of the film's environmental resonances, this gaze is also an anthropocentric one, centring humanity over other species. While it is understandable that writer/director Edwards would want Andrew's character to experience an awakening to the atrocities at the US-Mexico border, the film decentres the perspective of the Mexican citizens trying to escape the bombings in the infected zone and, as mentioned above, gives the creatures no voice at all. This representation echoes Fojas's description of the white male gaze in border films, where immigrants are "mute objects" and "never fully humanized subjects" (2007, 94). While the film is seemingly well-intentioned, one can't help but wonder how differently and more pointedly the story could have been told if the white male gaze or the anthropocentric gaze were decentred; or if told from a perspective of a border resident, as in *Sleep Dealer*; or, most radically, from the perspective of the alien creatures or the landscape on which this all occurs.

After Andrew's awakening, he and Sam reach the border and cross into US territory, discovering that the American side of the border is not much different from the infected zone. The cause of the desolation appears to be US airstrikes, and the closest towns have been evacuated. When the couple finally reaches a gas station with a working phone (and electricity), they stop to call their relatives to tell them they have crossed the border. Unbeknownst to them, a creature attracted by the electricity has approached the gas station and is extending its tentacles inside to absorb the energy from the television's light. When a frightened Sam turns off the television, the creature withdraws back outside. Andrew and Sam stand together outside watching the creature walk in the distance as another creature approaches it. The two creatures embrace in a similar fashion to the jellyfish in the nature program on Sam's television earlier in the film. As the human couple are watching the embrace of an alien couple, they understand (as does the audience) the obvious similarities between the humans and the aliens. However, given how the filmmakers frame the two human characters as the voyeurs in this scene, the aliens' touching embrace is yet another spectacle to behold, positioning the creatures as "Others" in the anthropocentric perspective of the film.¹ Eventually averting their eyes from the aliens' shared affection, Sam turns to Andrew and tells him, "I don't want to go home," and the two kiss. The scene (and the film) ends with the US military arriving, singing "Ride of the Valkyries," and grabbing Andrew and Sam away from each other as they share their embrace, just before the missile will destroy one of the creatures, as it did in the opening footage of the film. The separation of Andrew and Sam and the implied separation of the two aliens make for a powerful ending to the film. The separated couple now understands that the real monsters are not the aliens at all, but the United States government.

Critical reviews of *Monsters* after the film's release, while largely positive, were few in number, likely attributable to the film's extremely limited theatrical release, and few critics made note of the sociopolitical implications of the film's narrative. Wetmore also notes that many films grappling with the events of 9/11 and beyond didn't attract large audiences, simply because "American filmgoers did not want to see 9/11 and its military and political aftermath on the screen" (2012, 1–2). Most of the early reviews of *Monsters* focused on the love story

¹ The emphases on environmentalism and human rights in *Monsters* suggests a correlation between the immigrant alien and the nonhuman animal that are potentially problematic. In this scene in particular, the depiction of an alien embrace that we can only assume is connected to the jellyfish mating in the nature footage on Sam's television earlier in the film could imply that the film's aliens (both immigrant and non-human) are parallel Others in the film's metaphorical schema. It is important to consider these potentially problematic readings that could arise in conjunction with the film's "alien as immigrant" schema.

between Andrew and Sam, the spectacular special effects, or the DIY nature of the film's production. It wasn't until the film gained a much bigger audience on Netflix in the years after its theatrical release that critics and scholars began to fully realize the political relevance of *Monsters*. Critic Chris Barsanti revisited the film in early 2019, asking, "What kind of movie will best describe the Trump presidency for future generations?" His answer was that "*Monsters* might be a good place to start," given the "extremely obvious yet potent visual metaphor that predated the current catastrophe" (2019). Scholar Steffen Hantke notes that "it is impossible not to read the film as a commentary on issues of immigration in recent years" (2016, 32). And Shohini Chaudhuri two years previously notes that the movie "symbolically inscribes another journey, that of undocumented migrants facing exclusion and expulsion from the USA," and that it "explore[s] the causes and contexts of this state violence against migrants that is an everyday part of wealthy societies" (2014, 116). Chaudhuri adds that *Monsters* "take[s] us on a journey through [its] world, littered with signposts making links between past and present, enabling us to perceive present-day policies in a different way" (129).

This last point by Chaudhuri is important, because despite the fact that *Monsters* seems predictive in its depiction of the crisis at the US-Mexico border, the film draws significant imagery not only from US history but from past cinematic depictions of both isolating and expelling a racialized "Other." The aforementioned film *Sleep Dealer* depicts a huge border wall separating Mexico and the US, a dividing line that decides who controls the area's precious water supply, a resource desperately needed by the Mexican farmers near the border. In 1997, *Starship Troopers* (Paul Verhoeven) depicted a gung-ho group of soldiers bent on destroying colonies of hostile "bugs." Part of the military's defense system are giant walls to keep the bugs from permeating their defenses. And going back to the early years of sound cinema in 1933, the titular character in *King Kong*, which many scholars read as the symbol of a racialized "Other," is barred from human society by a giant wall. Cinema's history is filled with these "signposts" of colonialism and racial separation that Chaudhuri refers to, so in that respect, *Monsters* is not entirely unique. (See Figure 3.)



Figure 3. The border wall on the US-Mexico border in *Monsters*, directed by Gareth Edwards (2010 Vertigo Films) (Author Screenshot)

However, where *Monsters* defines its uniqueness is with respect to its perspective and representation of its characters and its subversion of the binary destructive monster/sympathetic alien dichotomy. For instance, Malisa Kurtz singles the film out as “representative of a kind of postcolonial science fiction that remains within the boundaries of the colonial gaze but begins to challenge its epistemological and material framework” (2016, 7). Hantke argues the film “announces a new stage in the way popular culture is responding to post-9/11 discourse” and that “it deserves special credit because it is, in fact, the first film to do so” (2016, 28). To Kurtz’s and Hantke’s points, it is worth adding that the film positions the US government and military as the film’s primary antagonist. As Cornea points out, in early science fiction films, the US military often (though not always successfully, as in films like *War of the Worlds* [Byron Haskin, 1953]) protected us from harm beyond the borders of our atmosphere. But in *Monsters*, the US military does not protect anyone from harm; rather, it is the primary cause of the harm. While *Monsters* is definitely not the first science fiction or monster film to portray the US government this way, its context in the post-9/11 era, combined with the film’s message—“Who are the ‘monsters?’”—positions the film as a direct reaction to and critique of the US and its history of nationalistic policy and aggression aimed against immigrants, specifically those crossing the US-Mexico border. In the beginning, we assume the US military is an institution that is serving and protecting its citizens, but by the end, the arc of the story positions us firmly with Andrew and Sam with their transformed outlook of the atrocities.

Unlike more traditional science fiction and monster films, the aliens in *Monsters* are discovered to be more like the sympathetic aliens that Ramírez Berg describes, but they are not allowed to assimilate or leave. They are instead treated (and destroyed) like the destructive monsters, even though Andrew and Sam (and the audience) know they are not. Edwards further subverts this dichotomy by placing the ending of the narrative timeline at the beginning of the film. Chaudhuri says this editing structure “places the emphasis on the transformative encounter” (2014, 134) of the two primary characters and the audience, but what it also does is temporarily deny the antagonist’s victory, at least for now. Even though the audience knows at least one of the two mating aliens are destroyed at the end of the story’s timeline, the filmmakers deny the closure that would come from the aliens’ total destruction at the end, allowing the aliens to still be alive at the film’s conclusion, neither destroyed, assimilated, or returned to their place of origin.

Conclusion

While the political vision of *Monsters* centres the white male perspective, the film provides an acute critique of the US government’s response to immigration in the post-9/11 era. Combined with *Sleep Dealer*, *Monsters* provides a filmic one-two punch against the intensifying atrocities at the US-Mexico border. Depicting air strikes, border walls, evacuations, misinformation campaigns of infectious immigrants, and partner separations, *Monsters* gives us a US leadership that has decided to deal with the influx of immigration using both isolation and hostility, a reaction that is not all that different from how the current US government is handling the issue. Now fourteen years after the release of the film, the reality of the immigration crisis at the border is catastrophic, resulting in caged and separated families, fatalities as a result of lack of care and nourishment, and deplorable conditions in holding facilities where refugees are imprisoned. Former President Trump fought ruthlessly for his desired border wall, resulting in a government shutdown in 2019. And his inflammatory public rhetoric has only fueled nationalist hatred toward immigrants, referring to people as an “infestation” (Zimmer 2019). This comparison of immigrants to an infestation evokes Ramírez Berg’s argument that comparing immigrants to an insect or pest dehumanizes them and thus encourages inhumane treatment. It is worth noting that current President Biden recently waived 26 federal laws in South Texas in an effort to continue the construction of US-Mexico border

walls, in line with Trump's policies, suggesting that there is no end in sight for the ongoing suffering (Gonzalez 2023).

But how will future sci-fi and monster films tell the story of the crisis at the US-Mexico border? And will these future movies continue to inspire fruitful public discourse and scholarship on the filmic representation of science fiction aliens, border monsters, and the post-9/11 Western government response to immigration? Production context is key here, as the trenchant critique in a film like *Monsters* was possible in part due to its independent financing. Films released after *Monsters*, such as *Arrival* (Denis Villeneuve, 2016), *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J.J. Abrams, 2015) and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Rian Johnson, 2017), and the now-likely doomed production of *Alien Nation* all deal heavily with nationalism and borders. But these more recent filmic examples lack the direct criticism of *Monsters*, instead either creating a primary antagonist other than the US (China in *Arrival*) or smuggling their politics in a fictional galaxy far, far away where a rebel resistance fights the First Order (the *Star Wars* films). These softer, more veiled critiques are undoubtedly at least a partial result of the conglomerate studios responsible for their production and/or distribution (i.e., Paramount and Disney). And with the case of *Alien Nation*, a reimagining of the 1988 film, this time written by indie filmmaker Jeff Nichols, Disney's 2019 purchase of Fox likely killed the project. In interviews, Nichols claimed the script was going to be "epic" and was designed to show the initial process of alien immigration rather than starting the story's timeline after their integration, as in the original film. But after Disney's acquisition of Fox, the project became one of the many casualties of the former's purchase of the latter. Disney's tentpole strategy of safe, big-budget family films aimed at all demographic quadrants did not have a place for a challenging critique of the US immigration policy, and as of now, the project is considered dead ("Disney not going ahead" 2019). However, as Cornea points out, future filmic responses to crises such as the one at the US-Mexico border are coming, as global anxieties have continuously manifested themselves in Hollywood sci-fi and monster films. Victoria McCollum adds that the horror genre is "responding more rapidly" to current events than other art forms, "and at times a good deal more effectively" (2019, 3). But whether conglomerate Hollywood studios allow these films to identify the true monsters, or whether they allow the filmmakers to decentre the white male and/or anthropocentric perspective, remains to be seen.

Casey Walker is a PhD student at the University of Texas at Austin in the Department of Radio-Television-Film. He is currently working on his dissertation, which explores classical

Hollywood studio camera departments as networks of cultural and social capital. His work has been published in journals such as *Dialogue* and *Unbound*, in addition to an upcoming article in *Journal of 20th Century Media History* (June 2024). He lives in Austin, TX with his wife and three kids.

References

- Barsanti, Chris. 2019. “‘Monsters’ Built the Mexico Wall Trump Never Will.” *Medium*, January 23, 2019. <https://medium.com/eyes-wide-open/monsters-built-the-mexico-wall-trump-never-will-a7c4bfaeacaf>
- Berg, Charles Ramírez. 2012. “Immigrants, Aliens, and Extraterrestrials: Science Fiction’s Alien ‘Other’ as (Among Other Things) New Latino Imagery.” In *Film Genre Reader IV*, edited by Barry Keith Grant, 402–32. 4th ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Brah, Avtar. 1996. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.
- Broderick, Mick. 1993. “Surviving Armageddon: Beyond the Imagination of Disaster.” *Science Fiction Studies* 20 (3): 362–82.
- Chaudhuri, Shohini. 2014. *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 1996. “Monster Culture (Seven Theses).” In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 3–25. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cornea, Christine. 2017. “From Isolationism to Globalism: An Overview of Politics and Ethics in the Hollywood Science Fiction Film.” In *Science Fiction, Ethics and the Human Condition*, edited by Christian Baron, Peter Nicolai Halvorsen, and Christine Cornea, 159–79. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.
- “Disney not going ahead with Fox’s ‘Alien Nation’ remake.” 2019. *Business Standard*, June 29, 2019. https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/disney-halts-fox-s-alien-nation-remake-119062900173_1.html
- Engelhardt, Tom. 2006. “9/11 In a Movie-Made World.” *The Nation* 283 (9): 15–21.

- Fojas, Camilla. 2007. "Bordersploitation: Hollywood Border Crossers and Buddy Cops." *Symploke* 15 (1/2): 80–99.
- Fregoso, Rosa Linda. 1999. "Recycling Colonialist Fantasies on the Texas Borderlands." In *Home, Exile, Homeland*, edited by Hamid Naficy, 169–92. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gilmore, Gerry J. "Bush: 'We Will Take the Fight to the Enemy.'" Air Force, June 2, 2004. <https://www.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/136792/bush-we-will-take-the-fight-to-the-enemy/>
- Gonzalez, Valerie. 2023. "The Biden administration says it is using executive power to allow border wall construction in Texas." AP News, October 5, 2023. <https://apnews.com/article/border-wall-biden-immigration-texas-rio-grande-147d7ab497e6991e9ea929242f21ceb2>
- Grafius, Brandon. 2019. "Securing the Borders: Isolation and Anxiety in *The Witch, It Comes at Night*, and Trump's America." In *Make America Hate Again*, edited by Victoria McCollum, 119–28. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Hantke, Steffen. 2016. "The State of the State of Emergency: Life under Alien Occupation in Gareth Edwards' 'Monsters'." *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 41 (1): 25–38.
- Kearney, Richard. 2003. *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Kurtz, Malisa. 2016. "Globalization, Postcolonialism, and Science Fiction: Nomadic Transgression." PhD Dissertation, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario.
- McCollum, Victoria, 2019. "Introduction." In *Make America Hate Again: Trump-Era Horror and the Politics of Fear*, edited by Victoria McCollum, 1–15. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- McConnell, Frank D. 1973. "Song of Innocence: The Creature from the Black Lagoon." *Journal of Popular Film* 2 (1): 14–28.
- Sobchack, Vivian Carol. 1987. *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Somerville, Will. 2007. "The Immigration Legacy of Tony Blair." Migration Policy Institute, May 10, 2007. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/immigration-legacy-tony-blair>

- Sontag, Susan. 1965. "The Imagination of Disaster." *Commentary* 40 (4): 42–48.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. 2020. "Introduction." In *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, 1–36. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Wetmore, Kevin J. *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2012.
- The White House. 2007. "Fact Sheet: Improving Border Security and Immigration Within Existing Law." National Archives and Records Administration, August 10, 2007. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/08/20070810.html>
- Zimmer, Ben. 2019. "Why Trump Uses 'Invasion' to Describe Immigrants." *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/08/trump-immigrant-invasion-language-origins/595579/>

- 2024 -

MONSTRUM is Published in Montréal, Québec by the Montréal Monstrum Society.
Copyright and intellectual property rights are held by the individual author(s).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).