

# GOTHIC NATURE



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**Siren Sisters: Feminist Mermaid Ecohorror in Agnieszka Smoczyńska's**

***The Lure* (2017)**

(Poland: WFDiF, 2015)

Kristen Angierski

'Up where they walk, up where they run/  
Up where they stay all day in the sun/  
Wanderin' free - wish I could be/  
Part of that world'.

—Disney's *The Little Mermaid* (1989)

Unlike their red-headed Disney counterpart Ariel, the fanged mermaids of Agnieszka Smoczyńska's Polish film *The Lure* are not at first particularly interested in becoming 'part of that [human] world'. Indeed, mermaid sisters Golden (Michalina Olszańska) and Silver (Marta Mazurek) initially come ashore for a temporary 'vacation' among the humans of 1980s Poland before swimming on to America. But fate predictably intervenes. Following the film's fairytale source—Hans Christian Andersen's 1837 *Den lille Havfrue* (*The Little Mermaid*)—the narrative shifts from glitzy spring-break sister romp to tragic interspecies love story. A mermaid (Silver) falls in love with a human man (Mietek, played by Jakub Gierszał) and attempts to become human herself, only to lose her tail, her voice, his love and her life in the end. *The Lure* rewrites the anti-feminist messaging of the Danish original by giving the doomed mermaid a growling vampiric sister who takes ecohorrific revenge on the exploitative humans profiting off the mermaids' magnetic musical gifts and beautiful 'tails': the latter a crude term used to describe women's genitalia, signifying their dual oppression as women and as fish. They are also 'foreigners' on notoriously and increasingly nativist Polish soil. Ultimately, *The Lure*'s ecohorror highlights the self-murdering sacrifices that are prerequisites to assimilating into 'that' world: the world of Poland, of cisheterosexual womanhood, and of terrestrial humanity.



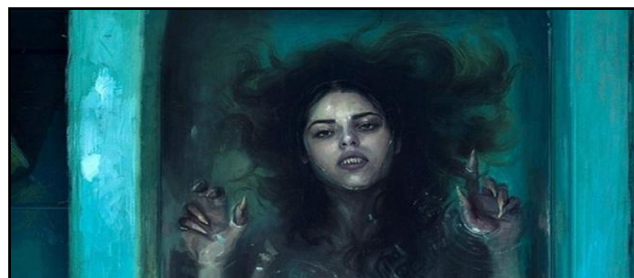
Golden and Silver's oppositional names and aesthetic map onto their divergent attitudes toward 'belonging', evident from the first moment we meet them. Silver looks on Mietek curiously; Golden, like a predator homing in on prey. While Silver yearns to metaphorically capture a human heart, Golden literally eats one. But Silver is not universally compliant. When Mietek's family discovers Golden's darker appetites—and when Silver inconveniently asks why they are never paid for their performances at the adult nightclub where the family also works—the humans attempt to murder them. Like 'the undocumented' and like animals, then, Golden and Silver are economically exploitable and vulnerable. They are also outside the purview of the law and human rights, both of which necessitate citizenship. Emboldened by the mermaids' foreignness and statelessness, the first time the club-owner meets them he demands that they undress and, noticing they are 'smooth as Barbies', probes an alternate vaginal opening in their tails. After this violation, the owner asks with false polite deference about their Polish language skills, an iteration of the trope by which racial and ethnic Others are expected to explain their 'real' origins.

After the attempted murder, one might expect Silver and Golden to return to the sea. But Silver is hopelessly in love and undergoes tail-removal surgery to become the 'complete' (that is, under an ableist and cisheterosexual paradigm) woman Mietek desires. Becoming part of 'that world' requires blood (menstruation) and radical bodily mutilation that is also a form of suicide; in a gruesome body horror scene, Silver 'kills the mermaid and saves the woman', but even this radical level of assimilation and tragically strict adherence to patriarchal demands (she becomes literally voiceless) cannot save her. The first time Silver and Mietek have sex post-surgery, she bleeds heavily. The visibility of her painful sacrifice and the loss of Silver's marketability repulse Mietek and he falls in love with and then marries someone else. As in *Den lille Havfrue*, a tail-less mermaid must earn the love of a human or she will turn into sea-foam the morning after her lover gets married: unless she kills him. Sensitive Silver cannot kill and fulfills the awful curse. In her grief and rage, Golden rips her sister's fair-weather lover's throat out before returning to sea, alone. *The Lure's* vision of non-human revenge, the central plot criterion for ecohorror, is thus also the violent revenge of the dehumanised: women,

immigrants, refugees, and animals. This interweaving of non-human and human oppression marks *The Lure* as an ecofeminist film that thematises the exclusionary basis and impenetrability of ‘that [human, white, male, documented] world’.



In contrast to love-addled Silver, Golden perceives early on the hypocrisies of an overwhelmingly ‘sad’ human world and sticks to its underground: the space Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) eloquently describes in *Borderlands/La Frontera* as home to ‘the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed’ (p. 25). As a half-fish woman quite content with her fish-ness, Golden represents a queer and transcorporeal (Alaimo, 2010) ecopolitics that rejects assimilation. Neither here nor there but trawling the margins of human society and its underground populations (she sings punk rock with humanoid King Triton) she is without a place, a voluntary refugee who, as Carole Murphy describes in *Beasts of the Deep: Sea Creatures and Popular Culture* (2018), ‘draws on both ancient fears of the sea as the repository of unknown monsters and more recent fears of the perceived threat of ‘refugee-as-invader’ and consumer’ (p. 154). Moreover, she is gendered; fear of the deep unknown of the ocean and of female sexuality collapse in the figure of the temporarily terrestrial siren.



Poster Art by Sam Spratt

In short, Golden is a nativist purist’s worst nightmare: a literal consumer of Poland’s male ‘resources’ a non-human ‘pollutant’ who breaks the law and embraces her Other-ness and love of the sea. (In one of the most sadly poignant moments of the film, Golden stares longingly

at an oceanic screensaver.) While the film lacks the more explicit ecological messaging of *Freeform*'s mermaid television series *Siren* (2018) in which mermaids are forced to the surface when overfishing depletes their food source, *The Lure*'s tragicomical, musical exploration of non-human exploitation and dehumanisation speaks to the enmeshed (il)logics of misogyny, nativism, speciesism, and ecophobia. *The Lure* is thus a smart, if at times aggressively weird, ecohorror feminist film that problematises the links between humanness and citizenship and, in so doing, suggests an aquatic alternative in the form of border-defying mermaids and vengeful siren sisters.

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