

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE 1

How to Cite: Duffy, C. (2019) 'We're not the only animals in the woods': *The Ritual. Gothic Nature*. 1, 304-309. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: 14 September 2019

Peer Review:

All articles that appear in the *Gothic Nature* journal have been peer reviewed through a double-blind process.

Copyright:

© 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Gothic Nature is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

‘We’re not the only animals in the woods’: *The Ritual* (2017)

(UK: The Imaginarium, 2017)

Caitlin Duffy

David Bruckner’s (2017) *The Ritual* is based on Adam Nevill’s (2011) British horror novel of the same name and was adapted for the screen by Joe Barton. It tells the story of a group of four urban men who go on a lads’ holiday to a hiking trail in northern Sweden in memory of their recently deceased friend, Robert (Paul Reid). After one member of their party, Dom (Sam Troughton), injures his knee, the hikers take an off-trail short-cut and end up facing a number of obstacles, including ‘fucking pagan hillbillies’, a demanding Nordic god, and the maze-like wilderness itself. Throughout the film, Luke (Rafe Spall) also contends with overwhelming guilt occasioned by his cowardly inability to prevent Robert’s murder. *The Ritual* goes beyond the usual destabilisation of human identity in the wilderness and instead uses Luke’s guilt to illustrate the continuities of violence between modern civilisation and ancient wilderness. It is this added layer that makes *The Ritual* a truly exciting piece of ecohorror cinema.

The first half of *The Ritual*, however, is grounded in old ecohorror tropes and characterised primarily by anxieties surrounding the wilderness. Armed with a map and compass, Hutch (Robert James-Collier) promises the others that they will be out of the forest before sun-down. However, as the forest grows darker, these pieces of technology, thought to provide humanity with some mastery over nature, become useless and inaccurate. Even Phil’s (Arsher Ali) memory foam boots seem to fail. In these initial moments, all of the fear and terror of *The Ritual* appears to emerge from the wilderness itself. When the group comes across a gutted deer hanging from a tree, they attempt to attribute the gory spectacle to nature rather than humanity, claiming that a bear is just as likely to have placed the deer carcass in the trees as a human hunter.

The film ultimately frustrates this desire to completely blame nature, and one thing that sets *The Ritual* apart from other ecohorror films is its refusal to present a singular site of violence or monster to its audience. The wilderness appears threatening through its excess and strangeness, but the city is also marred by the criminal violence connected to Robert’s murder. The forest is menacing in large part because it is the habitation of the Jötunn, a mysterious

figure from Norse mythology, however the film's human characters are equally capable of chaotic violence. The forest-dwelling pagans capture members of the small hiking party in order to present sacrifices to the Jötunn within their small backwoods community. Of course, this violence could be attributed to their degeneration as a result of considerable time spent in the wilderness. Hutch makes this very argument by ascribing the disturbing signs of human decay within and surrounding the cabin they reluctantly spend the night in (including the impenetrable markings on the trees and the wooden humanoid effigy with antlers in the attic) to the dangerous influence of too much time spent in the wilderness. According to Hutch, living 'in the middle of nowhere' can make a human 'go fucking mental'. However, *The Ritual* troubles the ability to find nature as the only source of horror through the urban murder of Robert, which is repeatedly reenacted in Luke's guilty subconscious and represents the film's original trauma.



Figure 1

The Ritual's most powerful demonstration of the major role humans play in the creation of violence in both civilised and wild environments can be found in its material depiction of the hikers' submersion into the wild. Although this is a common feature of ecohorror films, Bruckner's lengthy and recurring shots of the forest make it feel freshly terrifying. Just as much as Bruckner's forest shots often contain the hidden Jötunn, they also often envelop the four hikers (see Figures 1 and 2). Eventually, the forest even invades Luke's memory of Robert's urban murder (see Figure 3). David Bruckner's forest shots also effectively cause the audience

to experience the paranoiac urge to examine every detail of the *mise en scène* to find the lurking unknown danger (see Figure 4). As the audience searches the filmic image, the hikers scrutinise the wild for human traces. During the first half of the film, these traces represent hope of rescue for the hikers. Upon finding a mysterious trail, Dom happily exclaims ‘a path means civilisation!’; when they come across chopped trees, Dom again notes that they are ‘man-made! We’re getting somewhere!’; Hutch explains that they will get found eventually because ‘we’re on a path in the woods. It is near a hiking trail’. However, during the second half of the film, after members of the hiking team begin to be picked off one by one, these human traces take on a very different meaning. Suddenly they represent the dangers promised by the ‘fucking pagan hillbillies’: when they come across a path lined by torches, Dom pointedly murmurs, ‘we shouldn’t go that way’; upon finding a red tent containing a credit card that expired in 1984, among other human items, Phil observes, ‘that’s a bad sign, isn’t it?’



Figure 2



Figure 3

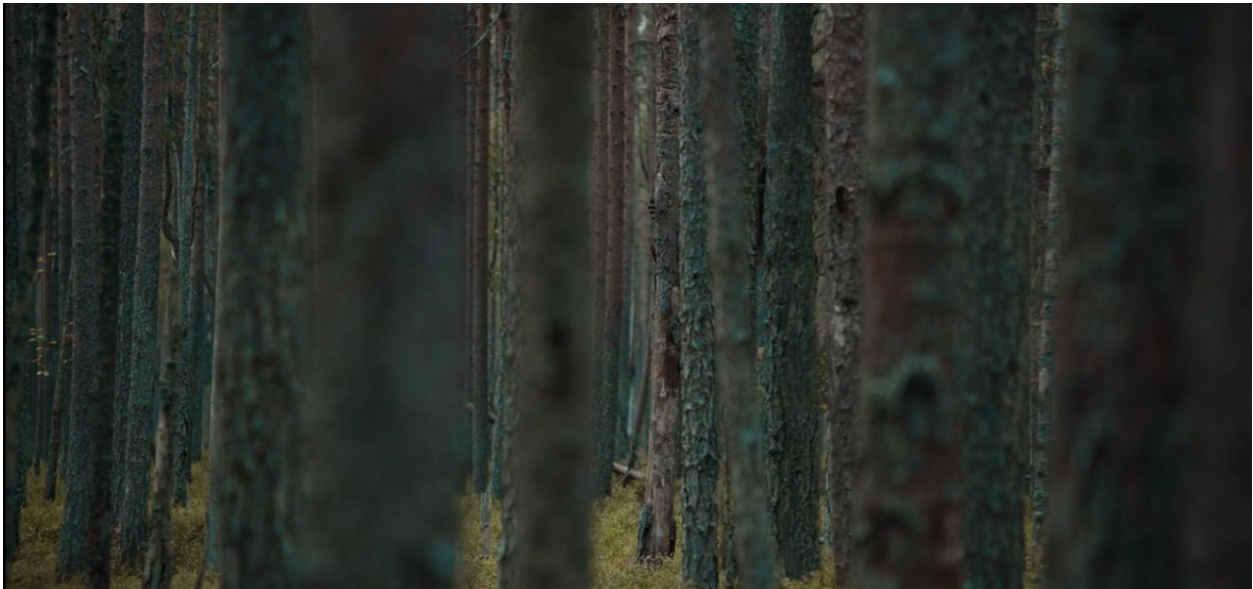


Figure 4

Although *The Ritual* appears to argue against the traditional ecohorror vision of the wilderness as inherently violent and degenerative, the film also presents the wild as capable of causing massive change within its human inhabitants and visitors. As the film progresses, the identities of the four urban hikers change. They begin the trip as fairly typical urban millennials, sharing sarcastic jokes, taking selfies on their cell phones, and indulging in drunken memories from their days together at university. Their time spent lost and stalked in the forest mutates them: they slowly lose their faith in maps and compasses, they physically fight each other, and panic after spending a night in an ominous cabin bearing the markings of witchcraft. After waking up to find himself naked and praying to an unknown statue on the cabin's second floor,

Phil emptily declares that ‘It got inside my head...I can’t get it out of my fucking head’. However, this time spent in the woods also strengthens them. Dom, once known amongst his friends as being incapable of sustaining even the most minor injury without complaining, manages to silently bear his pain and later heroically accepts his own fate as a human sacrifice for the Jötunn; At the film’s conclusion, Luke finally overcomes his paralysing cowardice and guilt by entering his recurring vision of the liquor store aisle and refusing to submit to the Jötunn. The film ends with a romantic vision of nature as a regenerative force. After exiting the forest, Luke emerges in an open field as the sun rises. The claustrophobic shots which characterised the film leading up to this moment (including the liquor store scene, with its tight aisles and unrelenting led lighting, as well as the forest scenes comprised of endless rows of looming trees), are replaced with the open expanse of field and sky (see Figures 5, 6, and 7). *The Ritual*, however, manages to maintain its complex depiction of the human-wilderness relationship. Even in this scene of rebirth, Luke’s face betrays his profound sense of loss and his awareness that, despite escaping the forest and returning to modern civilisation, deliverance from violence is a mere fantasy (see Figure 8). Danger lurks in all environments.

The Ritual’s ominous visual depiction of wilderness is terrifying in its all-encompassing excess; however, the film’s narrative complicates the ecohorror subgenre. Violence exists in both the modern civilised and the backwards wild environments of the film, suggesting that non-human nature is not entirely to blame for the horrors of *The Ritual*.



Figure 5



Figure 6

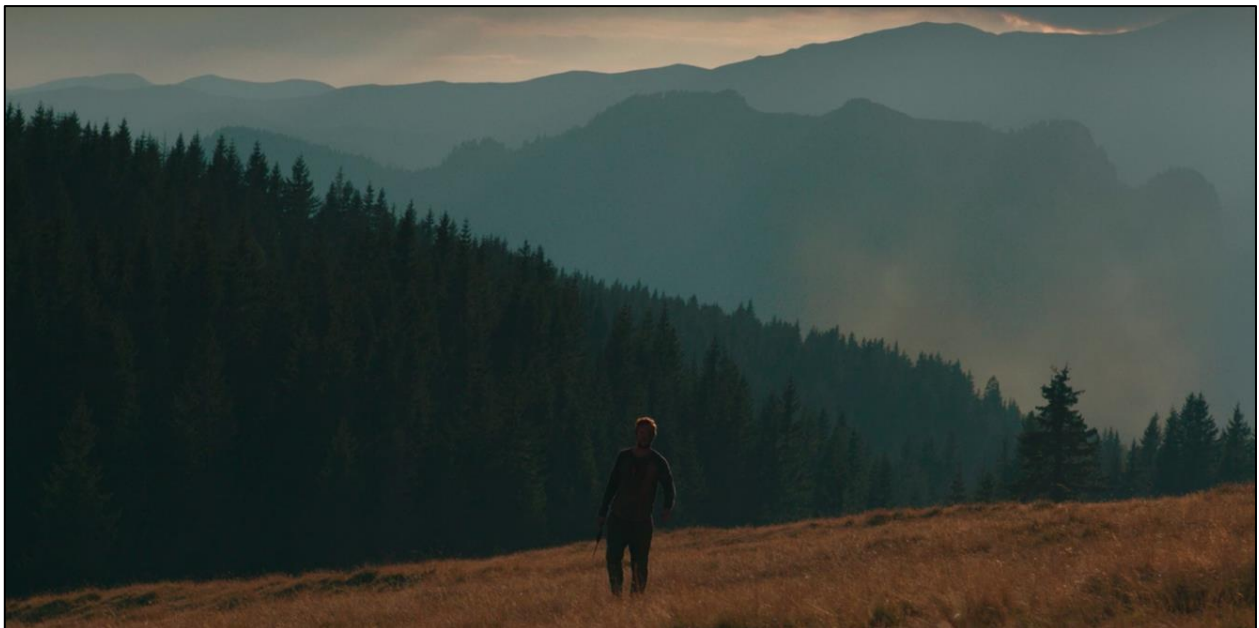


Figure 7

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Ritual, 2017 [film]. Directed by David Bruckner. UK: Entertainment One.