

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE 1

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*The Rain*

(Denmark: Netflix, 2018)

Rebecca Gibson

The first episode of Netflix's first Danish original series *The Rain* (2018) is by far the weakest, despite its dramatic premise. In its later episodes, the show deftly integrates elements of Gothic and dystopian narrative into its portrayal of a young band of survivors in order to demonstrate how it is possible to grow beyond these tropes even during the apocalypse and maintain an idea of communal hope. *The Rain* is a show which privileges character development and relationship-building between the survivors to this end, drawing from multiple genres in order to demonstrate how the bonds between them grow stronger despite the desperate decision-making necessitated by their apocalyptic landscape, but its beginning relies too heavily on clichéd peril in the wake of improbable environmental disaster.

We watch as a devastating biological event sweeps Scandinavia: an incurable virus spread through rainfall decimates the human population and drives our two protagonists, siblings Simone and Rasmus, to shelter underground in a bunker with their parents. They experience a rapid-fire sequence of losses – first their father, then their mother, then finally the more symbolic loss of a boy contacted over their radio, a relationship which ends as abruptly as it began after their equipment is damaged beyond repair. The time skip of six years which follows as Simone and Rasmus grow to young adulthood alone would perhaps have been better as a flashback, as the real story begins when they are forced to leave the bunker.

The tough band of survivors who trick Simone and Rasmus into leaving the bunker reveal themselves slowly over the course of *The Rain*'s eight episodes, forming the heart of its narrative. After the first episode, *The Rain* is less concerned with the biological implausibility of its premise—that a band of monomaniacal scientists working for a company named Apollon, including Simone and Rasmus' father, release an untested vaccine into the atmosphere, believing it to cure all human disease, and accidentally create the fatal rain—than with the potential of its characters to grow and form relationships in the aftermath of a man-made apocalypse. The show focuses on one character's backstory per episode, taking the viewer

through the sequence of events that led them to their current circumstances. It saves perhaps the least sympathetic for last: Patrick, an outsider even among their ragged band, who has so far been characterised as selfish to an almost pathological degree, is revealed to be so hurt by their leader Martin's denial of their friendship that he gets drunk and pushes Simone (a rival for Martin's affection) out into the deadly rain. Still unsympathetic, it would seem, except for the fact that the rain doesn't kill her: this unexplained anomaly perfectly exemplifies *The Rain's* approach to its integration of Gothic tropes and themes, which are employed only as long as they are useful to the developing dynamic between the survivors. Patrick's thoughtless action triggers a series of events which begins with him leaving the camp but eventually resolves in him rescuing the rest of the group from Apollon headquarters, demonstrating where his loyalty truly lies and concretising the group as an example of the 'found family' trope.

It has been suggested by numerous critics that Gothic is a mode well-placed to capture anxieties surrounding climate change and environmental damage, and although this model has merit it necessarily restricts the definition of Gothic to something reactionary, a mirror which regurgitates the cultural concerns of its age. Asserting instead that Gothic is tied to its historical context but not defined by it allows for a more expansive field of study, and acknowledges that Gothic works more as a discourse or mode than a particularly well-defined genre. In this vein, I would argue that *The Rain* utilises ecoGothic elements as it sees fit and dismisses them when they no longer serve its purpose, which is to illustrate the potential for hope even in seemingly hopeless circumstances: the lethal beauty of the Scandinavian forests is played for atmospheric value as the band of survivors begin their journey, as Rasmus and then Simone both experience scares that standing water or rain has touched their bare skin. The sheer horror of something as seemingly harmless and ubiquitous as water suddenly becoming a deadly weapon is emphasised by the foregrounding of small mistakes which could have lethal consequences: there is no way for the group to protect themselves entirely from an element which is essential for their existence. Nature has truly turned against humanity in this dystopian future, but the viewer is reminded often that this is all a consequence of our hubris.

The structural similarities to Gothic texts such as *Frankenstein* (1818) should seem clear, then, but as the show progresses it sheds some of its horrific sensibilities in favour of a more action-focused narrative. The survivors' journey through the woods to the Apollon headquarters allows them to traverse multiple microcosmic communities, such as the cult-like settlement which provides them with clean clothes and fresh food and which ultimately proves

too good to be true. The flashbacks to the characters' lives on the day of the first deadly rainfall provides a sense of fractured identity which ties the show more closely to post-apocalyptic road narratives such as *The Road* (2006) and *The Pesthouse* (2007), as these brief flashes split the characters' stories—and identities—into a *before* and *after*. The rain does more than simply change the environment, as it forces each character to reassess themselves and either choose to begin anew, reinventing themselves from scratch, or cling more fiercely to the person they were before the disaster. The obvious symbolism of water washing away past sins and mistakes should be acknowledged here, but it is not deployed in such a straightforward manner: because this rain (usually) pollutes rather than purifies, it is to each other that the characters have to look for absolution and a way forward.

The characters of *The Rain* are forced to undergo this erosion in a capricious environment where few rules remain, and even they are subject to change – as when, for unexplained reasons, a drop of rain in one setting kills one character, while standing in it for minutes does not harm Simone. Perhaps these lingering mysteries will be answered by the events of the second season, confirmed by Netflix to be coming in 2019, but it seems more likely that the focus will shift to the shady manoeuvrings of Apollon and their plan to weaponise the rain for use against other countries. A more fitting plot development could not be imagined for an extended metaphor as to human interference and pollution of the environment, but it would be to *The Rain's* detriment if the focus on the young group of survivors was lost. After all, the affectionate bonds which keep them together even in the face of extreme risk marks *The Rain* out as a hopeful dystopia in a field which often offers none.