

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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COVER CREDIT:

Model IV, 2017

Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

Photo credit: Jordan K. Fuller

Fabrication: Chicago Crucible

WEB DESIGNER:

Michael Belcher

***Vivarium* (2019): Interview with Director Lorcan Finnegan**

Interview by Elizabeth Parker, with questions from the Gothic Nature community

'It's just nature. It's the way things are.'

Vivarium, written by Garret Shanley and directed by Lorcan Finnegan, is an eerie story of isolation and entrapment—and one which premiered to UK audiences, all too fittingly, in the midst of the first lockdown. Though perhaps not obviously or conventionally an ecohorror film, *Vivarium* is nonetheless a rich and delightfully complex exploration into contemporary tensions between 'human' and 'more-than-human' worlds. It is a story more than likely to leave its viewers in something of an existential crisis about what is 'natural'—and about our own places within 'Nature'. We were absolutely honoured to have Lorcan Finnegan—director of *Foxes* (2011), *Without Name* (2016), and now *Vivarium* (2019)—answer some questions for us...

When you hear the terms 'ecohorror' and 'ecoGothic', what comes to mind and what connections do you draw with your own work?

To me, Eco Gothic and Ecohorror conjure up themes around our place in nature and our conflicting relationship with the natural world. The ancient consciousness of nature clashing with modernity. The idea that there are liminal forces and things in the universe that are beyond human understanding has always interested me, it ignites my imagination and makes the world a wondrous and mysterious place. So I suppose that this interest has ended up influencing the types of films I make.

***Foxes*, *Without Name*, and *Vivarium* are all extremely rich in atmosphere and environment—can you tell us a bit about your relationship to settings and how this has evolved through your films?**

I grew up on a peninsula in Dublin, surrounded by the sea and with forests and fields in-between. Both my parents are from more rural parts of Ireland, so I also spent quite a bit of my childhood fishing, hunting, foraging for wild mushrooms and just generally exploring. My Dad used to tell me stories of faeries in Monaghan and we would visit faery forts around that area. So I always had a love of nature and the natural world. In college I studied graphic design but I was drawn towards narrative structures so I started getting into animation and motion graphics. The first few short films I made were animated because I didn't need lots of equipment or people, I could just make everything myself or get a couple of friends to help out. With animation you have to create the world for your story to take place within, so when I started making live action projects the same principal carried across. With *Foxes* I had to create a very specific place and strange atmosphere for the story to take place within because if the place wasn't right the story wouldn't translate. The same applied to *Vivarium*, but on a more complex scale.

The timing of the film's release over here coinciding with lockdown was a little bit spooky to say the least. Has this coincidence significantly affected how you see the film?

Yeah it was pretty strange alright! I'll never get to see the film like an audience because I know all the technical mechanisms too well but I'm sure it adds another layer of strangeness when watching it during a lockdown. There were lots of strange coincidences that we became aware of, like the strange illness that affects Jesse's character, being stuck in a house, the book showing a virus-like symbol, food packages arriving and the loss of taste. Watching while stuck at home must have been pretty intense!

***Vivarium* is a film with an extraordinary atmosphere of dread. There's just so much to be frightened of, from the literally alien threat, to the societal pressures of adulthood, to the inevitability (and sort of insulting mundanity) of death. Of all the arguably 'Gothic' elements in the film, which do you find the most unsettling and why?**

We wanted to create a world that was all veneer but no substance, tangible but fake, to mirror the ideals that are sold to us as a society. Yonder is like a brochure come to life. We wanted to amplify the strangeness of the social contract to show the absurdity of it all. People striving to own a home

just to spend their lives working to repay the mortgage before they die. To me the synthetic atmosphere and complete lack of nature in Yonder is what is most terrifying.

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Watching *Vivarium*, I couldn't stop thinking about Bernice M. Murphy's *Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture* (2009)—and in particular this book's discussion of how aggressively 'environmental' it is to build suburbs. (To lift a few quotes that she uses: suburbs are 'a damaging waste of natural resources', 'a threat to the ecology of all living things', and 'built on the destruction of Nature'). Is this element something that influenced the conception or creation of the film?

Yes. Although I've never read the book, it rings true to what I've seen happening, particularly in Ireland. Vast swathes of land are often cleared to build uninspired suburban housing with no real infrastructure and detached from community and nature.

The very title of the film announces from the outset a tension between the 'natural' and 'unnatural', which of course resonates heavily throughout the whole film. We see seemingly 'natural', or at least normalised, behaviours in the human protagonists (buying a house, having a child, playing out gender norms, etc.), but everything unfolds in this stifflingly synthetic prison. Is *Vivarium* a depiction of a world in which we have annihilated, or at least severed our connections to, Nature?

That was the idea really. What if the suburb just went on and on forever? A completely homogenous world without any nature or individuality. The food arrives processed and vacuum packed in plastic. Children spending all day looking at screens. It's not a million miles away from reality. The antagonists provide what it would appear that we want—a house with a garden, warmth, shelter, entertainment and food—but they don't get it quite right. They are not human so they don't understand deeper human needs.



Figure one: the Gothic suburbia of *Vivarium* (2019)

Following on from this, the fact that this is a decidedly green world is especially interesting, evoking for me the extremes of both the plastic world of Monopoly and the archetypal Deep Dark Woods. Can you comment on this?

I chose that colour quite early on after doing a variety of tests. I'm really interested in the psychological impact of colour on an audience and green is quite fascinating. In nature green gives the feeling of verdancy and freedom, but taken out of nature entirely and given an unnatural shift in hue, it takes on very different characteristics. It becomes anxiety inducing, like toxic waste or poison. It also feels institutional. I was also inspired by *The Wizard of Oz*. The soil is yellow as Tom starts to dig downward and the houses are like the witch's skin or poisonous potion. The surreal puffy clouds and dreamlike interaction with light was inspired by René Magritte's painting *Empire of Light*.

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The central conceit of the parasitic cuckoo (a perfect example of Gothic Nature!) was fascinating throughout. Can you tell us a bit more about the inspiration behind this?

After we made *Foxes* Garret and I started working on an idea for a feature film, imagining a strange suburb that went on forever and had odd quantum properties. Like a blister universe on earth. While we were thinking about it I was watching a BBC Wildlife show with David Attenborough talking about Cuckoos. I thought there was something really interesting about it in relation to this new project, so I sent it to Garret. As we developed it further, brood parasitism and life cycles became an interesting way into the story.



Figure two: the ‘parasitic’ cuckoo in the opening scenes of Vivarium (2019)

In some ways, this leads us nicely onto my next question, as I was particularly struck by the bird-like features of The Boy’s throat movements when he mimics the mysterious alien creatures that are never shown onscreen. These creatures, or mysterious presences, or whatever we want to call them, seemed to me to take the idea of ‘alien Nature’ to the logical extreme, where Nature is literally extraterrestrial. Can you tell us a bit more about how you imagine these mysterious entities?

Birds ended up inspiring some of the character design and sound for the film, obviously cuckoos but also magpies. The black and white uniform of The Boy and the Estate Agent (with no colour

to their character or emotions) and the sound The Boy makes came from magpies. The swollen goitre is a bit like a neck wattle of a hornbill too. To me the creatures have a symbiotic relationship with humans and have been around for a long time, living in parallel with us. Much like the cuckoo, they need hosts. Cuckoos don't want to take over the world, they just want to breed. The indifference that nature has to humans terrifies some people, even though we're all a part of it. As Gemma says to the little girl who asks about the dead chick at the start of the film, 'It's just nature. It's the way things are'.

What fictional monster has disturbed you the most and why?

When I was a kid I went to see a play called *The Spotty Grousler* written by Pat Inglesby. It was for children but they performed something terrifying on stage. The Spotty Grousler took somebody and put them into a tall cabinet type box and shut the door. When they opened the door a minute later the person flopped out as a small ragdoll. Totally inanimate. It bashed the floppy doll against the side of the cabinet for effect. Then the Grousler was looking for a volunteer from the audience to get into the box. A torch searched the audience and they chose me. One of the actors performing alongside the monster came to get me from my seat and I freaked the fuck out. I was going nowhere near that box. I suppose what was so terrifying was the mystery, the unseen. I still find the unseen more chilling than any visible monster. My Dad used to joke that the Spotty Grousler was in the woods every now and then to get a reaction from me, which was kind of funny in hindsight.

In Nicolas Roeg's version of Roald Dahl's *The Witches* there was a little girl who became trapped in a painting. She would be spotted in different parts of the painting, always inanimate, growing older and older until one day she was no longer there. I always thought that there was something quite nightmarish about that too. I think it somehow inspired *Vivarium* in that the characters are trapped in something that looks like a catalog with photoshopped skies. In that world there is nothing else, which is quite horrific to me.

The Gothic is so often about 'what lies beneath' and in *Vivarium* this idea is literalised with the subterranean horrors of the film's finale. What do you think these final scenes importantly reveal, or suggest about this world?

I'd be more interested to hear what you think they suggest about the world! The intention was to reflect an atomised society, many of us don't know our neighbours and have lost a sense of community, so it's like there are people living in all the houses, all going through their own horrors but unable to see each other. Like alternate dimensions, they are vibrating at different frequencies. So when Gemma falls through the rooms she is being pushed out of each house until she is put back in her box. It's quite abstract and can be interpreted differently depending on your own cultural background. In many ways I feel that films, and art in general, can be the manifestation of our collective consciousness. As though we send out tendrils to examine ourselves and our fears and they result in a film that we can watch. So I'm always more interested in how other people interpret the film than what I was intending, consciously or otherwise.

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What projects are next for you and what should we look out for?

I'm making a new film pretty soon called *Nocebo*. It's a supernatural thriller about a fashion designer suffering from a mysterious 'tick related' illness until help comes in the form of a Filipino nanny who uses traditional folk healing to reveal a horrifying truth. The film explores consumerism, human exploitation and the fast fashion industry as well as placebos/nocebos and the power of the mind to harm or cure the physical body. It's a return to the supernatural and set between Dublin and Manila, so I'm looking forward to getting stuck in to that.