

“A Perfect Place to Die”: Thinking the EcoGothic, Darkness, and the Dark Sweet in Gus Van Sant’s *The Sea of Trees*

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Abstract

Aokigahara Jukai, situated at the foot of Mount Fuji in Yamanashi Prefecture, has historically been known as the home of people who commit suicide. Stories about Aokigahara as a popular suicide spot have fuelled interest. Drawing on filmic representation of Aokigahara, alias “suicide forest,” this article proposes to read Gus Van Sant’s film *The Sea of Trees* (2015) through the genre of the EcoGothic, addressing how the film deals with nature, death, precarity, and vulnerability to account for the (im)possibility of transformation in the dark woods. The uniqueness of Van Sant’s film compared to other filmic and literary representations of Jukai or the sea of trees, including Jason Zada’s film *The Forest* (2016), has been attributed to Van Sant’s incorporation of Aokigahara as a place for meditation and his treatment of the protagonist’s relationship with the Gothic forest. Based on new materialist theorist Timothy Morton’s thinking on “darkness,” this article is divided into three parts: Thinking the EcoGothic; Thinking Darkness; and Thinking Dark Sweet. The essay explores how the film challenges conventional representations of the dark woods by showing how the protagonist, by grieving for his dead wife in the forest, comes to acknowledge death as renewal.

Keywords: EcoGothic, Aokigahara, dark ecology, Timothy Morton, Gus Van Sant, *The Sea of Trees*

It is estimated that every year Aokigahara Jukai, located on the northwestern side of Mount Fuji in Japan, is home to between “fifty and one hundred people [who] take their own lives” (O’Keefe 187).¹ Since 2003, the Japanese government has ceased to publish the annual number of suicides committed in Aokigahara. With its strong association with suicide and corpses, Aokigahara has become an affective force in horror films, novels, television, and the press, which acknowledges it to be an important feature and thus almost like a “protagonist” (Mauro) in the topic of suicide in Jukai (sea of trees).² American film director Gus Van Sant’s movie *The Sea of Trees* (2015), starring Matthew McConaughey (Arthur Brennan) and Naomi Watts (Joan Brennan) as a troubled couple and Ken Watanabe (Takumi Nakamura) as a suicidal man who meets

McConaughey in the dark woods, marks the first time that Aokigahara has featured in a film. One year later, Jason Zada's horror film *The Forest* (2016) continued the supernatural tradition but turned Aokigahara into a place of banal horror (rather than ecoGothic) fraught with vengeful ghosts and cheap jump scares.

Since so many media representations of Aokigahara simply reinforce stereotypical images about the forest as a location for suicide,³ Van Sant's film, which registers Aokigahara as a suicide forest, falls into a predicament. The film received boos at the end of its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival in 2015 (Hammond) and relentless criticisms since it was released in 2015. Shallow criticism apart, negative reviews reveal that the film represents Aokigahara as "a hostile place" where the leading character Arthur not only stumbles easily but is almost drowned by floods (Bradshaw). Other negative reviews find fault with *The Sea of Trees* for failing to discuss Japanese suicide culture. Some claim that the film uses a Japanese man, Takumi, but "his [Arthur's] relationship with Japanese culture appears to be no more than cursory" (Mowe), and "Takumi's pain and his story is second-class" (Bradshaw). Some even mistake Takumi for a female since Arthur finally realizes that Takumi was Joan's spirit at the end of the film.⁴ And still others just condemn the film as "inert" (Bradshaw) and "kitsch" (Chang).

In contrast to the many horror stories and media, which focus on the notorious suicide forest, Aokigahara Jukai, Van Sant's movie *The Sea of Trees*, this article argues, is different in its treatment of the strange ambience of this Japanese forest and its manifestations. It transforms a presumed and stereotypical dark forest into a contemplative place for liminal beings. Moreover, the Aokigahara forest fits readily within the context of the ecoGothic, given that bodies, for example, could be found "in monthly sweeps" in 2011 (Gilhooly). As a critique of negative reviews that misunderstand Van Sant's film, this article argues that the film not only invokes new materialist Timothy Morton's sense of a (dark-sweet) meditative space for people to ponder the meaning of life but also helps us to recognize the re-enchantment of the Gothic forest where strangers encounter each other. Furthermore, this article also argues that viewing Aokigahara as an ecoGothic forest with an emphasis on its distinct geology and local customs and traditions offers an alternative epistemological understanding of a "transcultural" Gothic.

The dark woods have three dimensions in the popular imagination, according to Elizabeth Parker, author of *The Forest and the EcoGothic* (2020): (1) as a living and animated threat in itself; (2) as a space teeming with monsters; and (3) as a former idyll darkly infected by human interference (67). If the first category implies plant intelligence or the unpredictable power that plants possess, the second invokes the sense of fear while encountering corpses, predators, and spirits in the unruly wilderness. The third resonates with Morton's notion of dark ecology. Coining the term "dark ecology" in 2004 and furthering discussions in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007), Morton not only problematizes the idea of the "beautiful soul syndrome" (118), which connotes a "good" nature out there for us to protect, but also rethinks environmental aesthetics as darkness. Tracing the three trajectories as "dark-depressing," "dark-uncanny," and "dark-sweet" with regard to the comprehension of ecological awareness (2016b, 5), Morton maintains that these three threads in dark ecology map out the trajectories from experiencing nihilism and transversing uncanny darkness to ending with dark sweetness, from which "ethics and politics" will emerge (160). Drawing on Morton's dark ecology, ecocritic Heather I. Sullivan proposes the notion of "dark green," embodied by gothic nature and plant horror, which harbours three meanings: humanity's dependencies on the vegetal; human impacts; and plant agency (Sullivan). Her association of "dark" green with Morton's dark ecology reveals that it is "dark" because we tend to forget "we have serious plant interdependency," tend to idealize "isolated purity" where "nature" is construed as "a far-away place separate from human culture," and fail to recognize the plant's power (Sullivan). With its inhospitable terrain, spectral woods, and macabre history of death, Aokigahara Jukai seduces people with (or without) suicidal thoughts to visit. Thus, it should not be viewed as a "virgin" forest in itself.

Etymologically, "Ao" means blue or green, "ki" means trees, and "hara" means field, or ocean if "used in the word *unabara* [ocean or sea]" (Devlin 2019b, 8). Known as "Sea of Trees," which gets its name because "a vast sea of green trees" is spotted if one "look[s] down upon Aokigahara from up high" (8), Aokigahara (some call it "Fuji Jukai" or "Jukai" in Japan) is never "untouched" (11). It is a national park that attracts large numbers of tourists from all over the world every year and that sits adjacent to a busy

national highway, several tourist routes, and a large settlement around the outskirts, not to mention “people [who] live there” (11). Dark tourism in Japan includes Aokigahara as one of its destinations, as well as the Fukushima nuclear disaster area. Videos and photos redolent of an eerie atmosphere or dead bodies are often posted of Aokigahara on the Internet, many without official approval, along with frequent references to supernatural elements and lurkers. Urban legends and folklore also enhance the image of uncertainty and mystery that the dark woods, which take people’s lives, inspires.

The setting of Aokigahara deeply affects the protagonist’s body and mind in *The Sea of Trees*. The story revolves around a grieving American professor, Arthur, who wanders the mysterious regions of Aokigahara, contemplating his dark past and plotting to commit suicide following the death of his wife, Joan. In Aokigahara, the tourist trails and off-path areas have been carefully demarcated. After detouring from the path and taking an overdose of pills in the maze-like forest, Arthur encounters a stranger, a Japanese man, Takumi, who regrets his attempt at suicide via wrist-cutting and has difficulties finding a trail out of the enormous forest. The abrupt emergence of Takumi interrupts Arthur’s suicidal behaviour. Instead of swallowing more pills, and out of ethical concern, Arthur decides to assist the man first, and the two end up embarking on a spiritual journey through the forest, where Arthur finds love and redemption.

This article is divided into three parts: Thinking the EcoGothic; Thinking Darkness; and Thinking Dark Sweet. In my reading, Van Sant’s film cautions us against the stigmatization of the Sea of Trees, challenges the anthropocentric mindset, and calls for a more nuanced aesthetic and spiritual perspective on Aokigahara.

Thinking the EcoGothic

Following Andrew Smith and William Hughes, who first explore how the Gothic engages with ecocritical ideas (1) and source it back to Romanticism (5), Parker believes that the term “ecoGothic” offers not only “a way of looking (hence ‘lens’, ‘mode’, ‘framework’, ‘perspective’, etc.)” but also “an ‘approach’ and a ‘genre’” to shed light on the examination of forests in various cultures (33). In the light of ecocritic Simon Estok’s conception of ecophobia,⁵ Parker’s ecoGothic as a way to look at “nature” or forests differs from

that of eco-horror. Inspired by Joseph L. Foy and Brian Merchant, Parker contends that eco-horror as a genre suggests ideas such as “man tampers with nature,” “Nature’s revenge on humankind,” and “environmental awareness” (Parker 34). Eco-horror was contextualized in the 1970s, when public awareness of the danger of nuclear development started to grow. In contrast, ecoGothic has not been confined to any particular historical era. It is “transhistorical” (36). Thus, if eco-horror responds to “immediate danger,” ecoGothic is replete with “ambient dread” (36) and associated with the haunting atmosphere found in castles, manors, or deserted houses. “Horror” invariably elicits an element of evil or “bad” because nature is, to some extent, “monstrous” and “dangerous” to humans, whereas “Gothic” signifies both “fear” and “desire.” In this sense, nature should be “protected”, but it also signifies something “terrifying, to be destroyed” (36). As Parker argues, ecoGothic constitutes “a flavoured mode” in which the ecoGothic forest should go beyond “the geographical limits” and not be confined within “singular countries and regions” so as to investigate “the darker, more complicated cultural representations of the nonhuman world” (276). In this regard, I see Van Sant’s *The Sea of Trees* as following the trajectories of the ecoGothic.

As a notorious suicide spot, Aokigahara conveys Gothic terror in a variety of ways, including its geological formation, landscape, trees, and Japanese cultural and historical representations, all of which create an ambient dread and ambivalent emotions. As a massive forest without “defined limits,” Aokigahara covers approximately “25 to 40 square kilometres of land” (Devlin 2019b, 1) between 900 and 1100 meters above sea level (1). An eruption of Mount Fuji in 864 resulted in its formation, making Aokigahara take root on a hard lava floor. Off the tourist trails designed by the local government, the terrain of Aokigahara takes the form of uneven and hardened lava ground. Crooked roots and slippery moss cover the floor, interwoven with “unseen holes, cave openings, and tunnels,” making it hazardous to traverse, not to mention the hidden and rotten branches and dead trees that litter the old trails (8). Furthermore, the moss and soil covering the ground is “only about two centimetres [deep];” thus, roots, having no place to go, “snake outward” and burrow through each other (9). Additionally, since sunlight finds it difficult to penetrate the woods, certain parts of the forest become obscured, dark even before midday. Thick and dense vegetation,

overgrown roots, piles of fallen leaves, and eerie noises probably caused by winds, trees, leaves, “ghosts,” or even nearby cars characterize the surrounding area. Since “ambience” has roots in “the Latin *ambo*,” meaning “on both sides” (2007, 34), Morton sees “ambience” as more fitting than the words “nature” or “environment” in dark ecology. Aokigahara’s strange, Gothic traits are highlighted by images of people wandering lost in inhospitable terrain and impenetrable vegetation.

Given that Aokigahara is so vast and its trails nearly impossible to navigate, Van Sant’s depiction of supernatural “weirdness” (referring to “entwined” or “twisted in a loop” in Morton’s sense) in *The Sea of Trees* seems appropriate to illustrate how treacherous the route could be if one wanders the unmarked forest. In excavating the facts about Aokigahara, the film’s potent Gothic-like affective transmission assumes these trees are very much alive and capable of killing heedless people. Moreover, stories shape people’s view of dark woods. As J. W. Williamson observes, images of dark forests “don’t just reflect our fear of nature[;] they actively *teach* it” (151; emphasis in original). Parker also pinpoints the connections between “our ‘natural’ fears of the woods” and “our fictional creation about them” (13). For the Japanese, folklore and mythology associated with Aokigahara often reinforce the image of death, vulnerability, and the forest’s supernatural elements. For example, the folklore of *ubasute* (abandoning an old woman) denotes the abandonment of old women to perish as resulting from “the darker and more severe periods for famine or disease” (Mauro). The legend conveys that Aokigahara was the site for *ubasute*, as far back as the tenth century in Japanese literature (Hernandez-Santaolalla and Sanz-Marcos 1300). Today it has evolved into a suicide site for people who feel they are a burden to their families. Based on the survey of Japanese value orientations, this also requires the understanding that the family’s goals have priority over individual goals (Iga 114, 129). In *The Sea of Trees*, Takumi’s work-related suicide, though it might be a cliché, mirrors the speculated reasons attributed to suicide among men in Japan.

Aokigahara elicits two ambivalent emotions: desire and fear. The word “forest” shares the roots of the Latin word *foris*, meaning “out-of-doors” and the verb *foresta* which means “to keep out, to place off-limit, to exclude” (Parker 49). Naomi Watts, who comments on Aokigahara in the interview, understands

the desire-fear complex: “This is a place that could kill you or heal you” (Van Sant 2015a). As the name implies, the suicide forest has been the site of many suicide attempts, including “hanging, carbon monoxide inhalation, drug overdose, and death from exposure” (Takahashi 173). The more a death seeker thinks about why they came here to die within this labyrinthine forest, the more they feel strangely yet intimately connected with the entities that came here before. In this regard, suicide in Aokigahara not only provides great relief in the loneliness that death seekers desire because they believe they are secured by “previous deaths” and “belong to the same group” (Takahashi 173), but also envisages Aokigahara as a “sanctuary” where they can rest in peace “without being noticed or disturbed” (173), given that the patrols usually take time to ferret out the bodies. Take the most popular suicide zone in Aokigahara, *danchi*, a locale situated “between Narusawa Ice Cave and Fugaku Wind Cave” (Devlin 2019b, 37), as a case in point. It offers “tranquillity” by being located in a site where sunlight penetrates an opening in the trees and casts “a peaceful, warm glow” (40), yet “the sounds of civilization” can be heard as it lies about “300-500 meters from the highway.” Understood in this light, death seekers feel they are not “truly alone” even at the end of their lives (38, 39).

There is no denying that *The Sea of Trees* portrays several scenarios that accentuate the eerie ambience while people sojourn in the woods. Upon staggering to find the “right” trails (literally and symbolically), Arthur and Takumi hear a distant ghostly cry several times, glance at a black cat, encounter a human body hung from a tree, and cram themselves in a tent with a corpse lying next to them while searching for shelter during the night. “Ambient dread,” differentiating the ecoGothic from eco-horror, serves as a fundamental ground for *The Sea of Trees*. Van Sant’s film adopts composer Mason Bates’s music and cinematographer Kasper Tuxen’s lighting techniques to trigger the atmosphere of the mysterious and the ambience of thinking darkness. By manipulating the lighting, Van Sant creates a climate that resonates with the images of Polish photographer Tomasz Lazar’s black-and-white work *Sea of Trees* (2018), which was made after the film, in which Lazar invites his viewers “to envision that final walk of those who have died in Aokigahara forest” (Keefe, 2017).⁶ For Morton, ambience, good or bad, refers to “a sense of a

circumambient, or surrounding, *world*"). Although it alludes to "physical and material" attributes, it is "somewhat intangible" (2007, 33). Van Sant's film's reflective and sombre tone casts Aokigahara as a location that embodies Morton's idea of such "a circumambient, or surrounding, *world*." In the scene where Arthur glimpses someone's belongings (shoes, diaries, and suicide notes) left on the ground in Aokigahara while trekking the woods, these conjure up the ambient dread that someone else had been here and death is nearby.

Thinking Darkness

The Sea of Trees is accused of turning a blind eye to suicide issues in Japan. While agreeing that local problems could have been taken into consideration, I argue that Aokigahara is approached through an outsider's view in Van Sant's film, which does not serve as an answer to Japan's suicide problems but as a more general concern about the precariousness of life. According to Sigmund Freud, the death drive functions as "a tendency toward self-destruction" (Buchanan 110), and is manifested in the film as a wish for a permanent demise within this lush forest. This is a forest that has been marked as "a perfect place to die" in Google search results, and some corpses found in the forest are from outside of Japan, as shown in the film and reality. In a similar vein to what Lazar did with his photographs discussed above, Van Sant also invites the viewers to imagine "what it might be like to enter the forest," as well as the sights, sounds, and emotions associated with such a pilgrimage (Burger 116). In this regard, the Japanese character Takumi stands for "another pilgrim of despair" (Bradshaw) or one of the other lost souls Arthur encounters in Aokigahara. While these encounters call into question the impermeable boundary between life and death, the natural and the supernatural, and real and surreal, Arthur and Takumi's unwieldy walking in Aokigahara also symbolizes the precarious lives of those who are struggling in the journey of life.

After passing through a Torii, the traditional Japanese gate of a Shinto shrine, Arthur officially enters Aokigahara and sets off on his spiritual journey in a religious sense, despite his initial intention to take his own life at the beginning of the film. With the close-up view of Torii in the film, Van Sant's lens leads its

audience to appreciate the forest's spiritual dimension. However, instead of delving into local religions, such as Shintoism or Buddhism, Van Sant's religious treatment of the dark woods is much closer to western theology. Situating Aokigahara in purgatory or as a site of trial in Parker's sense (47, 50), where how to find one's own way in life matters, *The Sea of Trees* parodies Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the protagonist passes through nine circles of hell and ascends to Mount Purgatory. In the film, Takumi tells Arthur that Aokigahara is "what you call purgatory" (00:29:05). According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, purgatory means "(in Catholic doctrine) a place or state of suffering inhabited by the souls of sinners who are expiating their sins before going to heaven." Its meaning is significantly rich for it considers the role of Aokigahara as a pilgrimage, which brings about negotiation between "transcendental concerns," such as issues of life, death, and after-life with existential, religious, and philosophical aspects, and "individual self-reflection" (Burger 111).

"Why should I call it that [purgatory]?" Arthur asks Takumi, who simply answers, "Because you are American. You believe in God." Although the ensuing conversation leads to a debate between Takumi and Arthur concerning science versus religion, this article, given that Morton's philosophy was informed by Tibetan Buddhism, aims to employ Morton's concept of darkness as it pertains to Buddhist notions of suffering in order to explain the religious space and Arthur's suffering in the film. Historically, like Mount Fuji, which has been revered as "a sacred mountain" and as the "physical embodiment of a *kami* [god]" (Devlin 2019b, 82), Aokigahara as an important religious site also has several "shrines and caves" today; furthermore, people persist in making "the pilgrimage even now" (Devlin 2019a, N.p.). In this light, Aokigahara, which is at the base of Mount Fuji, is no stranger to religion and claims to have "power spots" where "positive energy" and "spiritual power" coalesce (86). As Aokigahara can help us to comprehend Morton's notion of darkness better, it will also enable us to see how one deals with melancholy and the confrontation with strangeness in Van Sant's film. As Morton asserts, "Into this dark forest you have already turned" (2016b, 2), suggesting that accepting dark emotion has been there already.

In contrast to deep ecology, Morton's dark ecology requires us to confront the world that we have

dumped and trashed without demarcating the ideal from the corrupted. As a Tibetan Buddhist who acknowledges that Buddhism pervades his work,⁷ Morton reckons the world we inhabit now has already turned into a world of Samsara, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, and recognizes samsaric suffering without rejecting the “dark” world (Morton and Littlefair). For Morton, the phrase “a charnel ground, a bardo,” meaning “the interstitial realm between lives,” is a better analogy to designate the current world we reside in now rather than “some pleasant hippy utopia or healthy paradise” (Morton 2013a, 48). Concerning Morton’s idea of “bardo,” the suicide forest can be seen as an analogy of bardo, in which people trapped in life often suffer the threefold sufferings: “the pain of pain,” “the pain of alteration,” and “all-pervasive pain” (126).⁸

The physical and psychological vulnerability of death seekers in Aokigahara highlights the condition of suffering. In Aokigahara, the plan to commit suicide is intrinsically the result of a precarious condition. Structurally, Arthur’s threefold suffering on his spiritual journey centres on a series of accidents which have involved him. First, his wife Joan’s sudden death brings him “suffering of change.” He then buries himself in his grief in Aokigahara by swallowing an overdose of pills. Due to the drug’s effect, Arthur stumbles on the rough ground, cutting himself, moaning in agony, and being nearly submerged by the heavy rain and flooding during the night, all of which entrap him in the “suffering of suffering.” Lying on the ground where he fell, Arthur remembers that he and Joan had joked about the suffering of suffering: after Joan was diagnosed with a mass in her brain, Arthur had warned her about sitting on a broken chair. She then laughed bitterly, “Yeah, well, why not add falling off a chair to the list?” (00:56:49). In addition to these sources of anguish, Arthur is experiencing “pervasive suffering,” which has “a fundamental creepy quality” because though we are unable to visualize it, it exists at every moment (Morton and Littlefair). Flashbacks follow Arthur in Aokigahara and keep him haunted by guilt. Nevertheless, Aokigahara is not the place to achieve complete closure for one’s suffering, because, as one of Morton’s favourite quotations from Trungpa Rinpoche’s elocution exercises explains, “the vicissitudes of life are like drowning in a glass pond” (qtd. in Morton and Littlefair), demonstrating “the irony of no escape.” In other words, “Wherever you go, there

you are” (Morton and Littlefair), indicating that it is not the way out but the way to accept and “dance” with it.

Aokigahara, as a liminal space in *The Sea of Trees*, has strong life symbols representing the suffering and struggle that people will confront at every turn and twist and evokes the image of being entrapped in a dark abyss (the maze) literally and spiritually. The film involves several elements signifying that Aokigahara is a maze that bewilders, bewitches the mind, and needs attentive observation. First, inanimate objects such as ropes, ribbons, and strings that are tied to the surrounding woods become life-saving objects exerting supernatural agency. Forbidden entry signs, surveillance cameras at each entrance of Aokigahara, and increasing patrols suggest that this forest needs to be watched. That cellphones and compasses malfunction in Aokigahara and that the Walkie-Talkie only offers weak signals invokes isolation from “civilization” and reinforces the weird ambience of the maze in the film’s forest. Finally, the film uses Joan’s favourite children’s book *Hansel and Gretel* and bread crumbs as an allusion to indicate when Arthur wanders too far and is caught in the middle of nowhere.

This trapped-in-between atmosphere in the film breeds criticism, with one reviewer complaining, “the film can’t decide if they should make us scared or sad. So we are neither: they are represented blankly, like the forest itself, and like the film, they are *inert*” (Bradshaw; emphasis mine). Similarly, Justin Chang also blamed “the frequent shots of the eponymous forest” and “the tinkling musical accompaniment” in the film for accelerating the “movie’s slow, inexorable slide into *kitsch*” (Chang; emphasis mine). Contrary to these negative reviews, this article asserts that Aokigahara in *The Sea of Trees* goes beyond being an abject place where people fail and leave their dead bodies, and instead presents a liminal place for learning and growth.

Due to its reputation as a suicide forest, Aokigahara attracts curious individuals. Two psychological effects could occur regarding Aokigahara as a Gothic forest. First, people feel Gothic forests are dreadful due to the possibility of being consumed by the others in the dark woods (Parker 54). Thus, the image of “the vegetation’s violence” accompanied by a “corpse spectacle,” in which decaying cadavers are

devoured by hostile nature (plants), produces uncanny visions of humans as food and even attracts suicide tourism. Second, Aokigahara is associated with an abject forest with the fear that one might be lost geographically and psychologically in the labyrinth-like forest where one might encounter bodies in various stages of decay. Corpses, from which blood-stained foam and rotten smells may gush as various processes of decomposition begin, are manifestations of things we find “abject” due to the violation of the body’s integrity and cleanness (Kristeva 3, 65).

Without making corpse scenes overly prevalent in *The Sea of Trees* or demonizing the forest as an abject place,⁹ Van Sant, this article argues, portrays Aokigahara’s agency or power from two perspectives. On the one hand, Arthur confronts the atmosphere of the uncanny when witnessing corpses or hearing strange, unknown, unrecognizable crying in the woods, which unsettles his scientist-rational mind. On the other hand, once he trespasses the sign forbidding entry in Aokigahara, which designates the border between civilization and the dark woods, the forest starts to challenge people’s claim to be the exclusive carriers of subjectivity and the elusive order Arthur wishes to maintain when it comes to psychic phenomena and paranormal occurrences. His determination to transgress the sign functions as a denial of “borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). On the other hand, drawing on Sally McFauw’s analysis of two models of looking at the forest, the landscape model and the maze model, I contend that Van Sant’s maze-like model of Aokigahara compels Arthur to be conscious of “nature’s otherness” (69) and “its independence, its dangers, its complexities and nuances” (69). Apart from the landscape model of nature, which emphasizes a dominant view that keeps a distance from the observed and regards the observer as an object or a “spectacle for human pleasure” (68, 69), the maze model often subjects one to alterations, twisting, and becoming.

Embracing darkness or dancing with dark emotions such as deep depression characterizes Morton’s suggestions to face the dilemma in the present Anthropocene. Negative descriptions of the film, such as “tacky,” “inert,” or “kitsch,” become “positive” in Morton’s sense. As Morton claims, “since there is no escaping kitsch, the only way to ‘beat’ it is to ‘join’ it” (2007, 22). According to *Oxford Reference*, the word “kitsch” refers to “art, objects, or design considered to be in a poor state for excessive garishness or

sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way.” Morton even proposes the notion of an “ethics of kitsch” to re-inhabit the much-feared and already-damaged dark worlds because the abject that the world repels is “intrinsic to its existence” (118). Morton’s ethics of kitsch contain discussions of “monsters” in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. He illuminates how the mariner appreciates “a thousand thousand slimy things” for their vitality provides a “temporary solution” to his guilt at killing the albatross. These monsters usually incur the “gothic and tacky” feeling that people tend to reject as seen in the negative comments that *The Sea of Trees* received. However, for Morton, excessive tackiness is “the anaesthetic (unaesthetic) property of kitsch: glistening, plasticized, inert, tactile, sticky—compelling our attention to perception; too bright, too dull, too quiet, too loud, too smelling, not smelly enough—subverting aesthetic propriety” (158). Thus, Morton comments that “Coleridge respected tacky. . . . So did Mary Shelley” (158), and, I will argue, so did Van Sant. His Aokigahara story recognizes “guilt and isolation” in the darkness and undermines the myth of anthropocentrism in the ecoGothic forest. In Arthur’s spiritual journey, staying strong in the face of darkness is a matter of life and death.

Thinking Dark Sweet

Actor Matthew McConaughey, who played Arthur Brennan, commented in an interview that “I say another title for this film [*The Sea of Trees*] is ‘You’ve got to go through annihilation to get to salvation.’ It’s one hell of a survival story” (Vilkomerson). Rather than being a suicide journey, Arthur’s trek at Aokigahara is much more closely associated with reflection and survival. McConaughey’s remarks coincide with Morton’s three threads of dark ecology; after experiencing depressive “dark nihilism,” the “mysteriously dark” ensues, and finally, “it’s dark and sweet like chocolate” (2016b, 117). Bringing Buddhism into Western philosophy, Morton reminds us that Buddhism is not “all about suffering” but also about “laugh[ing] hysterically at the absurdity of samsaric suffering” (Morton and Littlefair). This is where the sweetness arises. Dark-depressing

involves the smile that suggests “how weird it is that everything is awful,” but inside that “weird smile,” it also illuminates “another smile, which is quite joyful.” Therefore, for Morton, “the feeling of ‘dark’ is definitely Buddhist” (Morton and Littlefair).

In the film, “the smile” obviously comes after the darkness of grief. Arthur hides his grief for the loss of his wife by wearing an indifferent expression as a camouflage for his sadness, all the way from the airport in the United States to the plane ride to the crowded cityscape of Japan, the high-speed train, and the taxi ride to the suicide forest. As Morton notes, one is usually trapped in “the first darkness” (2016b, 5), “a self-made trap: claustrophobia of the paranoid intellect,” which can be “toxic” if one gets stuck there too long (136). Nonetheless, Morton also points out that ignoring the suffering and cheering up “too fast” in pursuit of “ideal” solutions will end up “mak[ing] things more depressing” and suppressing emotional pains into the unconscious (2010b, 269). “‘Linger long’ in the darkness of a dying world” is the motto that Morton favours in the face of dark-depressing worlds (269). However, Morton is quite elusive about how long is long enough for one to rise out of the early stages of the dark. In this regard, Van Sant exemplifies Morton’s idea of dark sweet in *The Sea of Trees* by means of the ecoGothic forest of Aokigahara and the orchid. Aokigahara harbours an ambience displaying a liminal space for Arthur to linger long in the darkness and contemplate each death he encounters in the forest.

As a dark site where dead bodies are observed, Aokigahara provides “a medium for contemplation of death” (Handayani and George 101). This contemplation may recast the dark woods as “sites as revelations” (100) for its “(re)connection with the divinity” (103). In this sense, Aokigahara is not so much about death as about “relationships and communication (specifically the breakdown of communication in its many forms)” (Chung). Likewise, McConaughy also recognizes that the film is not about suicide but how contemplating death could provide life (McClintock and Ford). *The Sea of Trees* provides “a very life-affirming story,” McConaughy suggests, that inspires people to ponder how to take care of themselves when they are “here” [in Aokigahara or on the Earth] (Van Sant 2015a).

As a scientist, Arthur is highly sceptical about ghosts, spirits, or paranormal entities. Nevertheless,

Takumi reminds him that “This is a very powerful forest.” The information somehow foreshadows that Arthur will soon confront “strange strangers” in Morton’s sense. Instead of using terms such as “animals,” “objects,” or “Other,” which might incur the dualism between animals vs. humans, subjects vs. objects, or Self vs. Other, Morton calls them “strange strangers.” Right after losing the trail in the maze-like forest, Arthur encounters three other tangible “strangers” (in addition to Takumi): a German who hanged himself, a corpse in a tent, and an orchid strangely grown in a site with hardly any soil, not to mention many other entities that exist intangibly. For Morton, strange strangers possess distinctive features in their spectral dimensions. Firstly, they remain mysterious. Nobody can fully figure them out (2010a, 41, 42). They could be “the being about whom we know less than we presume” (60) because their characteristics are not-all and “withdrawn” (2016b, 74). Secondly, they are both sentient or without and both alive or without because “their strangeness is part of who they are” (2010a, 41). Thirdly, they are “lifeforms” that reference floating, spectral, and constantly present entities, because “*spectral* is in some senses cognate with *species*” (18). The strange strangers, whether dead or alive, visible or invisible, remain mysterious and withdrawn to Arthur throughout the film. Likewise, Aokigahara, viewed in this way, embodies “an entity” in itself, which has its own “law” and its own “movement,” and where “strange strangers inhabit” (2010a, 52-53). Thus, entering Aokigahara brings about an encounter between Arthur’s subjectivity and that which disrupts his core.

Symbolically, Aokigahara – with its quiet vibe in the shade of the leafy trees – impels Arthur to turn his attention inward. In the nighttime of the dream-like forest, when the film reaches its climax, Arthur, accompanied by the strangers he encounters in the forest and that could be depicted as “smeared, shimmering, flickering” in Morton’s sense (2016a, 19), sits around a campfire he just lit with Takumi (Joan’s spirit). Surrounded by the Gothic forest, which is tied to “the unconscious” (Parker 55),¹⁰ with the flickering light illuminating Arthur’s face, Takumi plunges deeper into Arthur’s dark world by initiating a dialogue candidly: “Why end your life?”. His sightseeing excuse being debunked, Arthur finally unleashes a stream of guilty confessions about his too-late-to-mend broken relationship with his late wife. Experiencing shame helps him “tunnel into that shame to uncover inner sadness” (Morton and Littlefair). Mourning makes Arthur

admit, “I didn’t come here because of the loss. I didn’t come here because of the grief. I came here because of the *guilt*” (01:09:41; emphasis mine). Arthur then starts wailing and constantly repeating, “I’m sorry.” Takumi whispers with a loving look: “She’s listening....Her spirit....She’s with you. This forest holds on for you” (01:10:26-01:10:52). Aokigahara in that moment resonates with the lost man’s soul.

Arthur’s traumatic grief is “seen” by Takumi and the dark forest. As Morton indicates in Ed Panar’s *Animals That Saw Me* (2016), “the most healing thing” to the one with trauma is “being seen.” In Arthur’s case, Takumi observes Arthur “without comment, without praise or blame or indifference, just with some kind of open care” (Morton and Ed Panar). The forest in Van Sant’s film, in a sense, is not entirely apathetic or indifferent to Arthur’s mourning but offers the “precise moment” when his subjectivity starts to crumble, shake or twist (Morton 2016a, 20). Mourning refers to the vulnerability of the one who mourns and who is mourned (Stanescu 577). The fragility and vulnerability of Arthur’s subjectivity in mourning and Takumi’s assurance of the power of this forest help people make connections among Arthur, Takumi, and the place they are at, Aokiagahara.

In other words, grief borne from bereavement turns Arthur into a ghostlike or spectral person who treks into the forest in an attempt to take his own life. As he mourns his late wife next to Takumi, Joan’s spectre, before the wood fire during the night in Aokigahara, his sense of shame and guilt grows. The forest is watching him. His wailing apology makes a spectacle. In Morton’s words, he is now joining the “dancing” fire that keeps him alive in the night of Aokigahara, trembling, quivering, experiencing “some kind of subject-quake” or “inner shuddering” (Camp). To some extent, Joan’s spectre haunts Arthur in the maze where he gets the chance to encounter the unknown, the supernatural, the spectral, and himself.

Aokigahara creates a zone of proximity between Arthur and his inner self. Joan’s “tamashii” (spirit or soul), the term introduced by Takumi to Arthur, is more like spiritual guidance for Arthur than the wandering Yūrei, spirits or ghosts, who had died “bad” and “unnaturally” (Picone 394). When Arthur admits to Takumi (a stranger to him) that he knows little about his late wife and pours out his heart to him instead of to Joan while she was alive, Arthur attests to what Morton explains about intimacy: “[T]he strangest

person is the one you wake up with every morning. Far from gradually erasing strangeness, intimacy heightens it” (2010a, 41). That Joan’s favourite colour and season remained unknown to Arthur after Joan passed away becomes a love code that Arthur later decrypts through his student who understands Japanese words. The names of Takumi’s wife Kiiko and daughter Fuyu are codes for Joan’s favourite colour and season: yellow and winter. Finally, a eureka moment hits Arthur and makes him remember what Takumi has said with a smile: “It is during our *darkest* times that our loved ones are closest. Even those who have passed” (emphasis mine).

Morton frankly admits that supernatural entities, such as “elves and sprites,” are not easily accepted in “academics” (Camp). Similarly, Parker considers this phenomenon an indication of the disenchantment of modernity, where magic has been lost (37). Thus, Morton asserts that this world needs more artists and magicians to allow “the inner space to sparkle madly” (Camp). Compared to other Aokigahara-related works, *The Sea of Trees* complicates Arthur’s spiritual journey by re-enchanting, instead of demonizing, the forest. Though tackling several Gothic scenes, Van Sant’s film still seeks to intermittently incorporate two typical images of the Sea of Trees. In addition to the horizontal images of “the twisted tree roots that snake their way across the ground,” the panoramic view from above Aokigahara demonstrates “the eponymous Sea of Trees that seems to spread out forever in all directions” (Devlin 2019b, 9). The two views that Van Sant stages illuminate Aokigahara’s ambience and Gothic strength to nudge Arthur’s subjectivity from mourning his wife’s death into forming a new mode of understanding the mysterious darkness. For example, the river inside the forest that quenches their thirst after their trek through Aokigahara is mirrored by Joan’s favourite lake where her orchid garden is located. The orchid Arthur and Takumi spotted first in Aokigahara evokes a traditional saying explained by Takumi: “It is said a flower grows when a soul has crossed over from this place” (00:42:55). Later, after the park patrols rescue him, Arthur re-enters Aokigahara with the promise to save Takumi with well-prepared ropes and procedures. The orchid that he and Takumi had encountered together previously awaits him under his coat, which he had draped over Takumi before leaving. The orchid not only symbolizes Joan’s spectre that has always been with Arthur in the forest but also serves as a symbol

that this is an enchanted forest where rebirth is celebrated. Aokigahara teaches Arthur “valuable lessons of strength and resilience” (Parker 51), and he brings the orchid back to the garden where Joan wished to go. Here, the orchid embodies a sense of intimacy among Arthur, Joan, and Takumi.

Van Sant’s film re-enchants Aokigahara in light of Parker’s notion of the ecoGothic. Parker explores three ways that increase the re-enchantment of the Gothic forest: fantasy takes place in the crisis of faith; literature replaces the role of the sacred; and films become the counterparts of mythology (45). In other words, in dark woods, “mythos” prevails over “logos” (Parker 277). Stories of Aokigahara, where space has been “remythologized,” help construct the frightening forest as both “myth” as well as “very much alive” (Parker 47, 38). In Parker’s sense, Van Sant’s *The Sea of Trees* places Aokigahara in the limelight of the “‘Gothicisation’ of the woods,” demonstrating a “strange, monstrous, and enchanting” space (Parker 67, 44), and also simultaneously endows Arthur’s sojourn with love and redemption. Trees in Aokigahara have metamorphosed from inert, vegetative objects to active, animalistic subjects; moreover, trees in Aokigahara have made the plant kingdom heard. The repressed have risen and smashed the walls of exclusion through all kinds of ambient sounds in the film—leaves rustling, wind blowing, chimes jingling, water trickling, birds trilling—which makes us comprehend that it is magical and vibrant not because of ghosts lurking in the forest, but because it is Aokigahara itself.

In *The Sea of Trees*, Aokigahara is not a dark forest tainted by diabolical spirits that drive visitors (suicidal or otherwise) insane or where Yūrei or tamashii jump from behind the trees. Instead, Van Sant’s film suggests that even though Arthur gets lost in the woods, it is because he had swallowed pills to attempt suicide, leaving him delirious. He eventually recognizes the proper path to return with ropes and other preparation, as shown at the film’s end. Contemplation of death makes people think about life. Van Sant backgrounds trees and plants to highlight Arthur’s (or those misfits like him) vulnerability and foreground ambience and darkness, implying something beyond comprehension in Aokigahara that shakes his subjectivity and self-indulgence and that underlines a hard-to-be-tamed dimension. Moreover, the whole concept of a suicide forest is ironically linked to the environmental problems we now face. Deforestation

occurs because we treat trees and our environment as lifeless objects with only instrumental rationale. We have a rational understanding that our way of living in the industrialized world is suicidal — it cannot continue forever, undermining the Earth’s support systems and leaving disenchanting forests. Nevertheless, we persist. In a sense, suicide is not an unusual path — it is the path of modern civilization.¹¹

Notes

¹ This article is a partial fulfillment of my research project (MOST 110-2410-H-143-012 -).

² The fiction and film that focus on Aokigahara as a suicide spot include Wataru Tsurumi’s novel *Kanzen Jisatsu Manyuaru (The Complete Manual of Suicide)* (1993); Seicho Matsumoto’s *Nami No Tou (Tower of Waves)* (1960), adapted to TV movie by Kiyoshi Sasabe in 2012; Robert James Russell’s novella *Sea of Trees* (2012); Jeremy Bates’s novel *Suicide Forest* (2014); Van Sant’s *The Sea of Trees* (2015), and Jason Zada’s film *The Forest* (2016).

³ One notorious example is YouTuber Logan Paul’s event. YouTuber Paul, who has millions of subscribers, made fun of the corpses he and his friends found in Aokigahara in one of the episodes of his YouTube channel. Despite having deleted the film after receiving public criticism and apologizing for his actions, this event has negatively affected the forest’s image.

⁴ For example, Victor Hernandez-Santaolalla and Paloma Sanz-Marcos in their essay “Following Death: Suicide as Tourist Attraction through Popular Culture” point out that “Brennan’s intentions are frustrated when he encounters Takumi Nakamura (Ken Watanabe) in the forest, who, after admitting that she [*sic*] has regretted her [*sic*] decision, wants to find her [*sic*] way out of Aokigahara. The American helps her [*sic*] and, during their adventure, rediscovers reasons to live” (1301).

⁵ According to Parker, Simon Estok in his 2009 essay “Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia” and Tom J. Hillard in his 2009 essay “‘Deep into that Darkness Peering’: An Essay on Gothic Nature” both lay a foundation for ecoGothic scholarship (Parker 16-17). Theorizing the ecoGothic “through ecophobia” (2), without adopting the word “ecoGothic,” Estok distinguishes rational from irrational fears of nature and the environment. If rational fear refers to evolution-based fear such as fear of snakes and of darkness (8) or “rationally perceived threats to physical survival, such as tsunamis or earthquakes” (Estok 33), then irrational fears will be like “fears about unpredictability” (48). Estok’s notion of “ecophobia,” thus, indicates “irrational fear, contempt, and indifference to the environment” (Estok 22), given that the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests the word “phobia” has the following definition: “a strong unreasonable fear or hatred of a particular thing.”

⁶ However, to some extent, Lazar’s photography presents more connections with Japanese culture than Van Sant’s film. Lazar’s “black-and-white infrared film” which “makes trees and vegetation appear in a white glow” (Keefe, 2017) has carried critical “cultural and symbolic” meanings because “white is the symbol of death and mourning in Japan” (Keefe, 2017).

⁷ Morton has been introduced as one of the fifty most important living philosophers; the great Buddhist thinkers, such as Trungpa, Dogen, and Nagarjuna, have profoundly influenced him (Morton and Littlefair).

⁸ There are four Noble Truths in Tibetan Buddhism. According to *Oxford Reference*, the first North Truth is dukkha, meaning “suffering.” The second is samudāya, indicating “suffering arises due to craving.” The third is “cessation” or nirvāṇa, indicating “suffering can have an end” and the fourth refers to the Noble Eightfold Path, which “consists of eight factors collectively leading to nirvāṇa.” There are three stages in the first Noble Truth with slightly different translations: “the suffering of change,” “the suffering of suffering,” and “the all-pervasive suffering” (Morton and Littlefair). Both “pain” and “suffering” are translated from the Pali word “dukkha.”

⁹ Van Sant uses only two scenes where Arthur happens to encounter a corpse—one is a hanging body and the other a dried corpse in the tent—to represent the bodies that could be spotted in Aokigahara, rather than demonizing it as a forest littered with corpses.

¹⁰ As Freud associates “chaos” with “the dark and inaccessible part of our personality,” Parker pinpoints the contrast between “civilization as ‘ego’” and “forest as ‘id,’” with the latter referring to “the wildness of the natural world” uncontrolled by men (56).

¹¹ My thanks go to ecocritic Scott Slovic for his inspirational ideas.

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