

## Between Fantasy and Horror:

### *La nuée* (2020) by Just Philippot as a Film about the Ecological Crisis of the Anthropocene

*La nuée* is a French Film from 2020, directed by Just Philippot. It is a fantastic film, but also a horror film, a portrait of a woman and a social drama. In the magazine *Autre Cinéma* the film is presented as “a social and psychological thriller with fantastic accents”.<sup>1</sup> The film genre is ambivalent: *La nuée/The swarm* is perceived by the public as a fantastic film, although critics often comment on the horror scenes not unlike the strategies of a *film d'épouvante*.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, in 2020, *La nuée* received the *Prix du public* and the *Prix de la critique* at the *Festival International du Film Fantastique de Gérardmer*, the *Prix Spécial du Jury* and the *Prix d'interprétation féminine* at the *Festival International de Cinema Fantastica a Catalunya*. It was also nominated for the 2020 Cinema Festival in Cannes (which was then cancelled due to Covid). In France, the film was shown in cinemas, in Germany it can be streamed on Netflix under the title *Schwarm der Schrecken*, in English under the title *The Swarm*. The film tells the story of a woman – Virginie Hébard (represented by Suliane Brahim) – who wants to support her family by breeding locusts and who becomes more and more entangled in obsessions and horror phantasms. The critics are very positive and often underline the aspects of social drama and horror as for example in the Forbes Magazine:

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- 1 “Un thriller social et psychologique aux accents fantastiques” [translation GF], Anonymus: “La Nuée”, in: *L'autre cinéma* 2021, [autrecinema.fr/la-nuee/](http://autrecinema.fr/la-nuee/) (24.01.2023).
  - 2 The French concept of *film d'épouvante* is not quite equivalent to the English notion of a horror movie. Although the *film d'épouvante* intends also to arouse in the viewer a strong feeling of dread and horror, the French movies are more interested in psychological dimensions, mysterious plots, and anxiety than in purely shocking representations. Anyway, almost all films of both types belong to the fantastic genre because of nightmarish subconscious fantastical content of our anxieties. Cf. Éric Dufour: *Le Cinéma d'horreur et ses figures*, Paris 2006; Martine Roberge: *L'Art de faire peur: des récits légendaires aux films d'horreur*, Québec 2004; Philippe Rouyer: *Le Cinéma gore: une esthétique du sang*, Paris 1997; Rick Worland: *The Horror Film: An Introduction*, Hoboken 2006; Brigid Cherry: *Horror*, London 2009; Valérie Palacios: *Le cinéma gothique: Un genre mutant*, Rosières-en-Haye 2009.

It is an impressive debut feature by director Just Philippot, from a script by Jérôme Genevray and Frank Victor, about blood-sucking locusts bringing havoc to a struggling farmer in rural France. [...] *The Swarm* is a slow-paced film that blends different genres together. As much a social drama as it is a horror, this is a movie filled with tension that is essentially about a single mother fighting to keep afloat and provide for her two children. This is a film that is much more than what its premise and title suggest.<sup>3</sup>

The main question in this article is: which crisis (or better in plural: crises) does the film indicate by the means of fantasy and horror? I am going to choose several perspectives in order to highlight the different dimensions of the message of the film with regard to the contemporary real context in France, in Europe and in the world.

My central hypothesis is that in a plurivalent, eco-critical, sociological and psychoanalytic reading the crisis addressed in *La nuée* will turn out to be a five-fold crisis situation:

- the French and/or European crisis of the decline of the agricultural economy,
- the social crisis of the family, of gender and of role models,
- the moral crisis of humans in dealing with animals and nature,
- the ecological or climatic crisis of the Anthropocene,
- as well as the crisis of the body and desire.

Any of these critical images of the actual state of the subject, the environment, the ecological ethics and the global changes in the Anthropocene are expressed in the film by different combinations of aesthetic means, narratives, mimetic and semantic as well as symbolic signs, intertextual and intermedial strategies and the, sometimes irritating, play with similarities with well-known film genres like fantastic film, horror, social drama etc.

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3 Sheena Scott: “The Swarm’: A Great New French Horror on Netflix”, in: *Forbes Magazine*, 07.08.2021, [www.forbes.com/sites/sheenascott/2021/08/07/the-swarm-a-great-new-french-horror-on-netflix/?sh=2ae0d7ec39e5](http://www.forbes.com/sites/sheenascott/2021/08/07/the-swarm-a-great-new-french-horror-on-netflix/?sh=2ae0d7ec39e5) (21.05.2023). Karelle Fitoussi comments: “À la fois conte horrifique écolo, film catastrophe rural et thriller d’anticipation social à la croisée de mille genres” [“Both an ecological horror tale, a rural disaster film and a social anticipation thriller at the crossroads of a thousand genres”, translation GF]. Karelle Fitoussi: “Just Philippot (‘La Nuée’): monstres et compagnie”, in: *Paris Match*, 16.06.2021, [www.parismatch.com/Culture/Cinema/Just-Philippot-monstres-et-compagnie-1742984](http://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Cinema/Just-Philippot-monstres-et-compagnie-1742984) (20.05.2023).

The French and/or European crisis of the decline of the agricultural economy

The film *La nuée* has a political message concerning the crisis of the agricultural economy; it shows the strong pressure on the producers within the food industry and the price pressure – first on the husband of Virginie who was elevating goats and who ended up committing suicide because of the ruin of his farm, as the film suggests on the discourse level as a sort of preliminary story or context. The same problem exists in the very French domain of the viniculture – illustrated by the neighbor of the protagonist, Kirman, a young producer of North African descentance who discusses many of these economic problems with Virginie and later becomes her friend.

The first part of the film presents the agricultural crisis through the discourse of Virginie, her daughter, her son, and the already mentioned neighbor, but also on the visual level by images of the simplicity and poorness in the farm which is situated in the south of France somewhere in a really agricultural area. In fact, the film was made in the region of Nouvelle Aquitaine which is in the western part of France. Even if the landscape looks beautiful and the life seems peaceful, the misery is still there. The agricultural crisis which indicates also a food crisis at a larger scale, leads Virginie to choose a new product: instead of goats, milk, meat and cheese, she starts breeding locusts and thus produces a new – at least in the Western/Northern countries – comestible which is sometimes said to save the world from hunger. But the rules of the market do not allow to make relevant profit with this new product and the result is still not enough to meet the ends. This is the reason why Virginie – who's name indicates her initial innocence but also her naivety – is about to give up, but by chance she discovers that the locusts are carnivores and hungry of blood which makes them grow much quicker and thus promises more profit. This discovery marks a turning point of the story. The film turns out to be a metaphor of the crisis of the agricultural economy as Sheena Scott states:

There is an obvious analogy here, about farmers being themselves exploited in the desperate hope of making a profit and survive, exploited to such an extreme that their blood is being sucked dry. Underneath its premise – a horror on a lethal swarm of locusts – lies a deeper insight into our society.<sup>4</sup>

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4 Scott: 'The Swarm'.

In 2021, Just Philippot, the film director, said in an interview with Caroline Veunac: “I needed to talk about the agricultural world”.<sup>5</sup> In his opinion, the first part of the film, where we are as spectators invited to share the problems of a real world and where we are in the genre of a social drama, is the most important dimension – at least with regard to the political message of his film. Guillem Martínez also underlines the political message of the movie:

Just Philippot nos enfrenta, en una situación donde la tensión es constante, al dilema alimentario del mañana que, en realidad, es hoy. [...] Un film donde el contraste de la naturaleza es altamente poético y terrorífico por sus paisajes y por la actuación de los animales que los habitan. ‘La nuée’ es una alegoría del modo en que hemos abordado, durante siglos y mal, la ganadería.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, the aesthetic cinematographic means are not far from a documentary. The direct observation of the family by the camera, the impression of simple and authentic clothes of the protagonists, the use of everyday language as well as the movement and the gestures, which might remind the spectator of amateur acting, and finally a rather slow rhythm of the sequences underline this dimension of a social documentary or social drama. The director says in an interview with regard to the relation of the fantastic and the realistic aspects:

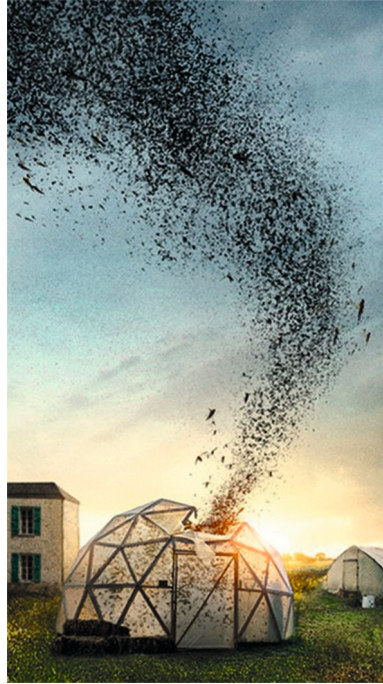
Je voulais emmener le fantastique sur le chemin du réel, en mélangeant les deux. On est dans la vraie vie, dans cette campagne qu’on a filmée dans le Lot-et-Garonne et en Auvergne. Avec l’aide de petits artisans qui ont rendu le film possible, comme Pascal Belzunce qui nous a construit l’abri des sauterelles. Puis, petit à petit, les codes changent. Ce qui amène le spectateur à se demander ce qui est possible... ou pas. [...] D’après certains chercheurs du CNRS spécialistes des insectes, ce n’est pas forcément si éloigné que ça du possible quand on commence à jouer avec la nature.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Just Philippot: “I needed to talk about the agricultural world.” Interview with Caroline Veunac”, in: *Somewhere else*, 14.06.2021, <https://www.somewhereelse.fr/en/films-uk/just-philippot-the-swarm/> (16.05.2023).

6 Guillem Martínez: “La nuée’ o cómo explicar la historia de la alimentación humana”, in: *Cinematismo*, 04.08.2021, [cinematismo.net/2021/04/08/la-nuee-o-como-explicar-la-historia-de-la-alimentacion-humana/](https://cinematismo.net/2021/04/08/la-nuee-o-como-explicar-la-historia-de-la-alimentacion-humana/) (21.05.2023). [“Just Philippot confronts us, in a situation of constant tension, with the food dilemma of tomorrow which, in reality, is today. [...] A film where the contrast of nature is highly poetic and terrifying due to its landscapes and the agency of the animals that inhabit them. ‘La nuée’ is an allegory of the way in which we have practiced, for centuries and badly, livestock.” Translation GF].

7 Just Philippot: “Entretien. Avec son film La nuée, Just Philippot fait peur au service de la prise de conscience”, in: *Ouest-France*, 16.06.2023, [www.ouest-france.fr/culture/cinema/en](https://www.ouest-france.fr/culture/cinema/en)



1 LA NUÉE (2020): Swarm of locusts breaching the technological biosphere.

However, from the very beginning the sound track disturbs the impression of a realistic social drama. Emma Stefansky comments on the sound: “The bugs themselves are horrifying, but it’s the sound that will stick with you, looking over your shoulder every time you hear an insect start to buzz.”<sup>8</sup>

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tretien-avec-son-film-la-nuee-just-philippot-fait-peur-au-service-de-la-prise-de-conscience-f14fdf48-cdea-11eb-ba8f-55c2bdb5c1d2 (20.05.2023).

- 8 Emma Stefansky: “Netflix’s French Horror Movie ‘The Swarm’ Breeds a Flock of Freaky Locusts”, in: *Thrillist*, 06.08.2021, [www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/the-swarm-netflix-review](http://www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/the-swarm-netflix-review) (21.05.2023). Philippot himself explains in an interview: “on a en effet cherché une certaine musicalité, que les éléments de montage son s’infiltrèrent dans la musique et vice-versa. [...] parfois le son devait prendre en charge l’horreur que l’image ne faisait que suggérer, et parfois il fallait plutôt éviter d’en rajouter trop, pour éviter une surcharge qui aurait été contre-productive. [...] Pour ce qui est du son des sauterelles, on cherchait quelque chose d’assez organique, qui s’écoute et qui se ressent. Quelque chose du même ordre que les basses dans une boîte de nuit, un son qui provoque un ressenti physique. Leur son est moins une nappe homogène qu’une gamme très nuancée. On leur a créé un langage. Selon que les sauterelles mangent, s’agitent, attaquent, la

Some images also do create a cleft in the images – especially the greenhouse installed for the breed of the locusts that looks like a technological biosphere or a space object in a science fiction movie even if it is constructed with simple plastic curtains and wood – mainly because of the special lighting from inside. Christopher Forrester underlines that stark contrast, between nature and the strange things forced upon it by human desperation, is the film’s most compelling motif: what becomes of the world when our aspirations disrupt its order?

Philippot’s orderly, regimented style lends itself admirably to capturing these strange intrusions. If there is an image that defines *The Swarm*, it is hardly of the locusts themselves, but of the otherworldly glow of their greenhouse in the night.<sup>9</sup>

Another science fiction element is the protection cloth of Virginie who almost disappears as a person and looks like a robot as the images are voluntarily blurred or flat so that her face cannot be seen precisely. The presence of the locusts in closeup, already in the first part of the film, creates an uncanny and disturbing atmosphere. Slowly some “fantastic accents” are announced and the impression of an uncanny world and an impending disaster is growing. We see the animals in a curious perspective from below and because of the closeup camera perspective and the slow motion or the apparent immobility of the animals, they seem to be or to become monsters. Thus, the film slides slowly towards the fantastic genre which dominates the second part of the movie. But before

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nuée ne fait pas le même bruit. Et puis elle devait aussi incarner un bruit de fond, qui se rappelle constamment au personnage et qui pourrait s'apparenter à celui d'une usine en arrière-plan”. [“we have indeed sought a certain musicality, that the sound editing elements infiltrate the music and vice versa. [...] sometimes the sound had to support the horror that the image only suggested, and sometimes we had to avoid adding too much, to avoid an overload which would have been counter-productive. [...] As for the sound of grasshoppers, we were looking for something quite organic, which can be heard and felt. Something like the bass in a nightclub, a sound that causes a physical feeling. Their sound is less a homogeneous layer than a very nuanced range. We created a language for them. Depending on whether the locusts eat, move about, attack, the swarm does not make the same noise. And then she also had to embody a background noise, which constantly reminds the character and which could be likened to that of a factory in the background.”]. Just Philippot: “Entretien. Avec son film La nuée, Just Philippot fait peur au service de la prise de conscience”, in: *Ouest-France*, 16.06.2023, [www.ouest-france.fr/culture/cinema/entretien-avec-son-film-la-nuee-just-philippot-fait-peur-au-service-de-la-prise-de-conscience-f14fdf48-cdea-11eb-ba8f-55c2bdb5c1d2](http://www.ouest-france.fr/culture/cinema/entretien-avec-son-film-la-nuee-just-philippot-fait-peur-au-service-de-la-prise-de-conscience-f14fdf48-cdea-11eb-ba8f-55c2bdb5c1d2) (20.05.2023).

- 9 Christopher Forrester: “Review: ‘The Swarm’”, in: *Film Cred*, 20.08.2021, [film-cred.com/review-the-swarm-netflix-horror/](http://film-cred.com/review-the-swarm-netflix-horror/) (24.05.2023).

completely entering the fantastic part, let us have a short look on the second dimension of the crisis.



2 LA NUÉE (2020): Virginie in her protection cloth

#### The social crisis of the family, of gender and role models

The gender crisis is represented from the very beginning by the fact that a single mother has to feed and to protect her family. She is the breadwinner and the only female model for the adolescent daughter who refuses the neoliberal constraints of work her mother has followed: Thus, the daughter is for a very long time in the film a counterpart of Virginie and represents a younger generation which seems – although frustrated in the actual life (at school, with regard to consumerism or without concrete social perspectives) – to be somehow more realistic, reasonable and even optimistic. The absent father is reflected in the son, who is still a child and more or less powerless in the family. He adopts some grasshoppers as his pets and does not (or not yet) realize the critical horizon of the situation. The mother Virginie represents ideals of the meritocracy and liberal market rules – hence taking over a more ‘male’ marked norm – however without profiting from them. The daughter stands for the wish for a more individual well-being and a sceptic world view; she remains without real power in the crisis but she still represents a sort of ethical instance (socially talking; she is the model of the impotent intellectual).



The younger boy who is still a child represents in this microcosmos the hedonistic and innocent consumer subject. Forrester identifies the crisis of the family and especially the problems of the double burden of the single mother Virginie as the core dimension of Philippot's movie:

The intersection of Virginie's struggles as a mother and as a businesswoman are the emotional and thematic center of the film. In grieving her husband's death, it seems she has drifted away from her family and allowed her work to consume her. She spends her days hard at work in the dome-like enclosures that hold her locusts, and her evenings messaging potential buyers online. Her identity as a mother is restricted almost exclusively to the performance of domestic tasks.<sup>10</sup>

At some instants of the film, the old harmonic family model seems still possible by forming a new parents couple with the neighbor, but this construction would not ameliorate the economic situation and, thus, it is negated by the desire of success and growth of the farm. The figure of the father, the possible new paternalist authority, is sacrificed by the mother and his life is destroyed in order to feed the insects, i.e. in order to follow the rules of the liberal market with the necessity of permanent growing production output.

The moral crisis of humans in dealing with animals and the nature

In the second half of the movie, the rhythm is accelerating. The locusts turn out to be vampire animals and Virginie starts feeding them, first with the blood of animals, then with her own blood; she even kills some animals to feed them and does not react to the first attack of her friend Kerim by the locusts. He is probably killed by the animals later on, but the film does not show this. The behavior of the protagonist is strange and becomes more and more shocking with the horror scenes in the following sequences. She is completely obsessed by the idea to breed as many locusts as possible.

The French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky made the diagnosis of the excessive hypermodernity of consumerism and production in late modernity.<sup>11</sup> This hypermodernity characterizes, in his eyes, the new historical moment of liberal societies. All the old obstacles to modernization have

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10 Ibid.

11 Cf. Gilles Lipovetsky/Sébastien Charles: *Les temps hypermodernes*, Paris 2004 [*Hypermodern Times*, translated by Andrew Brown: Cambridge 2005].



fallen and there is no longer any credible and legitimate alternative system to democratic and commercial modernity: it is the time of complete modernity, without constraint, deregulated and globalized. This second modern revolution is the one which, reconciled with its basic principles (techno-science, democracy, human rights, the market) is carried away by a hyperbolic process of modernization of modernity itself, which always means more competition, commodification, mobility and flexibility. Hypermodernity thus presents itself under the sign of excess, of a rise to extremes in the most diverse spheres of social and economic life.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Virginie and her locust farm in the film represent this excessive economic production and the accelerated hypermodernity. The locusts to her (in this perspective) are only products, goods, money and no longer animals or part of a respected nature. They have to breed as quickly as possible in order to create a maximum of output, even at the price of the life of the neighbor Kerim, of Virginie's own physical wellness and the mutilation of other human beings.

The ethical or moral aspect of humans dealing with animals or with nature in general has been addressed many times in the last years since the beginning of the so-called Human Animal Studies. The anthropological approach of Bruno Latour in his network-actor-theory and more recent positions have, in France, guided the central idea of animal agency as defended by thinkers of the Human Animal Studies.<sup>13</sup> Sarah McFarland and Ryan Hediger explain the focus on *Animals and Agency* in their book

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12 Cf. also Gilles Lipovetsky: *Le Bonheur paradoxal: essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation*, Paris 2006, and id./Jean Serroy: *La Culture-monde: réponse à une société désorientée*, Paris 2008.

13 Cf. Sarah McFarland/Ryan Hediger: *Animals and Agency. An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, Leiden 2009, summary; Mieke Roscher: "Darf's ein bisschen mehr sein? Ein Forschungsbericht zu den historischen Human-Animal Studies", in: *H-Soz-Kult*, 6.12.2016, [www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-2699](http://www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-2699) (30.01.2023). Besides Latour's actor-network theory, there are other methodological approaches to the question of animal agency. See also: Sven Wirth et al. (eds.): *Das Handeln der Tiere. Tierliche Agency im Fokus der Human-Animal Studies*, Bielefeld 2015, doi.org/10.14361/9783839432266; Dorothee Brantz/Christof Mauch (eds.): *Tierische Geschichte. Die Beziehung von Mensch und Tier in der Kultur der Moderne*, Paderborn 2010; Margo DeMello: *Animals and Society. An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*, New York 2012; Kari Weil: *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?* New York 2012; Samantha Hurn: *Humans and Other Animals. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Interactions*, London 2012; Paul Waldau: *Animal Studies. An Introduction*, Oxford 2013; Chris Pearson: "Beyond 'Resistance'. Rethinking Nonhuman Agency for a 'More-than-Human' World", in: *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 22 (2015), 5, pp. 709–725.

from 2009 with the following words, distinguishing four categories of animal agency:

While many scholars who write about animals deal with animal agency in some way, this volume is the first to position the question of nonhuman agency as the primary focus of inquiry. Section I presents studies of actual animals demonstrating agency; Section II moves agency into new terrain while considering key representations of animal agency in literature; Section III analyzes animals as mediators and as conveyances of human-to-human communication; and Section IV investigates the agency of beings who defy conventional species categories. The Envoi demonstrates how the microscopic polyp is interwoven into notions of agency and mythical superagency. This volume's interdisciplinary explorations press hard on issues of agency to open up space for more questions about how we can understand relationships between the human and the nonhuman.<sup>14</sup>

In applying these distinctions to the movie, we can say that *The Swarm* shows a special animal agency in two ways: first, it is not an individual actor but a collective agency, not the one intelligent locust like in a fairy tale, but the swarm that decides to act – or to react – against the exploitation of its nature. Second: The swarm (*la nuée* – the term designates in French also another natural element: a cloud, that can also become very dangerous...) becomes aggressive and turns its action against the cultivator – nature destroys (agri)culture. This inversion is part of the horror aspect of the film (besides the bloody images of course). Animal agency functions here as an allegory for the alienated exploitation of nature and thus mirrors the actually perverted “relationships between the human and the nonhuman”<sup>15</sup>.

The swarms (of locusts, killer bees, spiders etc.) are “key representations of animal agency in literature [and cinema]”.<sup>16</sup> In the perspective of an allegoric reading, the fantastic dimension disappears somehow, like Tzvetan Todorov already said in his famous definition of the fantastic literature.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the horror genre takes over.

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14 McFarland/Hediger: *Animals and Agency*, summery.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Todorov insists that the fantastic can be neither “poetic”. (p. 60) nor “allegorical” (pp. 63–64); Tzvetan Todorov: *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca/New York 1975, translated by Richard Howard. See also: Michel Chion: “Frontières entre science-fiction, fantastique et merveilleux”, in: id.: *Les films de science-fiction*, Paris 2008, pp. 41–42.; Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb (ed.): *L'Invention d'un genre: Le*

The aesthetical means in the representation of this dimension of the crisis regarding the relation between human beings and animals are mainly intermedial or intertextual. In terms of film aesthetics and intermediality, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963)<sup>18</sup> and the theme of vampirism<sup>19</sup> (coming from fantastic literature of the 19th century) are quoted, as well as the biblical plagues and the apocalyptic motifs show how the collective

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*cinéma fantastique français ou les constructions sociales d'un objet de la cinéphilie ordinaire*, Paris 2012.

18 Alfred Hitchcock: *The Birds*, USA 1963.

19 The literary vampire first appeared in 18th-century poetry, before becoming one of the main figures of gothic fiction with the publication of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), which was inspired by the life and legend of Lord Byron. The most famous version of a vampire fiction is of course Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), adapted in literature and cinema many times. The two most influential film versions are probably *Dracula* (1958), with Christopher Lee as the vampire protagonist, and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), directed by Francis Ford Coppola. In the medium of cinema, 20th-century vampire fiction went beyond traditional Gothic horror and explored new genres such as science fiction, as one can already see in the film *Nosferatu* (1922). But we can find this genre combination also in literature, especially in popular literature: Gustave Le Rouge's novel *Le prisonnier de la planète Mars* (1908 [*Prisoner of the Vampires of Mars*]) and its sequel *La guerre des vampires* (1909 [*The Vampires of Mars*]), is an early example of vampire fiction combined with science fiction and technological fantasy. Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is a very influential novel combining vampire fiction with biotechnological science fiction. The plot is located in a dystopian Los Angeles occupied by hordes of bloodsucking zombies. The protagonist is the last survivor of a pandemic of a bacterium that causes vampirism. The novel was adapted into at least three movies: *The Last Man on Earth* starring Vincent Price in 1964, *The Omega Man* starring Charlton Heston in 1971, and *I am Legend* starring Will Smith in 2007. Stephen King's thriller *Salem's Lot* (1975) which is also famous as well as a book as in film, replaces the traditional *Dracula*-story in a modern American small town. After the cinematographic adaptations of the novel by Tobe Hopper in 1979 and Mikael Salomon in 2004, the most recent version of *Salem's Lot* directed by Gary Dauberman came out in April 2023, what shows the unbroken interest in vampire stories. The image of the literary vampire has evolved from the bloodsucking creature to more mysterious and even erotic human or android beings; in contemporary works, fictional vampires can be romantic figures, often described as elegant and sexy, for example in the *Twilight* series (2005-2008) by Stephenie Meyer or in the *Vampire Academy* series (2007-2010) by Richelle Mead. The ambivalent obsession of the protagonist for the carnivore locusts in Philippot's film can be seen as part of this evolution of the vampire motif. See also: Donald Palumbo (ed.): *Eros in the Mind's Eye. Sexuality and the Fantastic in Art and Film*, New York/Westport/London 1986; Margaret L. Carter: *The Vampire in Literature. A Critical Bibliography*, Ann Arbor/Michigan 1989; J. Gordon Melton: *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*, Canton/Michigan 1999; A. Asbjorn Jon: "Vampire Evolution", in: *Metaphor* 3 (2003), pp. 19–23; Lorna Piatti-Farnell: *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature*, New York 2013; Heide Crawford: *The Origins of the Literary Vampire*, Lanham 2016.

intelligence of nature hits back against humans, like, for example, nature does in the German novel *Der Schwarm* (2004) by Frank Schätzing<sup>20</sup>. Other aspects of creature horror films are also present; we are reminded of *Arachnophobia* (1990) or *Tarantula* (1955), *Jaws* (1975), *The Fly* (1986) or the killer bee film *The Swarm* (1978)<sup>21</sup> which belongs rather to the disaster film genre.<sup>22</sup>

Besides the mentioned themes, the aesthetic strategies are similar to the aforementioned films, especially to *The Birds*, namely the accelerated rhythm of the film images and cuts together with the growing number of animals: first some individuals are seen, they are slowly moving or immobile, then we see groups moving more quickly, but still crawling and not flying, finally the whole swarm is quickly attacking bodies and capture the entire movie screen. In the first part of the movie, the cuts of the images or short sequences with locusts come up suddenly (like in Hitchcock's *The Birds*) and are mostly not motivated by the previous sequences. The irrupting impression creates also an uncanny feeling of permanent danger. The fantastic genre is less informed by the uncertainty of the observer (or spectator)<sup>23</sup> nor is there an incorporated observer or narrator person (at least one may identify with the daughter in some sequences, but this does not correspond to the – often suddenly changing – camera focus).<sup>24</sup>

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20 Frank Schätzing: *Der Schwarm*, Cologne 2004 [*The Swarm: A Novel of the Deep*, translated by Sally-Ann Spencer, New York 2006]

21 Frank Marshal: *Arachnophobia*, USA; Jack Arnold: *Tarantula*, USA 1955; Steven Spielberg: *Jaws*, USA 1975; David Cronenberg: *The Fly*, USA 1986; Allen Irving: *The Swarm*, USA 1978.

22 A disaster film or disaster movie is more of a subgenre of action films than of fantastic animal horror movies. Cf. Stephen Keane: *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe*, London/New York 2001.

23 Todorov's classical definition of the fantastic genre is based on the uncertainty of the reader: „The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.” Todorov: *The Fantastic*, p. 25. See also: Oliver Jahraus/Stefan Neuhaus (eds.): *Der fantastische Film. Geschichte und Funktion in der Mediengesellschaft*, Würzburg 2005; Claudia Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film. Instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität*, Berlin/New York 2010; Frank Lafond: *Dictionnaire du cinéma fantastique et de science-fiction*, Paris 2014.

24 The debate about the existence of a narrator in the cinematic media – and the relation of the narrating instance and the camera – is not yet finished. Cf. Markus Kuhn: “Narration in Film”, in: Hühn, Peter/Pier, John/Schmid, Wolf/Schönert, Jörg (eds.): *The living handbook of narratology*, 22.04.2014, [www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narration-fi](http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narration-fi)

The fantastic mode is introduced by the themes like vampirism and acting animals, by the uncanny feeling one remembers through the similitudes with *The Birds* and other horror animal movies.

Nature is getting out of order; thus, natural and reasonable explanations are no longer valuable; we are neither on the side of the “strange” or uncanny, nor on the side of the “marvellous” fantastic genre. The impression of the film spectator is nearer to Roger Caillois’ definition of the fantastic as a rupture in the reasonable explanation of the world.<sup>25</sup> Loosing somehow the clear orientation in the fictional reality, the spectator – who identifies only partly with Virginie in the film – may feel more and more irritated, disturbed, and exposed to something strange and powerful. This reception position does not work by an aesthetic of shock; it is rather based on a “subjective camera”<sup>26</sup> and a slow intrusion of a threat by the presence of the locusts which is repeated in an accelerated rhythm and becomes more and more threatening.<sup>27</sup> In this perspective,

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Im-revisedversion-uploaded-22-april-201 (2.04.2023); id.: “Film Narratology: Who Tells? Who Shows? Who Focalizes? Narrative Mediation in Self-Reflexive Fiction Films”, in: Peter Hühn et al. (eds.): *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modelling Mediacy in Narrative*, Berlin, pp. 259–278; Sabine Schlickers: “Focalization, Ocularization and Auricularization in Film and Literature”, in: Hühn et al. (eds.): *Point of View*, pp. 243–258; Julika Griem/Eckhart Voigts-Virchow: “Filmnarratologie: Grundlagen, Tendenzen und Beispielanaysen”, in: Vera Nünning/Ansgar Nünning (eds.): *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*, Trier 2002, pp. 155–183; Torben Grodal: “Film Narrative”, in: David Herman et al. (eds.): *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London 2005, pp. 168–172; Helen Fulton: “Film Narrative and Visual Cohesion”, in: id. et al. (eds.): *Narrative and Media*, Cambridge 2005, pp. 108–122.

25 Cf. Roger Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique*, Paris 1965. The title translates as „At the heart of the fantastic.” Parts of the book have been translated in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, edited and/or translated by Claudine Frank and Camille Naish, Duke 2003. To Caillois, the fantastic is an interruption of normal order: “Tout le fantastique est rupture de l’ordre reconnu, irruption de l’inadmissible au sein de l’in-altérable légalité quotidienne” (Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique*: p. 191) [“The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality”. Translation GF].

26 This concept is defined by Franck Henry: „Le plan subjectif ou la caméra subjective, choisit de montrer le film ou une séquence du film, selon la perception visuelle du principal protagoniste.” [“The subjective camera chooses to show the film or a sequence of the film according to the visual perception of the main protagonist.” Translation GF]. Franck Henry: *Le Cinéma Fantastique*, Paris 2009, p. 89.

27 Cf. Oliver Armknecht: “Schwarm der Schrecken”, in: *Filmrezensionen.de*, 16.06.2021, [www.film-rezensionen.de/2021/08/schwarm-der-schrecken/](https://www.film-rezensionen.de/2021/08/schwarm-der-schrecken/) (20.05.2023): “Schwarm der Schrecken bleibt bei einer recht langsamen Erzählweise, verlässt sich mehr auf die unheilvolle Stimmung als auf tatsächlichen Schrecken. Regisseur Just Philippot verzichtet darauf, die unausweichlichen Angriffe der Heuschrecken explizit zu zeigen.

one can certainly come back to the general concept of Sigmund Freud describing such a psychological condition: “das Unheimliche”, usually translated as “the uncanny”.<sup>28</sup> Freud writes that „das Unheimliche sei jene Art des Schreckhaften, welche auf das Altbekannte, Längst vertraute zurückgeht.“<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Royle resumes this definition with the following words: „The *uncanny* is the psychological experience of an event or individual as not simply mysterious, but frightening in a way that feels oddly familiar.“<sup>30</sup> In Freudian terminology: the uncanny is the mark of the return of the repressed.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, with regard to the movie of Philippot, we can ask what the archaic trauma that triggers the uncanny feeling might be. In the dimension of the story, the repressed experience of Virginie can be identified as the death (or the suicide) of her husband. Since she is lonely and anxious about the future, nobody touches her body in the meanwhile etc., the loss of the male partner throws her into a psychologically extreme situation and into a socially ambivalent role. The constraints of the neoliberal

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Dann und wann werden wir mit den Folgen ihrer Fresslust konfrontiert. Ansonsten überlässt er es lieber dem Publikum, sich das Grauen im Kopf auszumalen. [...] Wer sich nicht an dem geringen Tempo oder der fehlenden Explizitt strt, der findet hier einen etwas anderen Genrevertreter, der vielleicht keine Panikattacken auslst, aber doch eine bestndige Anspannung verursacht.“ [Swarm of Horrors sticks to a fairly slow narrative style, relying more on ominous mood than actual horror. Director Just Philippot refrains from explicitly showing the locusts' inevitable attacks. Now and then we are confronted with the consequences of their voraciousness. Otherwise, he prefers to leave it to the audience to imagine the horror in their minds. [...] Those who don't mind the slow pace or the lack of explicitness will find a somewhat different genre representative here, which may not trigger panic attacks, but does cause a constant tension.”]

28 Cf. Sigmund Freud: „Das Unheimliche (1919)“, in: id.: Gesammelte Werke in 18 Bnden mit einem Nachtragsband, Berlin 1947, Band XII, pp. 229–268. [“The ‘Uncanny’”, in: id.: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 17, An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917–1919), London 1999, pp. 217–256].

29 Ibid., p. 231, “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.” (Freud: The ‘Uncanny’, p. 219).

30 Nicholas Royle: *The Uncanny*, Manchester 2003, p. 1.

31 Cf. Freud: The ‘Uncanny’, p. 217. Freud, however, warns us not to jump to conclusions too swiftly: “It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition. But these factors do not solve the problem of the uncanny. For our proposition is clearly not convertible. Not everything that fulfils this condition – not everything that is connected with repressed desires and archaic forms of thought belonging to the past of the individual and of the race – is therefore uncanny,” (ibid., p. 219).

economy force her to continue (and even to renew) the farmwork of her husband and, thus, she has no time or possibility for working through the mourning process. The protagonist represses the death of her husband, the male person, the symbolic father, otherwise the stability of the family system threatens to fall apart. At the beginning, the locusts seem to touch the body of Virginie quite tenderly, thus opening up the return of the repressed.<sup>32</sup> The uncanny experience as a death drive also prepares the almost suicidal exposition of the protagonist to the carnivore animals later on.

Regarding the spectator, the uncanny feeling might come from an original trauma of separation that is experienced by the child in the separation from the nourishing mother.<sup>33</sup> And the wound comes also from the alienation from nature that modern individuals experience in industrial societies. The calm and solid presence of the nature as symbolic mother is questioned in the movie by the more and more aggressive animals, until the confidence in the familiar natural environment is destroyed. The cinematographic media has, as Freud says, special possibilities to indicate or to produce the uncanny:

The uncanny as it is depicted in literature, in stories and imaginative productions, merits in truth a separate discussion. To begin with, it is a much more

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32 In the context of the motif of bestiality in the fantastic genre, this symptom could also be read as the perversion of the desire of rape: “La bestialité renvoie aux histoires confrontant l’homme et la bête [...]. Il peut s’agir du rapport de l’homme avec sa propre animalité, vu comme une perception inconsciente d’un moi imparfait ou inquiétant, se combinant avec l’anthropomorphisme. Dans *King Kong* c’est le thème classique de la bête convoitant la belle [...]. Le monstre bestial est interprété comme “le viol souhaité”, et la référence freudienne au singe velu, et à l’analogie entre la bête et le sexe.” [“Bestiality refers to stories confronting man and beasts [...]. It can be the relationship of man with his own animality, seen as an unconscious perception of an imperfect or disturbing self, combining with anthropomorphism. In *King Kong* it is the classic theme of the beast lusting after beauty [...]. The bestial monster is interpreted as ‘the desired rape’, and the Freudian reference to the hairy monkey, as the analogy between the beast and the sex.” Translation GF], Gérard Lenne: *Le Cinéma “fantastique” et ses mythologies*, Paris 1985, p. 79.

33 When Philippot was asked in an interview if the main character of his film was a nourishing mother, he answered: “Un agriculteur fait naître. Mais on peut être mère nature ou mère nourricière et enfanter des monstres. En fait, son mari a disparu brutalement et il en reste une fracture. C’est cette faille qui la mène dans un engrenage destructeur.” [“A farmer gives birth. But you can be mother nature or a nourishing mother and give birth to monsters. In fact, her husband suddenly disappeared and an open wound remains. It is this loss that leads her into a destructive spiral.” Translation GF], Philippot: “Entretien”.



fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life. [...] there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life.<sup>34</sup>

One of these means of fiction and film is the repetition, or better: the play of repetition and difference, a growing threat. In the psychoanalytic reading, this aesthetic figure is linked to the psychological figure of the *Wiederholungszwang* [repetition compulsion]. Royle states with regard to the famous essay of Freud, that he “goes on [...] to identify uncanny effects that result from instances of ‘repetition of the same thing’, linking the concept to that of the repetition compulsion.”<sup>35</sup> The repetition as a neurotic structure does not clarify anything or help to manage the situation, on the contrary. The figure of repetition operates here as an accumulation and multiplication agent of the return of the uncanny feeling, hence also as a means of creating suspense.

One important aspect of the uncanny is the loss of moral orientation and of agency. If for Freud, the uncanny is located in the strangeness of the ordinary, this means to lose the capacity of judgement and acting in the ordinary world. Expanding on the idea, the French psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan wrote that the uncanny places us “in the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad and good, pleasure from displeasure, resulting in an irreducible anxiety that gestures to the Real.”<sup>36</sup>

The deviation from an ‘ordinary’, stable relation of humans and nature is announced in the movie by the sound track and can be guessed from the very beginning by listening to the irritating and slowly growing sound which is oscillating between artificially produced noise and natural sounds of the animals. The nervous noise of a lonely and slightly modulating violine or a synthesizer tone and later on the more or less permanent buzzing of the insects seam to form the acoustic horizon of the uncanny. Thus, the animal agency (of the locusts) also occupies the sound screen of the movie which has mostly an important impact on the unconscious dimension of the cinematic reception.

34 Freud: The ‘Uncanny’, p. 226.

35 Royle: *The Uncanny*, p. 90. Cf. also Jean Laplanche/Jean-Bertrand Pontalis: “Compulsion to Repeat” (Repetition Compulsion) [1973], in: id.: *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London 1973, pp. 124–126.

36 Cf. Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire. Livre X. L’Angoisse (1962-1963)*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris 1991 [*Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, Cambridge 2014].

Animal agency and destruction of human beings by nature point out to our next item: the more general and/or global dimension of the ecological or climatic crisis of the Anthropocene.

#### The ecological or climatic crisis of the Anthropocene

At top of the original French film-poster, one can read in capital letters: “nourrir le monde de demain ... à quel prix?” [“Feeding the world of tomorrow ... at what cost?”]<sup>37</sup>. This question widens the perspective of the political or ecological message of the movie to a global scale. The concept of the Anthropocene refers to human impact but also to human responsibility for the earth as a whole as Erle Ellis underlines: “The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on Earth’s geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change.”<sup>38</sup>

By the way, even if there is no explicit reference to the concept of the Anthropocene in the discourse of the film, Philippot has chosen similar colours for the film poster (blue and green) as many of the illustrations of the concepts of the Anthropocene use. Anyway, he refers to this horizon in some interviews, saying for example:

[...] nous avons une dimension plus large, écologique, qui se greffait au propos. Cette idée justement que le travail tel qu’on le pratique aujourd’hui était aussi le fondement de mécanismes de destructions. On détruit la nature, on détruit nos corps. On travaille pour offrir une bonne vie à nos enfants, tout en détruisant la Terre sur laquelle ils sont entrain de grandir.<sup>39</sup>

And he continues:

Après si c’est pour le rapport de l’être humain à la nature, à ses catastrophes qui lui tombent dessus et qu’il a parfois lui-même engendrées, là oui, c’est vraiment quelque chose qui m’intéresse et me travaille. [...] Le fait que l’Homme inconsciemment ou pas, provoque sa propre perte. Ce que l’on vit avec le

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37 This political message is only on the French poster, but it also appears in the Netflix and the film trailer where we can hear it.

38 Erle Ellis: *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction*, vol.1, Oxford 2018.

39 Philippot: “Esprit de synthèse”: [“we had a broader, ecological dimension, which came in addition. The idea that the work as we practice it today was also the foundation of mechanisms of destruction. We destroy nature, we destroy our bodies. We work to provide a good life for our children, while destroying the Earth they are growing up on.” Translation GF].

COVID en est un très bon exemple, l'épidémie de vache folle... L'explosion de Chernobyl aussi. A chaque fois l'être humain est plus ou moins à l'origine de la catastrophe et cherche ensuite à se dépatouiller d'un drame qu'il a créé.<sup>40</sup>

In the last decade, many disciplines have contributed to the definition of the Anthropocene, its consequences, and the related ethics. In 2009, Dipesh Chakrabarty underlined the dilemma that the Anthropocene poses for the practice of history: On the one hand, it spells “the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history”, yet, on the other, societies and individuals do not experience themselves as a “species”.<sup>41</sup> In 2014, Julia Adeney Thomas highlighted problems of scale and value as the reasons for this irresolvable tension between human stories and scientific ones.<sup>42</sup> Since 2000, historians and scientists have been actively collaborating on multidisciplinary approaches to the Anthropocene.<sup>43</sup>

If human beings form a species among others and on the other hand the impact of human industries and technologies have definitely changed the planet – as we know now – this human species has to assume the responsibility and to develop new forms of care (for other beings, the climate, the quality of the water and the air, etc.) and sustainability is no longer enough. Of course, it is also of human interest to care for the future, but the idea of the Anthropocene goes beyond special interests of one species only; the interplay and entanglement of all species, cultures, and elements all over the globe can no longer be ignored. Hence, the film *La nuée* comments on the aspect of the food production in relation to the

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40 Ibid. [“Regarding to the relationship of human beings to nature, to the catastrophes that fall on them and that they themselves have sometimes generated, yes, that’s really something that interests me and bothers me. [...] The fact that Man, unconsciously or not, causes his own loss. What we are experiencing with COVID is a very good example of this. The Chernobyl explosion too. Each time the human being is more or less at the origin of the disaster and then seeks to get out of a drama that he himself has created:” Translation GF].

41 Dipesh Chakrabarty: “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, in: *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), 2, pp. 197–222.

42 Cf. Julia Adeney Thomas: “History and biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of scale, problems of value”, in: *The American Historical Review* 119 (2014), 5, pp. 1587–1607.

43 Cf. Will Steffen et al.: “The Anthropocene: Are humans now overwhelming the great forces of nature?” in: *Ambio* 36 (2007), 8, pp. 614–621; Libby Robon/Will Steffen: “History for the Anthropocene”, in: *History Compass* 5 (2007), 5, pp. 1694–1719; Julia Adeney Thomas et al.: *The Anthropocene: A multidisciplinary approach*, Cambridge/UK 2020.

still increasing world population and the hunger crisis which is one of the very urgent problems as the global hunger index GHI shows every year.<sup>44</sup>

The fantastic and shocking horror elements in the movie underline the dramatic situation and the urgency of a better understanding of the role of humans. These genre markers are used for the political message and to create an emotional trigger for reflection and changing attitudes. Clémentine Dramani Issifou qualifies the movie with the following words: “Tackling the great tragedy of our times – the excessive exploitation of natural resources – it is a universal contemporary tale; the story of those who give in and those who hold out. With *The Swarm*, Just Philippot restores the genre films’ capacity for empowerment.”<sup>45</sup>

Although the Anthropocene is not mentioned, – there is anyway no continuous presence of any specific ideological or political discourse – the references are quite clear, at least for the intellectual and cinephile public in France. This is the reason why the film of Just Philippot has been shown in the *Week of the Critique* during the Cannes Festival, which is the week where critical, reflecting, and political avantgarde films as well as the so-called French *film auteur* are shown – although the scenario is not written by Philippot himself and thus, the movie is not a typical *film auteur*. The reception in other contexts and especially for the public of Netflix may be different and stress other dimensions like the horror genre or the pleasure of the growing suspense. By the way, Philippot was not glad to see the film in the Netflix distribution before it could be projected in the cinemas (which was the case because of the Covid pandemic). He negotiated at least a later start on Netflix and produced also a slightly different trailer for the digital public.

The irreversibility of the destructive process is shown in the movie by a longer series of sequences, again within the allegoric mode of the striking back of nature through the agency of the swarm: Virginie becomes aware of the imminent danger by the carnivore animals when her son is hurt. She decides to destroy the greenhouses and tries to burn down the

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44 The Global Hunger Index was first produced in 2006. It is published every October. The 2022 edition marks the 17th edition of the GHI, last report: 2022 GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE, edited by the Welthungerhilfe, Bonn/Dublin 2022, [www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2022.pdf](http://www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2022.pdf) (22.01.2023).

45 Clémentine Dramani Issifou: “About THE SWARM (LA NUÉE)”, in: *La Semaine de la Critique*, [www.semainedelacritique.com/en/articles/about-the-swarm-la-nuee](http://www.semainedelacritique.com/en/articles/about-the-swarm-la-nuee) (24.05.2023).

whole breed. This does not work, because the swarm is liberated by the fire; it even accelerates the destructive mechanism. The swarm passes in Philippot's film from animal agency to what some researchers in Human Animal Studies call "mythical superagency".<sup>46</sup> The images of the breeding sphere in fire, illuminated like a burning globe, the apocalyptic darkness and the following last sequences of the film in a blue-black forest and a lake, partly under water all in blue light of night and the elementary dimensions point out to a mythical hyperbolic power of nature incorporated in the swarm (of locusts). The motif of the locust swarm also refers to the ten biblical plagues – locusts are the eighth Plague (Exodus 10: 12-15) – and thus becomes an apocalyptical touch.

The end of the film does not provide a solution to the crisis neither to the question of the survival of humans (and other beings as well as nature itself). The final images of the movie are discussed by some critics and are later commented by the director himself. Critics underline the apocalyptic and pessimistic end, where Virginie offers herself to the locusts in order to save her daughter who hides under a boat in the lake but is chased away anyway. Brooke Mondor qualifies the final images as "a terrifying ending that will leave you shaken" and also as an "abrupt ending"<sup>47</sup>:

At the end of 'The Swarm', it seems like all hope is lost – multiple people are killed and eaten by locusts, Laura is being chased by an angry mob of insects, and Virginie takes way too long to come to her senses. Eventually, Laura is chased to the edge of a lake, where she takes an old boat out onto the water and hides underneath it. Unfortunately for her, the locusts are too hungry to let a boat get in the way, and they continue to attack her.<sup>48</sup>

Just Philippot choses (in a second version after having imagined a complete pessimistic end in the first version) to show a last gesture when the daughter Laura tries to save the mother. And he considers this gesture as a sort of 'open end' and even an optimistic end:

C'est une fin qui peut paraître minimaliste pour certains parce qu'elle se ressert sur un enjeu du film qu'est ce lien entre cette femme et sa fille, mais elle n'en est pas moins ambitieuse. [...] Ce n'est pas un *happy end* à proprement parlé, mais en finissant comme ça, sur cette union [...] c'est dramatique mais il reste une note d'espoir qui est incarnée par cette jeune fille et par ce lien retrouvé avec sa

46 McFarland/Hediger: *Animals and Agency*, summery.

47 Brooke Mondor: "The Ending of Netflix's *The Swarm* Explained", in: *Looper*, 10.08.2021, [www.looper.com/484314/the-ending-of-netflixs-the-swarm-explained/](https://www.looper.com/484314/the-ending-of-netflixs-the-swarm-explained/) (20.05.2023).

48 Ibid.

mère. De tout ce drame naît finalement l'espoir, celui d'un tout premier jour à venir. J'aime finalement cette fin, même si l'idée première était d'être plus âpre, plus dur, plus pessimiste.<sup>49</sup>

One of the last images shows diving (or dying?) locusts on the surface of the lake.



3 LA NUÉE (2020): Locusts on the surface of the lake.

The crisis of the body and desire.

*La nuée* allows us to read the film also along another dimension or another crisis, namely in a psychoanalytic horizon and with regard to the body, and especially to the female body.

Virginie, the protagonist with the speaking name, is a widow; she starts a sexual relation with the neighbor Kerim, but not really seriously. She is more or less frustrated, a single mother and hardworking cultivator. In many sequences we see her in pale light, in blue ambiance or in a reflec-

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49 Philippot: "Esprit de synthèse". ["It's an end that may seem minimalist for some because it tightens on an issue of the film that is the relation between the woman and her daughter, but it is no less ambitious. [...] It's not a happy ending strictly speaking, but by ending like this, on this union [...] it's dramatic but there remains a note of hope which is embodied by this young girl and by this newfound relationship with her mother. From all this drama is finally born hope, that of a very first day to come. I finally like this end, even if the first idea was to be harsher, harder, more pessimistic." Translation GF].

tive position where she seems to be melancholic or depressed. “Virginie’s desperation pushes her deeper into the all-consuming angst of life under late capitalism, and that consumption is literalized with blood-thirsty bugs, but the film passively observes these things more than it comments on them”<sup>50</sup>, as Forrester states. The impression of melancholy and depression is reinforced by the slow rhythm of the first part of the film. Then, Virginie becomes more and more fascinated and finally obsessed by the locusts. When she realizes that they like to drink blood and she first offers her skin to them, she is hurt. Her skin is marked by the bites of the locusts. The next time when she meets her friend Kerim, the sexual relation fails as she does not want to take her cloth off because of the visible wounds and scars. The scene is again in blue light. The body of the woman indicates now a sort of border line syndrome with auto-aggressive episodes.



4 LA NUÉE (2020): Virginie’s face covered by locusts.

This is the crucial moment when the swarm takes over the role of the lover and appropriates the body of Virginie. As the breeding of locusts need a high temperature, the female body of Virginie is almost naked in the greenhouse, even before the attack of the swarm. For practical reasons, her body is exposed, and at the same time her face is covered by the

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50 Forrester: “Review: ‘The Swarm’”.



protective hat. This exposure of the body and especially of the skin, the surface of the body, and the vanishing individuality – i.e. in the language of the images: the face disappearing under a protection hat – turn over in the following sequences of the movie to a voluntary exposition of the body. The skin which is the largest receptive erotic organ of the body, is no longer caressed by the human lover, but touched and bitten by the locusts. Virginie – the innocent or ‘untouched’ woman as her name says – makes no defensive gestures and seems even to feel some pleasure in this situation as we can read on her face.

Hence, we have a double substitution and shift in desire:

1. The human lover is replaced by the swarm.
2. The pleasure comes no longer from the erotic tenderness but from pain, wounds and scars of the skin.

The first shift means for desire that – following Jacques Lacan – we are confronted with a perverse form of the *jouissance*:

Lacan’s psychoanalytic take on what makes a pervert perverse is not the fact of habitually engaging in specific ‘abnormal’ or transgressive sexual acts, but of occupying a particular structural position in relation to the Other. Perversion is one of Lacan’s three main ontological diagnostic structures, structures that indicate fundamentally different ways of solving the problems of alienation, separation from the primary caregiver, and castration, or having limits set by the law on one’s *jouissance*. The perverse subject has undergone alienation but disavowed castration, suffering from excessive *jouissance* and a core belief that the law and social norms are fraudulent at worst and weak at best.<sup>51</sup>

So, what we see in the movie is the following psychological mechanism: The crisis of the frustrated (working) body is marked by the desire of

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51 Stephanie Swales: *Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject*, London 2012, summary, book back. Cf. also id.: “Psychosis or Neurosis? Lacanian Diagnosis and Its Relevance for Group Psychotherapists”, in: *Group*, 34 (2010), 2, pp. 129–143, [www.jstor.org/stable/41719272](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41719272) (31.01. 2023): „Jacques Lacan’s diagnostic system is based on a patient’s ontological structural position in relation to Others, language, the unconscious, the law; and *jouissance*. Correspondingly Lacan’s three main diagnostic structures of psychosis, perversion, and neurosis suggest [...] a differential diagnosis between psychosis and neurosis, working with symbolic-order transference (neurosis and perversion), working with imaginary-order transference (psychosis).” See also Bruce Fink: *The Lacanian Subject. Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton 1995, and id.: *Eine klinische Einführung in die Lacansche Psychoanalyse: Theorie und Technik*, Wien 2005 [*Fundamentals of psychoanalytic technique: a Lacanian approach for practitioners*, New York/London, especially chap. 6].

excessive (and neurotic) *jouissance* and still by the fear of castration (or death, or the Real).

The second shift from tenderness to pain marks a borderline phenomenon. The subject tries to create strong pain on the own body in order to feel the own existence. A borderline personality uses scarification for self-assurance,<sup>52</sup> thus this subject which is in danger to get lost, voluntarily approaches the Real in the Lacanian sense, the disorder of pain to bring the body back. This can be seen in the context of *jouissance*, which is defined in the Lacanian psychoanalysis as “an enjoyment that always has a deadly reference, a paradoxical pleasure, reaching an almost intolerable level of excitation.”<sup>53</sup> *Jouissance* is “the path towards death”,<sup>54</sup> as Lacan said.

To resume this chapter, we can say that the crisis of the body – at least of the female body – is characterized by the perversion of a desire of suffering – thus approaching the Real – and by the perversion of excessive *jouissance*, thus acting in the fear of the Real. The borderline perversion is sometimes defined as a disturbed relation to the mother and not to the father or the phallic, like it is the case in the first definition of the pervert. The desire is thus also expressed by a death drive and the desire to return to the mother.

In the film *La nuée*, the voluntary excessive *jouissance* stops, but the death drive goes on. The general destruction and the self-destruction are unleashed and take apocalyptic dimensions. The regressive desire of the return to the mother can be seen in the last sequences of *The Swarm* when Virginie and Laura (mother and daughter) dive in the lake, in the water as a maternal matrix.<sup>55</sup> Is this a salvation? One may doubt.

52 Cf. Anne Dyer et al.: “Body image and noticeable self-inflicted scars”, in: *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 201 (2013), 12, pp. 1080–1084, DOI: 10.1097/NMD.0000000000000057.

53 Anonymus: “Jouissance”, in: *No Subject. An encyclopedia of Lacanian psychoanalysis*, nosubject.com/Jouissance (31.01.2023).

54 Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire. Livre X. L’Angoisse, 1962-1963*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris 1991 [*Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, Cambridge 2014], p. 17.

55 Water as a maternal matrix is a very old symbol, reinterpreted by psychoanalysis. Cf. Carl Gustav Jung: *Mysterium Coniunctionis. An Inquiry into the seperation and synthesis of the psychic opposites in alchemy. The collected works of C.G. Jung*, edited by William McGuire et al., vol. 14, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton 1970, p. 717: “It’s very ancient identification with hydrargyrum, quicksilver, drew the whole Hermes Trismegistus tradition into the immemorially numinous sphere of the water’s significance. This could happen all the more easily since its maternal aspect as the matrix and ‘nurse of

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all things' makes it an unsurpassable analogy of the unconscious." See also: Dani Rhys: "Water Symbolism and Symbols – A Guide", in: *Symbolsage*, symbolsage.com/water-symbolism-and-symbols-a-guide/ (18.05.2023).

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