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Strangers in a familiar land

Science Fiction as a „fundamentally subversive“ literature
with *ostranenije* („estrangement“) at its core
by the example of *Monsters* (2010)

1. Introduction

In his seminal 1972 *On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre*, Darko Suvin, an early scholar to engage the genre academically, offers a definition of Science Fiction that has remained relevant to this day. The genre's core mission, he postulates, is what Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky had dubbed *ostranenije* - estrangement - 47 years earlier while looking for a definition of the essence of art. In true Science Fiction, Suvin says, Shklovskyan estrangement is a formal and essential component: estrangement that alters the reader's perception of some aspect of reality, opening them to truly new thoughts and experiences, making SF a „fundamentally subversive" and „educational" genre (Suvin 379, 381). It is also a literature for the scientific age, inextricably linked to our perception of reality: no matter how fantastic a SF premise may seem, it has to be explainable within the parameters of the world as we understand it today - else it is not SF, but a different genre, like fantasy. SF is always constrained by the „‚zero world' of empirically verifiable properties around the author" (377). Whatever premise a work of SF introduces, it must appear *possible* under current scientific understanding; differently from myth, fairy tale, or fantasy, SF can not conjure up supernatural intervention, or alter the laws of physics. To Suvin, some 95% of the genre's product does not fulfill these criteria, and he is not shy to brand them „inferior SF" or „non-SF" (380). While this harsh categorization has, unsurprisingly, been challenged many times over the decades - not only because it shuns a sizeable chunk of mainstream SF as mere „space opera" - it remains a useful reading guide to the genre, especially if we want to approach its works as products of literature rather than pure entertainment… or defend our right to treat them as such in the first place. Viewed through Suvin's eyes, SF is not about escaping to faraway worlds or future utopias - it is ultimately a literature that is unfailingly connected to the reality that the reader, and the author, inhabit.

In this paper, we will first get a grasp of Shklovsky's and Suvin's theoretical groundwork, and then examine through its lens a relatively recent Science-Fiction film, Gareth Edwards' *Monsters* (2010), which envisions northern Mexico becoming a zone „infected" by an alien lifeform - a now heavily fortified and forbidden land through which the proponents must travel. We will focus on the multitude of ways in which cognitive estrangement applies to the film, and what points it makes. Assisted by Brooks Landon's epic guidebook Science Fiction since 1900, we will also try to locate *Monsters* in the SF genre's history and context. We will find that this 2010 film has important spiritual roots in the 1960s and `70s, back when SF had its first major rebellion against the „technophiliac optimism" that had so far dominated the genre (Latham 107) - and yet, through the almost dismissive way how it treats the „Science Fictional novum" (Landon 175f.), *Monsters* far transcends its ancestry and is a true product of the early twenty-first century.

2. A theory of Science Fiction

2.1 Shklovshky's *Ostranenije*

„As perception becomes habitual", Viktor Shklovshky contends in his 1917 essay *Art as Technique*, „it becomes automatic." At the end of this process of automation - unavoidable as the process of recognition, familiarity sets in and only emptiness remains: „…life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war." (777) Taken to its extreme, the automatization of perception ultimately leads to a life that is lived unconsciously - it becomes „as if [it] had never been." (ibd.)

To Shklovshky, art exists to remedy this condition. Its mission is to *disrupt* this habitualization process. Art exists to „[remove] objects from the automatism of perception", „… that one may recover the sensation of life … to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. … The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known." (778) The reader's mind is inherently changed by the experience. Opening them up to experiences that lay outside their habitual range - in early 21st century English, we might call it the „comfort zone" - is not just a side effect: it is the very essence of the process.

In viewing art as an attack on perceptional automation, Shklovsky specifically rejects Symbolism, a movement in Russian art in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that explicitly emphasized the *symbol* as the core message of art. (Shklovsky's paper is as much a commentary on the state of contemporary Russian literature and art as it is a stand-alone

piece of art theory.) Striving for an „economy of perceptive effort“, symbolists' idea of poetic expression was reducing it to images and algebra-like alphabets; today we might call those alphabets „codes.“ The result, Shklovshky contends, is essentially habitualization, the very thing art is supposed to disrupt: objects portrayed by symbolist art are recognizable to us only as „silhouettes“; we „recognize [those objects] by their main characteristics“, rather than truly grasp them. As a consequence, the objects of symbolist art „[fade] and [do] not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten.“ (778)

Artistic disruption of habitualization uses the technique of „making the familiar seem strange“, something he dubs *ostranenije*, „estrangement.“ In marked contrast to the idea of an economy of effort,

> The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important. (778)

Shklovsky goes on to analyze various estrangement-inducing literary techniques employed by the great names of his day. Tolstoy, for example, „makes the familiar seem strange by not naming the familiar object“ (779). Everyday customs - Shklovshky uses the example of a flogging - are estranged by describing them without using the familiar terms, as if they were witnessed for the first time by someone who does not know the practice. In a similar vein, Gogol and Hamsun defamiliarize erotic scenes, and Tolstoy has a horse describe the human concept of property rights (780). When the animal describes how this works, its perspective is so far removed from any context that would make the concept appear understandable that the result is unavoidably ridiculous. This is the essence of estrangement: an abstraction of social life that, usually through lifelong nurturing, seems self-explanatory to us, is completely

distorted - estranged - when looked at from an alternate point of view, with obvious subversive and educational implications not far away: the satirical and subversive power of defamiliarization is an inherent threat to *any* status quo, because its task is to deconstruct the status quo. It is probably because of this that the newly minted Soviet state did not appreciate Shklovshky's early ideas. Like many intellectuals of his time, he was enthusiastic about the 1917 revolution, seeing in it a starting point for great social progress. As the civil war progressed, however, he ended up opposing the Bolshevik faction, and as its power was consolidated, found himself forced into exile. He had to recant his early works, including *Art as Technique,* in order to make peace with the new powers that be in his home country, and be allowed to return home in the late 1920s (Ehrenreich 2013).

2.2 Suvin's *Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre*

Forty-seven years later in *On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre*, Darko Suvin, a Croatian professor of literature and émigré to Canada, suggests a theory of Science Fiction that builds on Shklovsky's ideas. The key mission of the genre, he contends, is to be a „literature of cognitive estrangement" (373): one in which *ostranenije* „has grown into the formal framework" (375). This estrangement has a social function at its core: „[to confront] a set normative system - a Ptolemaic-type closed world picture - with a point of view or glance implying a new set of norms" (ibd.) This is why SF, no matter how wildly speculative and fantastic, has to maintain *some* connection to the author's present-day, „empirical", rational universe: after all, estrangement can work only when estranging a „set normative system" that one can actually recognize and relate to! In this, SF is at the same time more restrained, and more free than other genres. It is more restrained because it can not speculate, can not change the laws of nature, the „‚zero world' of empirically verifiable properties around the author" (377), without providing an explanation that is generally satisfactory, or at least theoretically believable, to the scientific mind. „Magic", supernatural interventions, unexplained changes to the laws of nature, concepts of fate and pre-determination - a dime a dozen in other genres like fantasy and the fairy tale - are anathema to SF. Suvin calls those *myth*, a „ritual and religious approach" that is similar to SF in that it „[looks] in its own way beneath the empiric surface" and „also doubts the laws of the author's empirical world" (375) but stops short of examining the mythical or magical premise itself. This is where SF goes further: it „sees the norms of any age, including emphatically its own, as unique, changeable, and therefore subject to *cognitive* glance" (ibd.) Here, SF is more free than those other „non-realist" genres that it is routinely lumped together with (go to any bookstore and you will almost certainly find a „Science Fiction & Fantasy" section, as if the two were natural twins.)

Suvin's take on „cognitive glance", however, also excludes plenty of works within the genre itself. Novels like Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon,* or the American Science Fiction pulp literature of the 1920s and `30s are to Suvin, at best, primitive early stages to an eventual mature SF (376). While they engage in scientific speculation, and „[take] off from a fictional (‚literary') hypothesis and [develop] it with extrapolating and totalizing (‚scientific') rigor", as SF does (374), neither of them really has estrangement at their core. Primitive SF „[introduces] into the old empirical context only one easily digestible new technological variable", which creates a sense of „temporary" estrangement, one that subsides quickly, returning to a status quo that is never *fundamentally* changed or challenged, similar to how murder mysteries work. (One immediately obvious example of this type of literature is Jules Verne's work.) Suvin also dislikes the popular tendency to read SF as a literature of „prognostization" - focusing on predictions in SF that then can be classified as „successful" if they come true, and „unsuccessful" if they don't. This misses the point of the genre entirely and can only contribute to its demise (379). Science-Fictional predictions exist to serve the sense of estrangement that is supposed to be conveyed; they do not have predictive meaning in themselves. Somewhat disenchantingly to lovers of the genre, Suvin's view on SF's role is sobering: it can be a „stimulus for independent thinking," no more, no less (ibd.) It is, ultimately, a literature of the here and now. Similarly, Suvin discounts SF that „[retrogresses] into fairy tale" (375), work that on the surface looks like SF, but at its core is actually something entirely different. „Space opera" or cowboy tales „in an astronautic costume" (ibd.) merely change the *stage* to space, or a faraway future; they do not, however, show any of those traits that are specific, and essential, to „true" SF. Suvin discards „at least 95% of printed matter" labelled SF as belonging to one of these categories (381).

If we accept estrangement and the „cognitive glance“ as the core features of a true, mature SF, it is not difficult to accept Suvin's claim that the genre is an inherently subversive and educational one. The technique of estrangement, and consequently the perpetual potential deconstruction of *every* aspect of reality, is automatically a threat to any fixed ideology, hierarchy, and system of power. Suvinian SF is inherently a perpetual opponent to those, and does not survive long if co-opted by those systems, like the Soviet Union, where writers were subjected to government control and censorship. When this happens, SF „languishes in strait-jackets more quickly than most other ones, responding with atrophy, escapism, or both.“ (379)

3. SF in film since 2000: a genre overview

If, now equipped with a robust theory on Science Fiction, we look at the totality of the genre, we find that much of what is labelled „SF“ today is indeed still the „cowboys in space“ or „space opera“ type story that Suvin wants so emphatically to separate from „true“ Science Fiction. Suvin's 1971 rule that 95% of supposed SF isn't actually SF is probably still correct - but luckily, the absolute have grown exponentially, and we have much more good material to work with. If we look past the Space Opera, we can indeed see a mature genre, rich in works that indeed have estrangement at their core, that subvert and question. Often, but not always, they have a home away from the mainstream. Even if we limit our view to something as narrow as twenty-first century American SF film, the list of works worth looking at is huge (and what is listed here is certainly not exhaustive): we can see *Moon* (2009) in which an ordinary individual must realize that they are a mere clone of a person long dead, worth less than a slave, to be disposed of when their defined purpose runs out - a theme also found in *Oblivion* (2013); *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) which (among other things) offers an

epic, deep, and uncomfortable exploration into what happens when the hostile Other is no longer distinguishable from ourselves - or, ultimately, actually and literally *is* ourselves; *District 9* (2009) which envisions an alien refugee ship having hovered over Johannesburg since the 1980s, with the alien passengers taking the place of blacks in a cruel system of Apartheid; *Children of Men* (2006), set in a near future in which worldwide infertility has caused mankind to abandon all hope and fall back into fascism, xenophobia, and violence; *The Walking Dead* (2010-), a zombie apocalypse series depicting a return to patriarchy (and, to a lesser extent, the nuclear family) as the only serious means of survival in the face of constant deadly danger - a „conservative critique" (Nuckolls 2014) proving that Science-Fictional subversion does not automatically *have* to be left-leaning and progressive in content and message. The list of candidates worthy of academic investigation goes on. If we include novels and short stories - still extremely important media and the birthplace of most contemporary SF blockbusters - or comics and graphic novels, the list grows even bigger.

Among these films there is also *Monsters,* a 2010 British-American independent science-fiction film directed by Gareth Edwards, and set in the Mexico-U.S. border region. It wasn't a box office blockbuster, but it is particularly interesting to us for a number of reasons. For one, as we will see, it is certainly „true" Suvinian SF. With its minuscule $50,000 budget, the film might have enjoyed rather more creative freedom than a more expensive Hollywood production would have. We can clearly see cognitive estrangement at play; subtle but scathing social criticism; challenging and atypical pacing, plotting, and storylines; and an expansive subtext available to the attentive viewer - in short, an „art film." In contrast, bigger-budget film adaptations even of SF classics as complex and philosophically challenging as *Ender's Game* (2014) tend to turn out stunted, simplified almost beyond

recognition, stripped almost bare of the bleak outlooks and uncomfortable questions their book versions pose, in order to conform with the formulae that govern the world of the box office. (Why *Monsters* was *marketed* to look like a typical big-budget movie - with sensational, tension-packed trailers and posters that don't match the film's mood and structure at all - is an interesting question that would reveal plenty about the status of Science Fiction, and about viewer expectations which may not have evolved much since the „golden age" of SF in the early 20th century. We can not, however, touch upon it in this paper.)

Monsters also explores deeply American issues, among them the country's tangled and complicated relationship with its southern border. The nativist fantasy of a gigantic border wall - recently revived by Donald Trump, but not as old as one might think; it was born as a national topic around the time of the Carter administration (Nevins 2001, 66ff., and Nevins/ Dunn 2008) - has become physical reality in the film. While the aliens trying to sneak past the border in *Monsters* aren't looking to clean houses or trim hedges, the allegory to the *actual* reality of „alien immigration" from Latin America is not exactly subtle. How a *Mediengesellschaft* with a strong tendency to iconify and amplify fears reacts to an Other that it perceives as threatening is one of the core questions that the film explores through the vehicle of this border wall.

The film's 2010 release date also poses the additional challenge of locating it in SF history without help from Brooks Landon's century-spanning compendium, *Science Fiction After 1900*, which we will fall back on to navigate through the genre's history. Where have the various strains of the genre evolved over the past fifteen years outside of Landon's scope, and where might we place *Monsters* in them?

4. Plot outline

Monsters takes place in 2010's present-day reality. However, a significant event has changed history six years in the past, when a NASA space probe discovered the possibility of alien life somewhere in the solar system. The probe, equipped with samples from the discovery, crashes in northern Mexico on its way home. Not much later, strange new life forms begin to develop in the area. Soon, all of northern Mexico is quarantined off as an "Infected Zone", surrounded by huge walls and fences. The region around the zone has frequent run-ins with the "Creatures", huge, octopus-like beings that can walk on land and measure about 300-450 feet. Their excursions outside the zone are guided by a seasonal rhythm. However, what is causing the great damage to buildings, roads, and tracks, as well as loss of life, that we see along the way seems to be caused by constant bombing raids by the U.S. and Mexican military in an attempt to keep the Creatures at bay; there is also the strong suggestion that the Creatures themselves aren't aggressive at all unless provoked. Despite all the military efforts, there is no significant progress in reclaiming the land: The Infected Zone seems to be there to stay. The story begins when Andrew Kaulder (Scoot McNairy), an American photo journalist looking for picture-taking opportunities around the Infected Zone in Mexico, is tasked by his supervisor to check in on Samantha Wynden (Whitney Able), the daughter of their publication's owner, in the now border town of San José. She had been slightly injured the night before, when a Creature attacked the hotel she stayed in. Against his protests - he is in Mexico anxiously waiting for photo opportunities - Andrew is forced to "baby-sit" Samantha, and escort her to the coast, where the last ferry for America is due to depart before the area gets closed down for traffic for the season. However, things do not work out as planned, and the two find that the only way home is doing the unthinkable – trusting their lives into the hands of Mexican smugglers hired to take them through the forbidden, deadly Infected Zone.

After a long and dangerous journey, the final part of which they end up finishing alone, they encounter the gigantic concrete wall that protects the United States from the Creatures. They find it deserted and manage to sneak through. The American borderlands are empty and a scene of total devastation. Eventually, they manage to call for help from a recently deserted gas station. While waiting for an Army unit to pick them up, they see two of the Creatures, for the first time in full and from up close. They appear to be mating. Samantha suddenly bursts out that she doesn't want to return to her old life; she wants to stay with Andrew. They kiss, and the Army unit arrives to pick them up. The film ends with the frantic radio dialogue that started in the opening scene, suggesting that the unit got into a violent encounter with a Creature, and that Samantha is likely dead.

5. Analyzing the film

5.1 The infected zone as a geographical, political, and inner space

The film's main object of estrangement is the concept of the Infected Zone. The zone alters life in and around it - and yet it is always clearly a reflection on issues surrounding the Mexican-American border in the real world. The Infected Zone creates the narrative tool of a no man's land from which technological civilization has retreated completely, a kind of a white spot on the map with the added bonus of an unsurmountable wall at the end. That wall, separating the zone from the United States, is both an allegory for the militarized border regime that really exists, and an allusion to the fantasy of a perfectly sealed southern border.

The Infected Zone also serves as a vehicle to put two first-world citizens into the role of illegal immigrants facing immense dangers, costs, and difficulties reaching their goal, a premise that would have been markedly more difficult to construct believably without the Science Fictional premise: in the real world, after losing their passports, the two would likely simply have reported to the Mexican or American authorities and started off a bureaucratic process leading to speedy and safe repatriation. When Samantha says, looking at the wall, that „America looks different from the outside looking in", she formulates the essence of estrangement.

5.2 How we treat the alien: social criticism in *Monsters*

The estrangement introduced by the concept of the Infected Zone allows *Monsters* to perform pointed social criticism, much of it in the subtext, *en passant*. The two characters' journey

leads them right through the Zone, from the Mexican side to the American. On the Mexican side, only a light, almost invisible fence separates inhabited country from the dangerous Infected Zone. Buildings stretch right up to it (Picture 00:20.17). Everyday life is guided by a sense of weary resignation. On the way from the hospital, Samantha talks to their taxi driver (00:06.00):

> **Samantha (in Spanish)**: Do you feel safe living here?
> **Taxi driver:** Where would we go? My work, my family is all here. This *[the incursions of the Creatures beyond the confined zone, and the military reaction]* happens every year. We just take our chances.

At the same time, life on the Mexican side is markedly „normal“, or at least - alive. Protest posters and murals oppose the bilateral military action in the Infected Zone (Picture 00:16.45) and ask on a signboard, in Spanish, “Who are the [real] monsters? No bombing.” (00:25.46). In the coastal town where the ferry home is to leave the next morning, Sam and Andrew explore the local nightlife. Just a few hundred feet from the Zone, they find raucous festivities, yet the deadly danger a few blocks north is not forgotten. A few blocks away, a sea of candles reminds of those killed. There, in the shadow of a church, silence is mandatory, and wearing gas masks is prohibited, another passing hint how deeply the situation has permeated everyday life (Picture 00:26.02). In a children’s TV programme, a cartoon teaches the kids how to put on a gas mask (Picture 00:12.20). The constant state of conflict has been integrated into daily life and culture. As Sam and Andrew miss their boat and are forced to enter the Zone, we find that its southern border is permeable: commerce, smugglers, even children exist there (Picture 00:39.24).

Inside the Infected Zone, there are few actual signs of „infection.“ What we see eventually is fungus-like eggs attaching themselves to trees after the Creatures, according to Sam and

Andrew's Latino guides, have gone into the river to hatch them (00:53.10). The Creatures, according to the same guides, are aggressive only when attacked (00:52.36):

> **Guide**: If you don't bother them, they don't bother you. When American planes come, the Creatures, very mad, you know. You know, crazy. Crazy animals. They very dangerous.

What is never spelled out but is strongly hinted at by the absence of any toxic reaction, e.g. when Sam touches the alien fungus (00:53.00), is that the gas masks aren't directly necessitated by the alien organisms: they are actually to protect from the chemical weapons that the bilateral Air Force deploys against them. Neither are the zone's borders dictated by the invasive organism: the entire imagery of an „Infected Zone", marked red on maps (Image 00:19.04) and featuring straight, arbitrary lines, is an entirely human creation: the Zone consists of perfectly normal, earthbound flora and fauna, with only a few sprinkles of alien organisms in between.

Life on the United States's side in *Monsters*, as we get to see it, is very different. As we can see from the map (Picture 00:42.24) the United States has not yielded an inch to the alien threat, while Mexico has lost almost half of its territory to the Infected Zone. A gigantic wall looms on the northern end of the Zone, promising perfect safety (Picture 01:08.38), but Sam and Andrew find it abandoned, with no electrical power (Picture 01:12.19) and easy to walk through. In the border hinterland, there is no traffic: the roads have been destroyed (01:11.40). The area is deserted; they walk past towns that have suffered from massive destruction. They find decaying bodies in one building (01:15.08). The only living soul they come across is an old, deranged woman dressed in an American flag (Picture 01:16.50). They encounter a sign titled „Emergency Evacuation Route"; underneath it, the slogan says

„Fighting for *our* world“ (Picture 01:17.36), indicating the ideology that guides the governments' efforts in dealing with the Creatures. The first building they come across that is intact is a gas station in the middle of the desert which seems to have been evacuated only hours before: the lights are still on, the doors unlocked. From there, they manage to call 911. The operator on the phone acts as a stand-in for the entire country's state of anguish: “You're lucky to be alive.” Following emergency protocol to the letter, she goes on to inquire about what they are wearing, even though they are the only two people in the entire area – mindlessly clinging to procedure and formality in the face of overwhelming fear. (01:18.00) On a TV screen that runs in the station, news coverage can be seen. The fights with the creatures have been dubbed „The Battle for Texas“ and given its own logo in the news coverage. Greenly glowing infrared footage from night vision devices and missile guidance systems remind us of past American military campaigns (Picture 01:25.21). This is the American state of mind in *Monsters*: In the very beginning of the film, Samantha tries to calm her father on the telephone: “I'm fine, dad, it's not as bad as it looks.” The father replied, “well, on the TV it looks bad.” (00:06.30)

Those hints, and the journey to the wall, suggest that U.S. society has not managed to integrate the Infected Zone into everyday life at all. It has chosen paranoia instead, creating a highly militarized war zone, an illusion of total security, and massive environmental desctruction instead, at a terrible cost. The way Andrew and Samantha's journey ends supports this: in underdeveloped, supposedly dysfunctional Mexico, where the First World citizen typically expects danger looming around every corner, the two were relatively safe. They were robbed, had to entrust themselves onto an armed gang, and were attacked by a Creature, but they stayed alive and largely unharmed. It is in the hands of a U.S. Army patrol

(with one soldier, in a homage to Coppola's 1976 *Apocalypse Now*, whistling Wagner's *Walkürenritt*) that they are suddenly brutally attacked, presumably by a Creature – an attack that, as we saw in the very first seconds of the movie, leaves Samantha dead or injured in the midst of a chaotic scene of combat.

It is very easy to read this journey as a critique of U.S. modern-day immigration discourse, which is almost entirely about the immigration of Latin Americans through the southern border, and of media-driven war frenzy. The film is arguably, however, about much more - about modern man's attitudes towards life and nature in general, our efforts to contain the threatening wilderness, and the failure of our seemingly omnipotent technology in trying to do so. As Roger Ebert put it in his 2010 review of the film: „I think the lesson [of this movie] may be: Life has its reasons. Motives are pretty universal. Monsters are in the eye of the beholder."

5.3 A personal journey through an estranged borderlands

The Infected Zone as an estranged space outside the reach of civilization also catalyzes a personal transformation in Samantha and Andrew. Both are, each in their own way, trapped in unfulfilling lives - Andrew an immature, unhappy globetrotter who forgets his problems through booze and one night stands. He has a five-year-old son in the US, the product of a short fling, whom he loves dearly, but who is out of reach for him, shielded from him by the mother. The son is unaware even than Andrew is his father („It's easier this way", he explains at 00:44:40). However little contact there is, it is clearly a thing that Andrew cares deeply about: at the end of the movie, it is the son's birthday, and Andrew calls him from the gas station to congratulate him. Samantha is an attractive, intelligent, responsible young woman

from a wealthy family with a strong patriarch in the background (he sets the plot's events in motion by tasking Andrew with bringing her home from Mexico). She is set to marry her fiancée and presumably start a safe, wealthy life in the United States. From the outset, she is portrayed as unhappy: she won't call her fiancé after being released from hospital in the beginning of the film, even though her father urges her to - "He's your fiancé. You can call him." (00:06:45) She is the stronger character of the two - she is the one who decides to go through the Infected Zone in order to make it home, against Andrew's initial resistance. (Differently from him, she is also able to truly connect with the people they meet on their journey; she speaks the language, does most of the talking, and is ready to trust their shady-looking guides who take them into the Zone.) It is also her who openly declares her love of him in the petrol station, daring to put into words what was arguably present all along, even though her repugnance of his immaturity dominated at first. In the early stages of the story, she dismisses as ridiculous that she could be having a relationship with Andrew; when asked by a Mexican woman whether it is him she is engaged with, she responds: „Con *este*? Nooooo." („With *that* one? Noooo.") This changes, obviously, markedly, towards the end. The forbidden space of the Zone sends both onto an inner journey as much as an outward one. In what is a deliberate or accidental nod to the border movie genre, the Infected Zone is a giant borderlands, an area neither here nor there, where rules are moot, and where humans are forced to experience themselves outside their normal sphere, its surroundings and limitations. Typical of the „Mumblecore" genre from which this film draws greatly (and on which we will expand later), the transformation the two characters undergo is subtle - so subtle that even big-name critics end up seeing a total absence of acting (Morgenstern 2010, Van Maanen 2010) - but it is there, a series of „quietly seismic shifts that are apparent only in hindsight" (Lim 2007).

6. Locating *Monsters* in SF history

6.1 The invasion motif in SF history

The idea of alien lifeforms invading and altering Earth is almost as old as the Science Fiction genre itself. *The War of the Worlds* (1897), *Invasion of the body snatchers* (1954), *The Genocides* (1965), *The Andromeda Strain* (1969), and the *Ender's Game* series are only the most visible from a huge list of works. All of those examples, except for *The Genocides,* have since been adapted into film. What most of them have in common is that the nature of the invasion is generally depicted as malign and invasive. This tendency has been interpreted, e.g. In 2007 by Latham in *Biotic Invasions: Ecological Imperialism in New Wave Science Fiction* as a conscious or unconscious allegory to the invasions perpetrated by western civilization - be they colonization of other cultures, or ecological destruction through industrialization and large-scale agriculture (112). The motif of an alien (bio-)invasion that is *benign* or at least not actively harmful to local life is much less common. The *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, a web-based, Wikipedia-like effort, manages to identify three stories from the fifties and sixties that feature welcome or benign invasions (2015). A more recent example, and arguably a kind of spiritual predecessor to *Monsters*, is Ian McDonald's „Chaga Saga" (1995-2000, published as „*Evolution's shore*" in the US), a series of three stories centering around the „Chaga", a fungus planted by aliens which, unstoppably growing at a speed of a few dozen meters per day, gradually transforms not only the earth, but everything it touches - including animals and humans. This leads mankind to flee from the organism, and to view it as a military threat; the worldwide migration away from the phenomenon, which started in Africa, causes massive social, political, and military shifts as entire nations cease to

exist, their territory devoured inch by inch. However, as the story progresses, it is suggested that the Chaga isn't necessarily the sinister invasion that human fears make it to be: there is a new kind of life going on within the areas taken over by the Chaga, one that is fuller and more abundant than life ever was before, impossible to understand to those who aren't in it. In the third book, the protagonist is even infected with the fungus, giving her new abilities. The Chaga, we are led to consider, *could* be mankind's next step, an inevitable transformation to enter a new stage of evolution in which scarcity no longer exists.

6.2 Echoes of the New Wave

In *Monsters,* the invasion is less transformative than in the Chaga saga; it turns out to simply be life looking to spread, not dissimilar to invasive species of plants or animals in our own ecosystem. But similar to the saga, in *Monsters*, it is the human *reception* of, and violent reaction to, the „invasion" that creates actual destruction. Both works can easily be read as critiques on human fear and human social dynamics, with the science-fiction adventure aspect moving to the background.

In this, both the Chaga saga and *Monsters* echo the „New Wave" of Science Fiction that set out to rebel in the 1960s and 1970s against what had, until then, dominated the genre: the „technophiliac optimism of Campbellian SF" (Latham 107), mostly pulp literature in awe of technological progress, or exaggerated scenarios, focused on sensation and adventure, providing little in terms of criticism, insight or estrangement. The New Wave, dominated by British authors, is one of the first major shifts that set out to challenge the genre consensus. When watching Sam and Andrew navigate through the Infected Zone with its ruins of

civilization - a jungle returning to a long-lost pre-colonial state - in *Monsters*, one can't help but be reminded of the outcry, „The only truly alien planet is Earth" (Landon 151), uttered by Michael Moorcock, one of the most important figures of this budding literary movement in 1962. And does their inner journey through a space made possible by the SF premise, culminating in their eventual confession of love, not echo Edward James' „[exploration of] our own subjective perceptions of the universe and our fellow human beings" (152) that also is a hallmark of the New Wave? Even though arguably far away from the New Wave in time and context, the film certainly ticks a lot of its boxes: its criticism of human hubris, of xenophobia in general, and particularly of American hysteria towards the unknown „other"; its subtle bashing of paranoia and hyperbolical media coverage (the ridiculous „battle for Texas"); its exploration of the limits of western civilization, waging war against nature and in the process damaging itself the most; the futility and destructiveness of „the wall"…. we can certainly call the New Wave an ancestor to *Monsters*.

6.3 Non-SF genre influences

While our main goal in this chapter is to locate *Monsters* in the history of specifically Science Fiction and its sub-genres, it is also worth looking how the film shows traits from other genres. One of those is the American road movie, even though at first sight, *Monsters* doesn't fit the bill at all: it isn't, strictly speaking, set on a road, nor in a car - to many, the lowest common denominator for placing a film in the genre (Morris 24). It also does not, on the surface, have an idea of a „*road* of excess instead of a practical or functional road: travel for travel's sake, travel as an ‚end' in itself", as David Laderman puts it in „Driving Visions" (2002): Sam and Andrew's journey through the forbidden zone has a clearly defined purpose, occasioned by necessity. Still, we find in *Monsters* many echoes of the American

road movie: „an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique“ (Laderman 2); social commentary in the depictions of everyday life on the Mexican end of the border, and the characterization of the destruction on the American end; „elusive development of alienated characters“ (3); and a tragic ending so common to the genre.

Monsters is also a milestone in the history of the „democratization“ of film, arguably a shift with far-reaching consequences for the industry. As Don Steinberg documents in „The new era of Low-Fi Sci-Fi“ (2014), an overwhelming portion of its production was completed by one person (the director, Edwards, himself, a digital effects specialist by trade). The work was done with minuscule funds, on hardware that would have cost tens of thousands of dollars to buy only ten years ago, but is now easily within reach to even college students. The fact that so few people and so little equipment were required for filming also allowed for an unprecedented amount of improvisation. Apart from those playing the two main characters - McNairy and Able - all actors were extras, cast on the spot as the team would arrive on a new location. The travel route was decided on the spot, too - one *could* make the tongue-in-cheek argument that the film is an American Road movie by way of production, if not plot. This lowering of the barriers of access to the production of commercial-quality film, and the spontaneity that digitalization makes possible, are likely to have a great impact on the future of filmmaking.

The low production budget is also one attribute that affiliates *Monsters* with „mumblecore“, a categorization that is perhaps not as much a *genre* as a loosely defined artistic movement. The *New York Times*' Dennis Lim lists the defining elements of mumblecore as „a low-key naturalism, low-fi production values and a stream of low-volume

chatter often perceived as ineloquence.“ (2007) Digital equipment is used, often one person is responsible for the entire production process; dialogue is „quasi-improvised“. The subject of many movies tend to be everyday occurrences of white middle-class twenty-somethings, something that opens the movement to criticism of mundanity and narcissism. Lin, however, continues that „… what these films understand all too well is that the tentative drift of the in-between years masks quietly seismic shifts that are apparent only in hindsight. Mumblecore narratives hinge less on plot points than on the tipping points in interpersonal relationships.“ Looked at from this perspective, Sam and Andrew’s relationship - criticized by critics such as Joe Morgenstern in the *Wall Street Journal* (2010) as „dull and nonexistent“ - could be a deliberate narrative tool. There is indeed little overt romance between the two (something which Morgenstern might identify as „acting“) but this isn’t due to lack of talent, it is because both are caught up in their respective, complicated lives and have to undergo invisible, seismic shifts, go through their journey in order to discover and express their affection for each other.

6.4 In post-9/11 SF

Some contemporary SF scholars also find *Monsters* noteworthy in the context of specifically post-9/11 SF. Cheryl Vint, for example, contends that mainstream SF since 2002 has a tendency of transporting problematic ideas about threatening „others“ for whose containment a „permanent state of exception“ (66), and any violent means are justifiable in her 2015 essay, „Biopolitics and the war on terror“. The zombie, the uncontrollable, dehumanized creature „whose killing is not murder“ (67), to her is a stand-in for actual, widespread xenophobic tendencies in the wake of 9/11 - a heightened demand for „security“ that targets, to put not too fine a point on it, brown people. She makes a connection between

the hordes of diseased climbing, in piles, the walls of Jerusalem in *World War Z,* and real-world ideas of present-day Israel being under siege from barbaric beasts (the Muslim world around it) who must be kept at bay with violence. (72) In Vint's view, *Monsters,* in its mocking of militaristic xenophobia and rather gentle depiction of the alien Other, serves as a life-affirming counterpoint to these tendencies (73f.) Her damning criticism of *World War Z* as transporting an ultimately racist, eugenicist, utilitarian world-view, and her reading most all mainstream Science-Fiction as inherently rooted in colonialist and neoliberal ideology (if not much worse), is ultimately unconvincing in its categoricalness. Still, we can take note of her characterization of *Monsters'* position - even if we may not fully appreciate the theory she frames it in.

6.5 Closer to home: Soft Agenda

While the New Wave of the 1960s and ´70s is surely an influence on *Monsters*, it also has attributes that identify it as a much more recent work. The closest genre label that can be applied to the film is what Landon, concluding his exploration of science fiction history at the end of the twentieth century, terms „Soft" or „New" agenda SF. For the „Soft agenda", the focus of attention shifts away from the „novum of a science fiction narrative" towards „the ideological, political, and social issues that dominate mainstream and academic discourse" (175). Despite the similarities - after all, both movements deal with broader social issues - there are clear differences from the old „New Wave" visible when we consider how Monsters treats its *novum*, the reality-altering ingredient that makes a story SF. The novum is typically, in one way or the other, at a SF work's center of interest. When a film is about a monster from outer space, or a space colony on Jupiter, then those elements and the way they

influence the actors and plot will be at the work's heart. „Soft Agenda" SF can't, of course, *ignore* the novum, but, as Landon puts it,

> […] instead of emphasizing dynamics of social and psychological change driven by scientific and technological "progress," soft agenda SF emphasizes **problems and conditions already clearly recognized in contemporary society, suggesting either that these problems will continue despite "old agenda" changes or will be intensified and foregrounded by those changes.** In this respect, soft agenda SF clearly continues programs associated with the New Wave and with the eco-feminist writing of the 1970s and 1980s. (175, emphasis mine)

This is at the core of what *Monsters* is - it is using a SF setting as a vehicle to talk about social issues that exist in the real world; the setting merely serves to intensify them, cast them in a new light - „estrange" them (more on that later.) Other than that, explaining and justifying the novum isn't at the center of the film, another marker of „Soft Agenda" SF:

> What Csicsery-Ronay identifies as hesitations or gaps are concerns with the plausibility of the SF novum, the first gap focused on the plausibility of novum, the second on its ethical implications and resonances. Both hesitations are present in most SF, but old agenda SF tends to privilege the first concern while soft agenda SF tends to privilege the second. (177)

When the film begins, the world-changing event - the introduction of alien spores to earth - is already several years in the past. People on the Mexican side have learned to stoically live with the Infected Zone like they would with any calamity - the novum is not much different from war, famine, natural catastrophe, or general ecological destruction, things we see plaguing the Third World every day. (There's even, in the person of Samantha, the stereotypical white liberal American twenty-something working as a volunteer.) The core SF premise in *Monsters* - the biological invasion - is hardly elaborated on: the theme is already so much part of the SF „megatext" - the background of knowledge and expectations shared by the genre audience (Landon xviiii) - that to mention of a crashed NASA space probe is sufficient to set the stage. The narratory focus is clearly on „[the novum's] ethical implications and resonances" - the way mankind, or western civilization, or America deals

with the presence of alien life on earth, and the social consequences of it. There is *some* action and combat - but not only is it portrayed as ultimately futile, it is possibly the actual source of destruction itself; but even this sardonic point is made *en passant*, with few overt pointers guiding the viewer. The focus of this „newer wave“ also puts more emphasis on exploring human experience than the novum:

> While science-fictional ideas are interwoven throughout both of these stories, neither is as concerned with an attitude toward a technologized environment or with change itself as with human compassion and understanding. (178)

How this plays out in *Monsters* is easy to see. The entire film, its many short wordless scenes, pictures, and dialogues, highlights human life and suffering in light of a militarized response to an alien threat. The journey of Sam and Andrew itself is, at its core, a story of human experience and transformation embedded into a SF setting.

6.6 The Mundane Manifesto

In addition to the genre influences we have noted above, we can connect *Monsters* to a small, relatively young SF sub-genre or literary movement termed „Mundane SF“. Codified in 2004 as the „Mundane Manifesto“ (Ryman et al.), the movement is dissatisfied with the prevalence of „unrealistic“ ideas in Science Fiction: interstellar travels, universe-spanning empires, alien intelligences with whom we can interact, „devices that can translate any language“, „alternative universes or parallel worlds“ and other common SF tropes „remain unlikely“, the manifesto says - and can „encourage a wasteful attitude“ to the abundance of our own planet. It is suggested to light a „bonfire of the stupidies“, leaving the SF author with a narrower basis from which to tell stories: „Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?“ Mundane SF elects to put „a new focus on human beings: their science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individual characters, needs, dreams, hopes, and failings.“ SF doesn’t need galactic

empires nor tentacled aliens in order to be exciting: speculation about the development of mankind without leaving our planet, or introducing aliens of any form is more than enough. This formally codifies an approach which, of course, has always existed in the genre. Philip K. Dick, William Gibson and George Orwell are only a few authors whose work is mostly or completely in this vein.

The core sentiment of the „Mundane Manifesto“ has many echoes in the New Wave - especially the focus on our world as a resource that is not to be wasted - and in Suvin’s SF theory. While the Croat works within a different framework to eject different tendencies from his idea of a „mature“ SF, both him and the Mundane Manifesto essentially reject the same thing: escapism, the tendency to use other worlds to lose oneself in them, instead of reflecting upon our own. At the same time, we can find Suvin’s disdain for „Space opera“ (the mere transplantation of cowboy stories and other non-SF themes into a Science-Fictional setting, with no actual estrangement taking place) expressed in the manifesto’s tiredness of „Aliens: especially those aliens who act like feudal Japanese/American Indians/Tibetan Buddhists/ Nazis or who look or behave like human beings except for latex.“ Suvin would likely agree with burning all these ideas on a bonfire, even though using aliens as stand-ins for social groups might look like an act of estrangement at first. They usually aren’t, though. The typical, tacky „alien“ that the manifesto criticizes (abundant for example in the *Star Trek* franchise, like the Romulans or the Ferengi) can only remain a reproduction of the ideas we have about the social group it is supposed (consciously or unconsciously) to depict or remind of. True estrangement - the *deconstruction* of habitualized preconceptions - does not typically play into these shallow caricatures.

Monsters is arguably a prime example of Mundane SF. Even though it features alien lifeforms, they belong to the plant and animal kingdoms; we can not communicate with the Creatures any more meaningfully than we could with very large and frightened cows. They reached earth through a satellite, and were presumably transported to our solar system through a comet or other piece of space rock - technically, perhaps, the result of „interstellar travel“, but certainly not in the spirit of the Mundane Manifesto: the alien invasion in *Monsters* is an accidental contamination, nothing more. The film is „mundane“ also because it so very much focuses on political and social issues, and the budding romance between Sam and Andrew. It pays little attention to the Science-Fictional novum - the Creatures - that it is built around, to the point of carelessness. Very few scenes feature the actual alien lifeforms. It is almost as if the novum were purely there to foment the estrangement necessary to tell a number of deeply human stories.

7. Conclusion

So! What can we take away from all this? Suvin's theory of Science Fiction delivers an outspoken, if perhaps sobering, view on the genre. Rather than provide us with an exit from dreary reality, a way to withdraw into the shiny illusions of a better tomorrow or a more beautiful far beyond, all SF can *really* do is to help us defamiliarize the today, and the right here, giving us new perspectives and outlooks, nothing more. There is no escape, not even here. A disillusionment to those of us who, in the depths of their hearts, might have hoped that perhaps SF *is* a reflection of other worlds - worlds really somehow, somewhere out there? Certainly. But in identifying „estrangement" - to Shklovsky, the very core of what makes art - as the formal foundation of this still relatively young genre, Suvin gives it a real place in cultural discourse. This is where Science Fiction grows beyond being a mere panopticum of fantasies to be consumed for entertainment or escapism. Read as a literature of estrangement, Science Fiction gains true social and political relevance, and becomes a unique tool of artistic expression that we can defend forcefully against those who deem it worthless. The Mundane Manifesto, albeit a small and lesser known movement, has a similar thrust. It seeks to shatter many the most common fantasies which, fuelled by our time's faith in technology and its unlimited potential, so pervade the genre. Agreeing to burn those fantasies may leave us with a narrower range of storytelling options - but it makes it much easier to create something *relevant* beyond its own entertainment value.

Looking at *Monsters* as a film, we can see Shklovshkyan estrangement satirizing the steadily increasing militarization of America's southern border, and challenging our relationship with the alien. It seems safe to say that the fundamental spirit behind the film is that the Other, unfamiliar and unpredictable as it may be, might not be as threatening as we think, or are

told, it is - and that in fighting it with fire, we burn only ourselves. The way the film conveys these core points are not particularly subtle, and some have held this against it: as noted before, the simile of the „alien“ trying to break through America’s southern border is not particularly subtle. Yet, the film is undoubtedly a fine example of Suvinian principles.

It could be interesting to compare *Monsters* at length to a work that appears counter to this film’s liberal, xenophiliac, tolerance-affirming message. One obvious, contemporary example that *may* have a different approach is *The Walking Dead*, where the (unquestionably deadly and dangerous) Other must be destroyed with prejudice - and where most of the achievements of our liberal society, like gender equality, look like silly extravagances for which, as the characters must painfully learn, there is no place left in a „the real world“, the constant battle for survival. (It is probably no coincidence that the main character is a cop.) Can we read and compare *Monsters* and *The Walking Dead* as political statements? Is *The Walking Dead* using estrangement to subvert the a generally left-leaning consensus in American media society? And, of course: is the „message“ in *The Walking Dead* really as straightforward as it may seem - is the series a reinforcement of those values, or rather a critical reflection on the thin veil of civilization, man’s tendency to fall back to „the old ways“ when society becomes unstable?

We could also expand into a discussion of the status of the Science Fiction genre in general, something we didn’t do at length here. To what extent does SF still remain in a „ghetto“ (Suvin 380), walled off from „serious“ literature, denied access to the highest levels of critical scrutiny and praise - possibly because the literary world, figuratively speaking, hasn’t read enough Suvin? Much has certainly changed in the more than 40 years since he

wrote his essay, and SF is as accepted as a mainstream cultural phenomenon as it has never been before, but the notion of the genre being in a ghetto, not *quite* to be taken seriously, is not alien even to us today. The way even *Monsters* was marketed as something that it really isn't is a strong hint that many traditional genre expectations still persist.

Regardless which path we take, it is obvious that the genre is a fruitful field to explore. Suvin's SF theory, even though more than four decades old, remains a useful guide for finding and categorizing the pearls of the genre. It is here that we might begin to understand Suvin's unabashed enthusiasm for SF. We might appreciate the genre's inherent idealism and utopianism, its being „wedded to a hope of finding in the unknown the ideal environment, tribe, state, intelligence or other aspect of the Supreme Good (or to a fear of and revulsion from its contrary)" (374). And we might become convinced by his view of SF as subversive, educational, and ultimately, a literature of the human condition:

> an educational literature, hopefully less deadening than most compulsory education in our split national and class societies, but irreversibly shaped by the pathos of preaching the good word of human curiosity, fear, and hope. (381)

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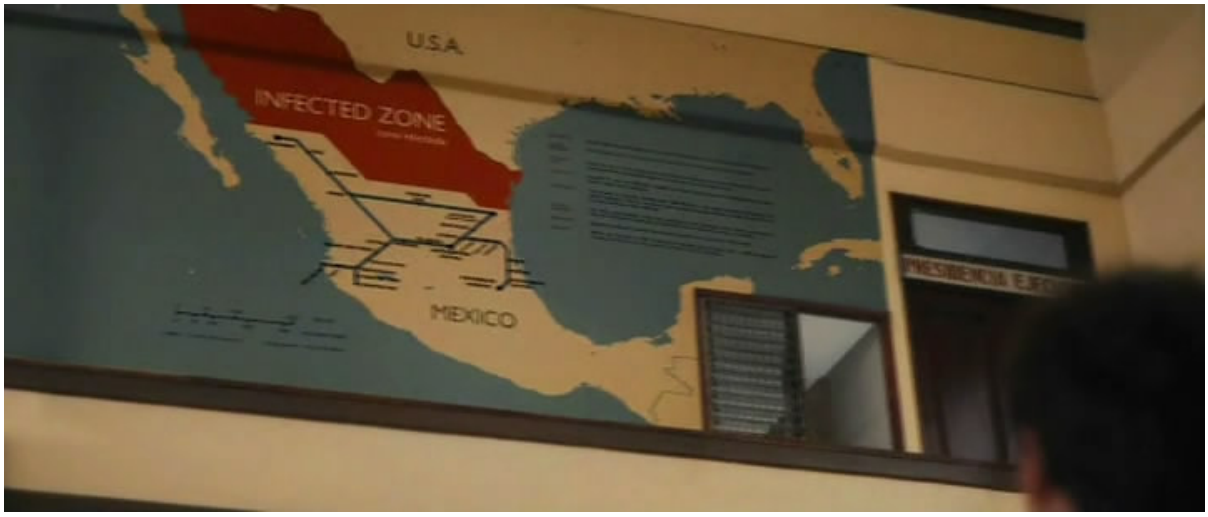
Tabayesco, den 25.7.2016

Pekka Gaiser

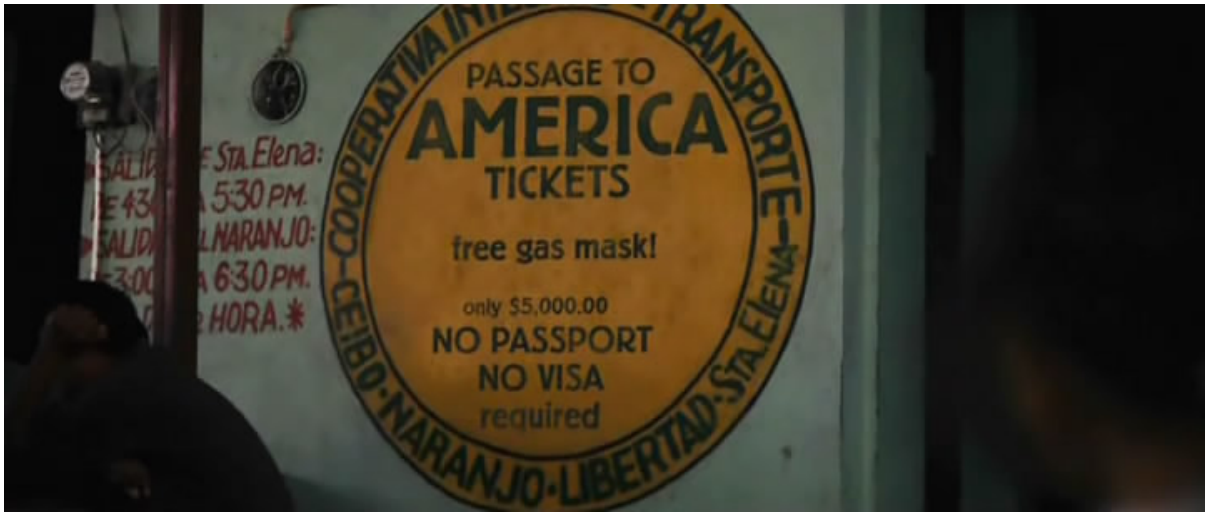
00:06.10 „This happens every year“



00:06.37 Map of the Infected Zone in the train station.


00:12.20 An educational cartoon on Mexican TV

00:16.45 A mural on the Mexican side



00:18.18 "Free Gas Mask!"

00:19.04 A map of the Infected Zone.

00:20.17 A border town in Mexico.

00:21.38 „Air Strikes Continue“

00:26.02 Mourning the Dead

00:38.18 Infected Zone Crossing

00:39.24 Life in the infected zone

00:40.53 Traces of Civilization

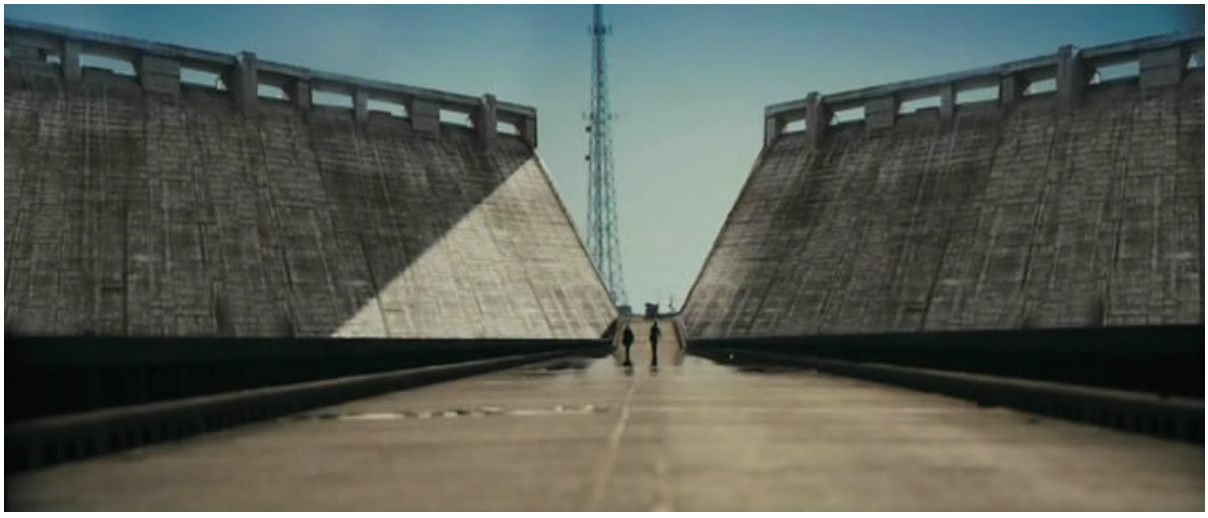
00:41.37 Traces of Civilization

00:42.24 Map of the Infected Zone

01:08.14 Traces of another civilization

01:08.38 The Wall

01:11.52 Goodbye Infected Zone



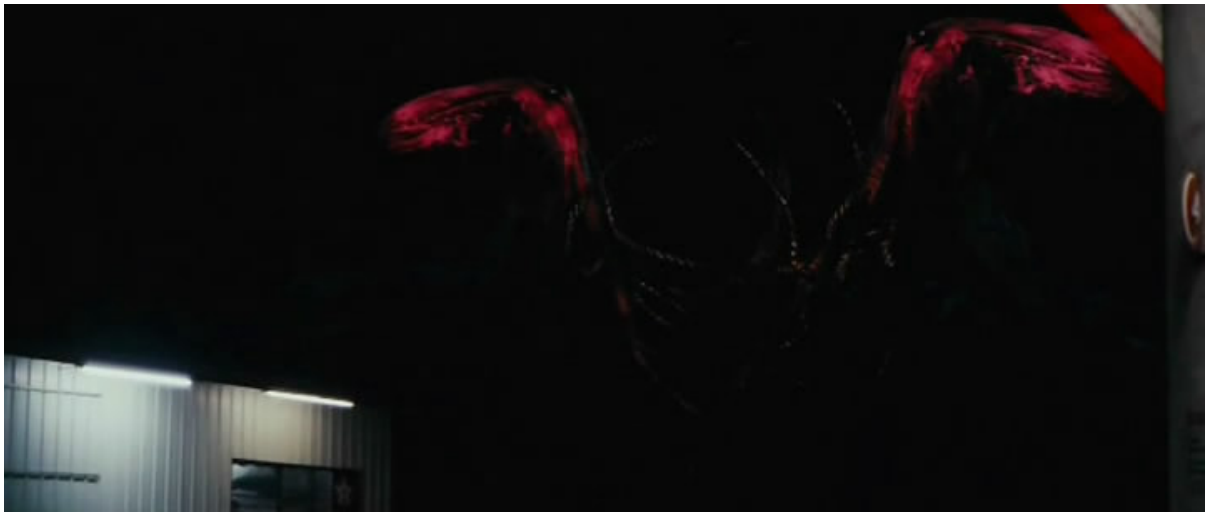
01:11.55 The Wall

01:11.55 The Wall

01:16.50 The insane woman

01:17.36 Fighting for *our* world

01:25.21 „The Battle For Texas“



01:27.22 Two Creatures conjoined