The changing tide of shark horror: *Sous La Seine* (2024) and the ending we deserve[1]

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Abstract:
In June 2024, *Sous La Seine* [*Under Paris*] was released on Netflix immediately securing a significant viewership. According to the director, it was intended to be a tribute to Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975). Taking place during the Paris 2024 Olympics and featuring a scene in which triathletes are eaten by a giant shark in the Seine, the film was released a month before the actual sporting event opened. This decision foregrounded the film's satirical and excessive quality, lambasting the social and environmental violence that underpins modernity. Its intertextuality with *Jaws* plays with conventions to highlight the political, environmental and social that frame our understanding of the shark, and the natural world.

Key words: shark, ecohorror, film, *Jaws*, environmentalism, politics

Article:

In June 2024, *Sous La Seine* [*Under Paris*] was released on Netflix 'scoring the best launch for a non-English language film' (Keslassy 2024). Taking place during the Paris 2024 Olympics and featuring a scene in which triathletes are eaten by a giant shark in the Seine, the film was released a month before the sporting event opened. This decision foregrounded the film's satirical and excessive quality, lambasting what was depicted as misguided nationalism in a capital city built on social and environmental violence. Alongside metatextual references to the Olympics, the film was, according to the director Xavier Gens, 'a tribute' (Sanction 2024) to Stephen Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) released in time for its 50th anniversary. Given its source material Gens' film fits within the broader genre of ecohorror; whilst Gens mentions *Jaws* as a specific influence, *Sous La Seine* equally draws on a wide range of earlier shark horror and aquatic creature features. More specifically, as a response to *Jaws*, *Sous La Seine* draws attention to ecohorror's significance in exploring fear in the Anthropocene: defined by Christy Tidwell and Carter Soles as not simply 'human fear *of* nonhuman nature' but 'human fear *for* nonhuman nature' (2021; original emphasis). Throughout, the film acknowledges the complicity of humanity in its own and nature's destruction, displacing the anthropocentric nature of many shark narratives.

Accordingly, the film opens in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, where Sophia (Bérénice Bejo), a marine researcher, and her team of shark conservationists are trying to locate Lilith, a tagged mako shark. During this search, Lilith attacks and kills Sophia's husband and crew. Three years later, in the build up to the Paris 2024 Olympics, Sophia is informed by a group of environmentalists that Lilith has swum up the Seine. Sophia works with police diver Adil (Nassim Lyes) to remove Lilith and protect the triathletes who will be swimming in the river. The Mayor of Paris (Anne Marivin) refuses to stop the triathlon, having spent millions of euros cleaning the Seine. It is discovered that Lilith is a mutated mako shark who has been breeding by parthenogenesis. When an attempt to bomb Lilith and her newly discovered offspring fails, the triathletes and attendees are slaughtered by Lilith. The ensuing panic causes unexploded World War 2 ordinances to detonate flooding Paris. The credits show that Lilith and her children will take over the world. Throughout, Gens draws on tropes laid out by *Jaws*, reinventing them for 'ecohorrific times' (Tidwell and Soles 2021). Thus, whilst the film promoted its relationship to the Olympics, *Jaws* and shark horror, the overtness of its premise belies the depth of representation.

Gens' film centralises two key narratives that emerge in *Jaws*: the threat to tourism and capitalism, and the assumption that sharks are dangerous man eaters. Based on Peter Benchley's 1974 novel of the same name, Spielberg's *Jaws* follows a series of shark attacks near a seaside town, Amity Island, New England. The attacks threaten to impact the income from tourism on the 4 July. Police chief, Martin Brody (Rob Scheider) attempts to prevent further attacks by closing the beaches only to be impeded by the town's Mayor Larry Vaughn (Murray Hamilton). When a young boy is attacked and killed, Brody enlists the help of Matt Hooper (Richard Dreyfuss), a marine biologist who has been employed to identify the killer shark, and Quint (Robert Shaw), a local fisherman with a pathological hatred of sharks, to catch the 'man-eater'. Despite the loss of Quint who is killed by the shark, Brody and Hooper are successful, and the film ends with the success of man over beast.

Thus, the film has been recognised as cementing the image of the 'man-eating' shark in the popular imagination. David McGuire, the founder of 'Shark Stewards', an international shark conservation charity, writes:

> the negative portrayal of sharks in "Jaws" has had real-world consequences. […] Coastal ocean goers ignorant about true shark behavior and relative risk are overly fearful of sharks, and this perception can generate overly-reactive public policy in the event of a (rare) attack on a human. (McGuire 2023)

The impact was such that Benchley himself went on to support marine conservation; twenty years after he published the novel, he wrote in the magazine *Popular Science*, 'I couldn't write *Jaws* today. The extensive new knowledge of sharks would make it impossible for me to create, in good conscience, a villain of the magnitude and malignity of the original' (Benchley 1995: 34). Yet, the success of shark horror films after *Jaws* shows an appetite for narratives about killer sharks, even as shark numbers decrease. As Gens suggests about his own film, shark horror is intimately connected to *Jaws* as Ur-text. *Sous La Seine*'s conscious intertextuality with *Jaws* and other shark horror plays with conventions to highlight the political, environmental and social that frame our understanding of the shark, and the consequences of human violence.

The Political Shark

Sous La Seine's invocation of real-world events draws attention to the incorrect assumption that *Jaws* was inspired by true events. In 2001, an article published in *The New York Times* incorrectly stated that there was a connection between Benchley's novel and the 1916 New

Jersey shark attacks (Broad). The relationship was claimed by scientists concerned over misconceptions around shark attacks caused by confusion between fiction and real-world attacks. Despite a later correction, this connection has gained traction in the popular imagination, illustrating how sharks are framed by science, culture, and, significantly, politics. In part, this is due to similarity of the cases, but also their use of sensationalism. The 1916 attacks happened at a time when 'the public was likely eager to read sensational news for its distractive qualities' (Neff 2016: 58-59) due the significant loss of life caused by a polio epidemic and World War One. The appeal of news stories about shark attacks was to increase over the coming decades. Moreover, these attacks were as significant as the film *Jaws* in creating the idea of the man-eating shark. Both the filmic and 1916 attacks appeared random and did not cohere to what Elizabeth Parker typifies as the 'golden rule' of ecohorror: 'human harms nature, and nature, in turn, delivers its own bloody retribution' (Parker 2017: 56). In both, there was no inciting incident, reinforcing a sense of randomness over humanity's engagement with the natural world. Analysing Simon C. Estok's theory of ecophobia, Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils note that often it 'is born out of the failure of humans to control their lives and their world' (2018: 3). Or, as Tidwell and Soles state of ecohorror, 'we fear the natural world and the way it exceeds our control' (2021). In *Jaws* and the 1916 attacks, attempts to reinstate this control, albeit futilely, were through political systems – a trope parodied in *Sous La Seine*.

The political impact of 1916 shark attacks was that of punishment against ineffective governance. Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels argue that communities financially affected by the attacks punished the incumbent Woodrow Wilson in the voting booths (2004: 3-19). They interpret this as an attempt to hold someone responsible for an uncontrolled and uncontrollable series of attacks. In *Jaws*, the need to control the financial impact of the shark attacks motivates Mayor Vaughn's decision to keep the beach open. Public perception is central to his decision seen when he asks for shark-themed graffiti to be cleaned from a billboard advertising Amity Island. Furthermore, politics and the shark seeps from the film into real-world politics. In 2006, before he became Mayor of London and then British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson stated at an awards dinner that his political hero was Mayor Vaughn because 'he kept the beaches open' (Vine 2019), prioritising fun over health and safety. During his campaign to become President of the USA for a second term, Donald Trump invoked the threat of sharks to repudiate the misguided nature of environmentalists. Despite

evidence to the contrary, in June 2024, he stated: ‘By the way, a lot of shark attacks lately’ (Klaas 2024). Thus, the shark is relegated to political symbolism.

This overlap between the shark and politics is foregrounded in *Sous La Seine*. By releasing the film to coincide with Paris Olympics 2024, there is an invitation to consider the increasingly complex dynamics of shark horror, politics and meta/intertextuality. Speaking to the similarities between his film and *Jaws*, Gens states: ‘It’s more or less the same thing, except that for us, the issue is that instead of the beaches of Amity Island on Fourth of July, it’s the Olympics’ (Sanction 2024). He goes on to say that the environmental framing of the film was to highlight that where the shark was the danger in Spielberg’s film, here it is ‘human greed’ and an obsession with ‘making money’ (Sanction 2024). Human greed and political hubris are exaggerated through the movement from diminutive and rural Amity Island to Paris - an urban hub with historic significance and ongoing colonial impact. However, in both cases there is a sense of historic loss. Amity Island’s economic reliance on tourism is born of the slow disintegration of the fishing industry in the area, hearkening to real-life economic downturn in the fishing communities on the coast of Massachusetts. The Paris of *Sous La Seine* is haunted by the legacy of colonial and martial violence, and a sense of decline in power and influence. The 2024 Olympics is depicted as an attempt to reclaim this influence on an international stage, and an acknowledgement of the city’s reliance on tourism. The parallels are shown through the two mayors’ responses to the threat of a shark. In *Jaws*, Mayor Vaughn denies the existence of the shark. In *Sous La Seine*, the Mayor of Paris spins the question of the shark in the river into a positive suggesting it shows the river is clean, highlighting the hypocrisy of the efforts to clean the river for performative rather than meaningful reasons.

Yet, the film does not offer easy solutions to shark representation as the anti-government elements are shown to be equally as misguided in their perception of sharks. Sophia is alerted to the presence of Lilith in the Seine by Mika (Léa Léviant), a young woman working with a group of environmentalists to protect sharks. Mika’s blue hair, the group’s location in what appears to be an abandoned building, and their use of social media is indicative of a new generation of activists, who, as the film shows, are idealistic to the point of naivety. In attempt to prevent Sophia and authorities from capturing Lilith, Mika uses a livestream to encourage people to travel to the catacombs and rescue Lilith leading her back to the sea. Mika enters the water to engage with Lilith’s offspring, petting it like a domesticated animal.

The consequence is a massacre with Mika as the first victim. Whilst Mika's compassion for the sharks, and concern for the future of the natural world, is understandable, her approach is a foil to the Mayor's. Both are more concerned with what they want the shark in the Seine to represent than with the reality of the shark itself. When Mika's message is livestreamed, we see people staring at their phones to watch - once more understanding of the shark is mediated through screens. The demonisation of the shark in horror films has moved towards a sanctification of sharks via social media. Writing about the phenomena of 'shark-whisperers' who share their interactions, often physical, with sharks, Chantal D. Pagel writes that they 'open the gateway for a novel form of wildlife harassment' (2022: 73). Thus, Mika's desire to protect Lilith gives way to her desire for an 'authentic' physical interaction with a real-life shark. Both the Mayor and Mika mediate versions of Lilith that cohere with their political desires, reflecting ongoing real-world issues around shark representation in politics. Yet, the film's representation of Lilith shows her to be a shark that exceeds human systems of control and, fundamentally, our understanding of what it means to be shark.

Becoming Post-Shark

In keeping with the film's anarchic response to political responses to the shark, generic conventions are undermined throughout. This complicates expectations of how sharks are 'meant' to behave in horror narratives, and beyond. Writing about shark horror, Dawn Keetley identifies two distinct strands: the first, drawing on Michael Fuchs' work on naturalism and horror (2015: 44-45), is 'naturalistic horror' which put humans 'firmly in the terrain of the shark, in a world relatively indifferent to humans' (Keetley 2015a). In this genre, there is no clear sense that the humans, even the 'good' ones will survive, and deaths are at random. The second strand is 'humanist horror' in which 'sharks come into our terrain, [and] events (including death) seem governed by human rules' (Keetley 2015b). *Sous La Seine* moves from naturalistic to humanistic but in doing so questions the underpinning anthropomorphic narrative logic.

The film's opening shark attack kills several 'good guys' – Sophia and her team of shark conservationists. Seemingly, then, we are firmly in 'naturalistic horror'. Yet, the presence of the plastic in the ocean disturbs this. The depiction of the ocean as pure nature cannot remain when the boundaries have been entirely breached by pollution. In *Jaws*, the opening attack disturbs the tourist idyll, presenting the shark as instigator. More recent shark horror has included, albeit often brief, moments of reflection on the impact of humans on the natural

world. The first *Sharknado* film (Anthony C. Ferrante, 2013) opens on the boat of a shark fin smuggler, and *The Meg* (Jon Turteltaub, 2018) includes a scene in which the megalodon swims above a seafloor littered with detritus. *Sous La Seine* moves environmentalism from the periphery of recent shark horror: thus the first example of horror in the film is the degradation of nature not the violence of the shark. As Stacey Alaimo writes 'ostensibly benign, human stuff becomes nightmarish as it floats forever in the sea' (2012: 485). The labyrinthine garbage patch is both physically and conceptually overwhelming. Jimmy Packham, Emily Alder and Joan Passey analyse the impact of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch on the relationship between land, sea and the coast. They argue that the two are no longer separated as the detritus of the land has become home to the denizens of the coast (2022: 7). Sophia draws attention to this by stating that the Garbage Patch is 'four to six times the size of France' (*Sous La Seine*), implicating the nation itself. Instead, landscapes close to the sea can be imagined 'as a space where humanity "purges itself", throwing out its own monstrosities to circulate and gather in the ocean's globe-spanning currents, before making their own uncanny returns as they wash up at our feet' (Packham, Alder and Passey 2022: 8). Though concentrating on beaches, rather than rivers, this analysis predicates the movement of the film from ocean to river, and naturalistic to humanistic. Such boundaries have already been thoroughly breached by human (in)action so that geographical and generic boundaries are rendered meaningless.

The movement to 'our terrain', an urban river, suggest a generic movement to 'humanist horror'. Yet, once more, these delineations are eroded as 'human rules' are usurped, and the shark emerges triumphant: the river Seine becomes the place where a 'purging' is experienced in the violence of Lilith. Indeed, the change in genre is seemingly at the behest of Lilith who has apparently hunted Sophia down using her heightened intellect and skills. In *Jaws*, the heightened intellect of the shark exaggerates the fear of the animal Other, reinforcing the need to destroy both the fictional and real-world shark. As Nichole Neff argues 'the shark's most infamous representation is in this horror film that presents Bruce (the shark) as a monstrous, murderous leviathan that is quite literally larger than life' (2016: 53).[2] Though the excessive qualities of Lilith, in size, intelligence, and reproduction, take this 'larger than life' quality even further, the narrative invites another reading. The opening, with its ecocritical framing, and the victory of the shark at the denouement, destabilises the supremacy of human intellect and strength. *Sous La Seine* offers a degree of narrative agency for Lilith.

The differences between *Jaws* and Gens' homage are significant here. An oversized great white shark is the central antagonist in Spielberg's film, and Benchley's novel, whereas in *Sous La Seine*, the species is the shortfin mako.[3] The decision to change species can be ascribed to multiple reasons. Thematically, this change perhaps alludes to *Deep Blue Sea* (Renny Harlin, 1999), in which genetically manipulated mako sharks are the central antagonists. The lead scientist on the project is a woman, Susan McCallister (Saffron Burrows), paralleling the central character in *Sous La Seine*, and in contrast to the overtly masculine cast of *Jaws*. Practically, the mako shark is the fastest shark in the world and has a widespread population making Lilith's journey a little more believable, at least within the context of shark horror. The mako shark, like many shark species, is sexually dimorphic with the female sharks typically growing to be larger than the male sharks. In the film, this is taken to extreme as Lilith becomes (unnaturally) large. Thus, human-based presumptions about the gender and size are destabilised, a theme that recurs throughout the film.

Where Lilith's preternatural size, agency and intellect incites horror, the framing of the film also suggests a necessary challenge to human supremacy. The narratives defiance of generic conventions is replicated in Lilith's usurpation of species identification. Following the attack in the catacombs, Sophia dissects Lilith's offspring, cutting open the young shark's belly. This scene echoes the necropsy of the tiger shark in *Jaws* in which the 'man-eater' is identified through the dissection of the shark. In turn, this reinforces prior depictions of sharks in which the contents of its stomach define it. As Neff identifies: 'Humankind, then, from the shark's first known appearance in the English language, opens up the shark to read it' (2016: 54). Yet, whereas previous shark necropsies have revealed death, in the form of the creatures on which the shark has predated, Sophia discovers life. Lillith and her offspring have been reproducing by parthenogenesis, undermining human sexual reproduction. The sudden emergence of parthenogenesis is also used in Steve Alten's *MEG* series of novels - the basis of the *The Meg* and its sequel. Jennifer Schell sounds a note of caution regarding these novels, arguing that 'they advance scientifically irresponsible misconceptions about the evolution of species' (2022: 65). In showing the adaptability of megalodon, they suggest that humans do not need to change their behaviour in the face of environmental degradation. Moreover, the narratives reinforce 'endorse speciesist attitudes, promote sexist discourse, and sensationalize violent acts' (2022: 65), which Schell correctly identifies in Spielberg's *Jaws*.

Though *Sous La Seine* utilises similar tropes, the parodic quality of the film, and its sustained engagement with ecological concerns counters the reactionary elements of this depiction.

Sophia's response to Lilith's parthenogenesis is to suggest that the sharks can no longer be defined as mako sharks but are a new breed. They have breached the boundaries of species, defying scientific attempts to rationalise and order the natural world. Thus, the disorder of shark attacks in previous shark horror narratives becomes a disorder of shark genetics. Throughout the film, the malleability of shark genetics is foregrounded including in the opening scene when Sophia talks about the potential evolution of shark species. The language shifts between evolution and mutation depending on context and speaker. These words signify an ongoing discussion between the natural and the unnatural. Though evolution is dependent on mutation, the two words evoke differing responses: one suggestive of a 'naturally' occurring process and the other of an 'unnatural' response to the external pressures, in this case human pollution of the seas. This language use, however, is always anthropocentric reflecting human concerns regarding our relationship with nature. Lilith's destabilisation of sexual reproduction and the limitations of habitat, seen when she crosses between salt to fresh water, speak to a being that is no longer 'shark' as humans understand both the word and creature. Writing about posthuman Gothic, Anya Heise-bon der Lippe writes that posthumanist thought 'draws attention to the constructedness of the human as a discursive category and argues that it is no longer tenable' (2019: 225). Here, the speed of evolution acts not as a soothing narrative of an animal's ability to survive but counters what Schell identifies as 'masculinist monster myths that endorse outdates ideas about human exceptionalism' (2022: 77). Like 'human', 'shark' can also be read as a discursive category which allows a specific treatment of the animal itself. Lilith can be defined, therefore, as post-shark further delineating humanity's limited understanding of the natural world, including our complex interrelatedness to and reliance on nature.

Indeed, from the ocean to the river, the film is clear about the intertwined nature of humans, bodies of water and the denizens of the sea. Discussing transcoporeality and the sea, Alaimo defines it as 'a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments' (2012: 476). Reading Lilith as post-shark allows us to recognise how the agencies of environments impact the non-human world. Lilith is not a passive victim of ecological degradation, nor does her presence invite complacency about human culpability. Opening the

film is the quotation: ‘The species that survive aren't the strongest species, nor are they the most intelligent, but rather the ones who best adapt to change’ (Gens 2024). Misattributed to Charles Darwin, this paraphrases his theory of evolution. Where posthumanism centres anthropocentric anxiety regarding the change inflicted on humans by technology and modernity, Gens’ film counters this with post-sharkism. Though the action is focalised through the human perspective, the film ensures that Lilith retains agency as she undermines the expectations of the humans around her. This, in turn, delegitimises anthropocentric narratives about civilisation and progress which underpin the human character’s sense of national and cultural identity. Lilith’s movements create a counter narrative in which historical violence, political and social, are disinterred.

What Lies Beneath

During the film, it is discovered that Lilith and her offspring are hiding within the catacombs, which form part of the wastewater reservoir underneath Paris. The film’s title stands as a reminder of that which is repressed or lies beneath the surface of civilisation. Both original French title and the English translation, uses the word ‘under’ or ‘beneath’. Where the original title, *Sous La Seine*, draws attention to the tension between the surface and depth of the Seine, the English title, *Under Paris*, reminds the viewer that the landmass of Paris has similar depths. Both readings are reflected in the film. In her discussion of Nautical Gothic tropes, Emily Alder draws attention to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ‘oceanic language’ in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980); using this theoretical framework, Alder identifies the innate Gothicness of the ocean regarding the ‘surface and depths, the threshold and breaches of it’ (2017: 7). I wish to extend these ideas to the river Seine. In the early shots of the Seine, it remains surface, depicted in the background. Yet, as Sophia stands by the river, in the background a pectoral fin appears moving, unseen, across the surface of the water hinting at the depths below. When the depths are explored by divers, they are out of their comfort zone, needing specialist equipment to survive. In the first river dive at night, the depths of the Seine are eerily murky. The water is brown with low visibility rendering human’s reliance on sight weakened. Not only does the surface of the water hide its depths but it further hides objects from human sight: the bed of the river is littered with rubbish, including a car, as though a dumping ground.

The breaching of the surface uncovers humanity’s disrespect for the natural world, despite the ongoing insistence that the river is being cleaned in time for the Olympic Triathlon. There is

sense that the river is overlooked. The river then 'lurks in our blindspot', a term I take from Dawn Keetley's introduction to *Plant Horror* (2016), suggestive of how the river affects our visual perception when we are in it, and how it fades into the background when we are not. Where the opening of the film centres on the expansive ocean, the move to the river suggests a more controlled body of water. The presence of the Brigade Fluviale, or the Parisian river police, whose headquarters are literally on the water, shows the river as not just controlled, but policed. Yet, as the arrival of Lilith shows, it remains out of our control. Just as 'plant horror upends usual hierarchies of the seen and the unseen, what is backdrop and what compels our attention' (Keetley 2016: 12), *Sous La Seine* plays with these tensions. Like plants, rivers are tentacular (e)merging, swelling, and forming a network that runs through the heart of many human habitations. Yet, despite their importance, and the threat of flooding, they disappear from our view. The barriers they once created disappear as they are criss-crossed with bridges much like the use of bars in a prison. From these bridges, the view of the river is all surface, reflecting back only our faces, and the traffic that crosses them. The centralising of the rover's depths in the film forces the viewer to acknowledge what is unseen.

The movement to the sunken and watery depths beneath the city itself reinforces this and coheres with other tropes within Parisian fiction. The relationship between the depths of Paris and political turmoil pre-exists the film. Paris's 'catamosphere', writes Andrea Goulet, continues to impact the city today 'evidenced in the popularity of sewer and catacomb tourism' (2015: 39), where the ancient and innately Gothic quality of Paris is sold to tourists. As such scenes in the catacombs of Paris feels *de rigeur*. Furthermore, Goulet notes that the 'underground imaginary' (2015: 41) in French fiction is typified by 'thrusts of violence, jets of Revolutionary ambition, and underground menace to order above' (2015: 69). Though Goulet focuses on crime fiction, this description speaks to the explosive violence that occurs during scenes in *Sous La Seine* that take place in these cavernous spaces. In the first, when Mika attempts to rescue Lilith, the camera hovers above the water so that the viewer sees the shark bursting from below, Mika caught in her jaws. In the later scene in the catacombs, literal explosions are used to quell Lilith. Though the humans see themselves as revolutionaries fighting either for nature or their own survival, it is Lilith who is truly revolutionary as she usurps the humans' systems of control throughout.

These systems of control include the wastewater reservoirs which speak to the effort required to prevent flooding and manage the river – something made overt when Paris floods at the end of the film. Writing about plumbing in Stephen King's *It* (1986), Marisol Cortez writes that flooding 'is a reminder of the impossibility of an "awayness" that strips both waste and nature of agency' and that the hidden nature of 'pipes, grids, and networks' that process water systems exist 'beyond accountability to the requirements of environmental health and the demands of environmental justice' (2021). Though less scatological than King's novel, Gens' film draws attention to that which is hidden beneath the surface of the city as well as the Seine. The language of horror and gothic invite a reading in which below the city and the river resides the repressed: both literal, such as physical detritus and human waste, and symbolic, both colonial violence and the destruction of the environment. And, to which Lilith and her children, markers of aberrant nature are added.

Against the backdrop of nationalistic celebration evoked by the Olympics, colonial violence haunts the narrative. Thematically, this builds on Gens' previous work. His horror film *Frontière(s)* (2007) drew attention to the rising far-right nationalism seen in the early 2000s in France. The film has been identified as part of 'Sarkozy horror', to use Neil Young's term, and engages 'with the political rhetoric of the time, implicitly and explicitly exploring the position of France as a 'host' nation, having both an established immigrant community and an incoming flow of *sans-papiers* [undocumented migrants]' (Bryan 2021: 224). One of the earliest Parisian victims in *Sous La Seine* is a black, unhoused man. Both his societal and ethnic identity make him disposable within the stratified, post-colonial society of Paris. His death in the Seine, draws focus to the sense that the Seine washes away human atrocities, particularly those in which vulnerable groups are attacked or violated. Like many rivers in industrialised cities, it has been a site of suicides, murders and colonial violence. More recently, the Seine was the site of 'the bloodiest act of state repression of protesters in the modern history of Western Europe' (House and MacMaster 2006: 1), when pro-independence Algerian protestors were massacred by the Parisian police on 17 October 1961. Not only has the river itself been backgrounded, but the violence it hides has also been overlooked. Lilith's presence foregrounds the hidden violence of the Seine and the complicity of state apparatus in this violence.

Furthermore, the river is haunted by environmental shame. The Mayor's insistence on the cleanliness of the Seine, both filmically and metatextually, speak to awareness of the

ecological impact of industrialisation in securing the wealth of Paris – an industrialisation that was itself fuelled by colonialism. This is reinforced by the statement from the real Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, at the time of the 2024 Olympics regarding her decision to swim in the Seine to prove its cleanliness. She is quoted in *The Guardian* as saying: 'making the Seine swimmable would also help the city adapt to the climate crisis and mitigate the pollution of the ocean into which the river flows' (Willshere 2024). The attention to the interconnectedness of the river with the ocean and the culpability of humanity in climate change returns to the opening of the film in which we see the outcome of human waste flowing into the sea, and the evidence of oceanic transcoporeality. It is this history of violence to people and the environment, under the guise of economic security, that the attempts to clean the Seine are exorcising. Yet, this ignores the presence of aquatic creatures who can swim against the current, reversing this flow. The post-shark Lilith makes an uncanny return into France's capital city, the cultural and imperial centre of the country. In doing so, she enacts not only the revenge of nature against a post-industrialised society, but also violent retribution against a significant European colonial power.

The Ending We Deserve

The synopsis of the film's plot on *Wikipedia* concludes: 'As the end credits suggest, Lilith and her offspring have proliferated in the major river cities of the world […], and seem to have, as Sophia feared, colonised the entire world' ('Under Paris' 2025). The use of the word 'colonised' to describe the dénouement of the film affirms that (post)colonialism is text rather than subtext. The end titles scroll over maps of major cities, and finally the world, on which red lines show the invasion of Lilith's offspring. Countering the former 'backgrounding' of the rivers, these images make clear how entwined water systems are in urban spaces, and the vulnerability of these spaces to invasion. Writing about nature, capitalism and the sublime in relation to sharks, Luke White notes that the shark 'has served as a displaced figure of the economic relations of capitalist modernity' (2015). In *Sous La Seine*, Lilith is framed as both victim and consequence of humanity's destruction of the seas, utilising our blindness towards the water ways on which we rely. White notes that the relationship between economics and the environment 'is often imagined in terms of older maps of Empire' (2015). The maps underlaying the end credits reference older, colonial maps. However, what they now show is reverse colonisation. Here, I build on Stephen Arata's reading of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as a novel that 'enacts the period's most important and pervasive narrative of decline, a narrative of reverse colonization' (1990: 623). The Paris of the film is haunted by its

colonial past and present, seen symbolically through the death-filled catacombs under the city, and literally through the unexploded WW2 ordinances.

Yet, the destruction of the ancient city of Paris is due to its own hubris rather than the fault of the shark. The decision to hold the triathlon in the Seine is repeatedly depicted as nonsensical and the cleaning of the river, as depicted in the film, seems to be more about publicity than a sense of the inherent worth of this space. The death of the swimmers and onlookers becomes a tragic inevitability consequence of the Mayor's arrogance as much as Lilith's wrath. The massacre of the swimmers, and its bloody excess, evokes similar scenes from films such as *Piranha* (Joe Dante, 1978), reinforcing this nonsensical decision. Moreover, the flooding of Paris is caused by both historic and current reliance on militaristic responses. The unexploded ordinances, leftover from WW2, are physical reminders of the shortsightedness of such solutions and the impact of human conflict on the natural world. Both are made more explicit in the decision to respond to Lilith's threat with further armament. Despite previously considering conservationist approaches, it is decided to bomb the catacombs where Lilith and her children are hiding. Using man-made armaments to destroy a natural entity fits more broadly both within ecohorror narratives and specifically shark horror texts.

In *Jaws*, the shark is killed through an explosion: the battle between man and beast ending in the absolute annihilation of the threat. Spielberg's ending sets the template for the required use of excessive force. More recently, this approach has been pastiched – if not parodied, in films like *Sharknado* (2013). Here, the solution to the titular shark-filled tornados is to bomb them leading to a successful outcome. This reflects a narrative paradigm in American culture that aggrandises the use of military power towards the environment. Johan Höglund theorises the use of the 'military solution' in American Imperial Gothic narratives as 'the exorcism of the gothic Other through extensive violence' (Höglund 2014: 168). This representation of the military solution can be seen in both *Jaws* and then to an exaggerated extent in *Sharknado*, as well as other shark horror narratives. The shark stands as the gothic Other: in Gens' film, Lilith embodies this as symbol of environmental degradation, reverse colonisation and post-shark threat to human hierarchies. As Höglund suggests the use of military force is depicted as 'regenerative, practical, clinical and successful' (2014: 168) in these texts as the threat of the shark is destroyed and the 'good' guys survive to carry on their way of life. This depiction is satirised in *Sous La Seine*. Where *Sharknado* leans into the idea of needing 'a bigger bomb' and invokes the prowess (and perceived success) of American militarisation, *Sous La Seine*

shows its ineffectiveness. In an interview, Gens describes his intention 'that the last act of the film would be something anti-Hollywood. So we ended up using Hollywood-style spectacular to make a nihilistic ending' (Sanction 2025). The bombs kill central human characters rather than stopping Lilith and her response is one of immediate revenge on the symbol of Parisian pride and power: the Olympic triathlon taking place in a Seine, now cleared for both human and shark use.

Following the attack on the triathletes, Lilith is chased both on water and land by armed police who shoot at her. The camera follows Lilith underwater as her preternatural speed allows her to dodge them effectively. Just as the previous attempts at bombing Lilith in the catacombs led only to human death, shooting into the river simply causes the submerged ordinances to blow up causing the river to flood. The underwater shots show the ineffectiveness of underwater shots. The bullets appear to slow down as they switch between air and water further enhancing the speed of the shark. The pre-existing advantage that mako sharks have is exaggerated thus the human's attempts to control Lilith are futile. At one point, a police man runs from one side of a bridge to another trying to chase Lilith. This movement is at odds with how humans typically move on bridges – from one bank to another, moving between dry land. Building on my previous discussion on the control of rivers by bridges, the bridges may act as protection for the humans but also prevent them from engaging with the river. Fundamentally, the bridges are proven to be fallible and ineffective symbols of humanity's control over natural forces. As the camera pans out from the exploding bombs, we see the bridges being destroyed.

Reinforcing the excessive nature of the film itself, the layering of meaning and symbolism at the end of the film ties together its internal nihilism. Where previously the death of the monstrous animal is, at least on the surface, cause for celebration, this certainty about the right of mankind to control the natural world has been eroding since the release of *Jaws*. Writing about the ecocritical element of ecohorror, Fuchs proposes that increasingly 'defeating the animal monster might appear to be a victory, but it can only be a momentary victory' (2022: 129). Though the immediate threat to human life is removed, the longer-term environmental issue remains. Over the past twenty years, the discrete ending of Spielberg's shark horror has slowly eroded. Films such as *Crawl* (2019), *Bait* (2012) and even the much-derided *Sharknado* use natural disasters as the inciting incident in dangerous animals encroaching on urban and human spaces. Though these films may not explore the reasons

behind the worsening weather systems, the cultural awareness of anthropogenic climate change leaves space for the interpretation that humans are the cause. The reprieve caused by the dead animal is only short lived.

In contrast, *Sous La Seine* delineates from this narrative structure. The environmental aspects are foregrounded explicitly in the opening scenes. Moreover, there is no reprieve: the monstrous animal is not killed. Nor is it simply one animal. Though shark horror can centre around multiple sharks, aspects of shark reproduction are rarely foregrounded as in Gens' film. Sharks, even allowing for *Sharknado*, are not swarming or pack animals. The excess of Lilith's offspring in number, hunger and reproduction, recalls Quint's (Robert Shaw) speech about the USS *Indianapolis*. His description of being surrounded by 'maybe a thousand' (*Jaws*, 1975) sharks is echoed in image of Sophia and Adil sheltering on the roof of a building surrounded by flood water and sharks. This final image of the two central characters – our 'good' guys – seems to conform to Keetley's analysis of the 'humanistic horror': the female and male characters, replete with romantic potential, survive the deluge opening the possibility of procreation and the future of mankind. If I am using biblical language here, it is to build on the implication evoked through the name 'Lilith', and the apocalyptic flooding that ends the film which is reminiscent of the flood sent by God in the Old Testament. The two humans can be read as a post-apocalyptic Adam and Eve: the only survivors who seem to be tasked with repopulating humanity and reinstating human control. Yet, this heteronormative and anthropocentric image is undermined by the injured Adil whose survival (and virility) seem uncertain, and Lilith's bypassing of sexually dimorphic reproduction. This is an anti-Garden of Eden in which the promise of the post-human is replaced with the success of the post-shark. Given both the wider context of the film and the ecohorror of the Anthropocene, this final image of the destruction of Western capitalism and culture, is perhaps the ending we deserve.

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[2] Regarding *Jaws* (the film), the name Bruce refers to the mechanical shark used during the film. The great white shark in both the novel and film remains nameless.
[3] The term 'mako shark' is also used to refer to the longfin mako shark. However, the longfin mako shark is not as well-known as the shortfin mako shark. For the purposes of this article, I will use mako shark to refer specifically to the shortfin mako shark that features in the film.