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Feral Ecologies and the Toxic Sublime: Intermedial Narratives of Contamination in *Fever Dream*

Abstract: Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream* (*Distancia de rescate*, 2014, trans. 2017) presents a harrowing vision of ecological crisis through a deeply interior, disorienting, and sensorially immersive narrative. Avoiding the grand spectacle of climate catastrophe or the distanced realism of traditional environmental fiction, Schweblin instead offers a claustrophobic, affect-laden portrayal of slow violence, contamination, and maternal anxiety. Through its fragmented structure, second-person address, and atmosphere of dread, the novel transforms ecological emergency into a psychic and corporeal event, an embodied aesthetic experience that gestures toward intermediality. Drawing on the tonal registers of horror cinema, speculative fiction, sound art, and oral storytelling, *Fever Dream* unfolds as a toxic dreamscape where the boundaries between self and environment, human and nonhuman, become porous and unstable.

This paper positions *Fever Dream* as a work of intermedial ecological fiction, with its 2021 Netflix adaptation by Claudia Llosa functioning not merely as a narrative transposition but as an intermedial intensification of the novel's eco-horror poetics. As such, the adaptation reveals what the novel can only suggest: the aesthetic entanglement of horror and ecology, dread and beauty. Both the novel and the film foreground feral ecologies, landscapes and bodies destabilized by agrochemical exposure, rendered ungovernable and mutagenic. These are not distant disasters, but intimate emergencies experienced through children, mothers, animals, and contaminated water. The Argentine countryside in *Fever Dream* is not a passive setting but an agent of mutation, producing hybrid life forms and altered perceptions. This paper argues that *Fever Dream*, in both its literary and cinematic expressions, radically reimagines environmental crisis as an aesthetic and affective entanglement. It refuses the redemptive arcs and explanatory frameworks typical of climate fiction and instead inhabits the terrain of spectral uncertainty, perceptual breakdown, and toxic in-

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timacy. Environmental emergencies here are not narrated through spectacle but whispered in hallucinated fragments, buried in soil and breath, seeping slowly into the body and the screen alike.

Keywords: Environmental toxicity, Ecological trauma, Slow violence, Contamination, Narrative fragmentation, Ecological grief.

Introduction

Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream* (2017) is a tale of ecological contamination and maternal anxiety that blurs the boundaries between reality and nightmare. Set in rural Argentina, the story unfolds as a feverish dialogue between a dying young mother, Amanda, and a mysterious child, David, as they attempt to retrace the steps leading to a poisoning. Critics have described the book as a "chilling eco-horror" (Scholes 2017) and likened it to "a disaster movie about toxic agribusiness," highlighting its fusion of environmental catastrophe with horror aesthetics (*The Economist* 2017). Schweblin channels real ecological crises such as industrial agrochemical pollution, poisoned water, deformed animals and children, through the intimate, suspenseful form of a psychological thriller. The result is a toxic dreamscape in which slow environmental violence becomes an ever-present supernatural dread. Schweblin's text engages contemporary debates on environmental crisis by literalizing the permeability of bodies and landscapes, dramatizing the "slow violence" of pollution (Nixon 2011), and evoking the toxic sublime.

In 2021, Peruvian director Claudia Llosa adapted this tale into a Netflix film with the same title, bringing its unsettling story of contamination and motherhood to the screen. On the surface, the film closely tracks the novel's narrative of a young mother, Amanda, who arrives with her daughter to an idyllic rural community only to encounter a creeping ecological menace that imperils children. Beneath this storyline, however, lies a rich terrain of intermedial exchange between literature and cinema. The adaptation is not a simple retelling, but an exploration of how different media – the printed page and the audiovisual screen – can together amplify the novel's ecological themes and affect.

Approaching *Fever Dream* through the lens of intermediality allows us to see the adaptation as a medial dialogue rather than a one-way translation. Literary and film theories of intermediality (Rajewsky 2005, Elleström 2020) provide a framework for understanding how the novel and film relate. In this case, Llosa's film is a medial transposition of Schweblin's text, obligated to undergo an 'intermedial transformation process' to rearticulate the story in cinematic terms. Yet the adaptation does more than merely carry over the plot; it actively engages with the novel's form and themes, illuminating aspects that the literary medium could only suggest. As Lars Elleström has observed, storytelling is inherently intermedial – every narrative can be refigured across different "modalities" of expression (visual, auditory,

textual) to reveal new dimensions of meaning. Llosa's adaptation seizes on the intermedial potential of *Fever Dream*'s narrative, particularly its vivid sensory imagery and disorienting structure, to create a cinematic experience that both justifies and intensifies the novel's ecological horror.

Crucially, both versions of *Fever Dream* are works of the environmental imagination. They grapple with ecological crisis through aesthetics, dramatizing issues of contamination. The novel's poisoned children and "monstrosities" evoke feral ecologies, blurring lines between human, animal, and toxic matter in ways that aligns with Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality. This framework posits that bodies are fundamentally interwoven with their material surroundings, and that no organism exists in isolation from the substances and forces that shape and traverse it (115). Meanwhile, the film's atmospheric cinematography invites us to behold a landscape that is both beautiful and deadly, what media scholar Jennifer Peeples calls the toxic sublime, "the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place... while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe" (375).

Before examining *Fever Dream*, it is useful to clarify what we mean by an intermedial approach. For much of the 20th century, adaptation studies fixated on fidelity, judging film adaptations by how closely they adhered to literary source material. This model treated the source as a sacred original against which the adaptation's success was measured. Contemporary theorists have critiqued this 'trap of fidelity', arguing that such one-way thinking ignores the dynamic interplay between media forms. As Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik observe, scholars today increasingly reject "medium essentialism," the notion that each medium has unique, insular traits, in favor of approaches that foreground intermedial relations. Kamilla Elliott's work epitomizes this shift: she dismantles the old assumption that novels are purely verbal and films purely visual, showing instead that novels can be visual and films verbal. Rather than treat adaptations as secondary "copies" of an artwork, Elliott calls for reciprocal influence between source and adaptation. She envisions "a reciprocally transformative model of adaptation, in which the film... metamorphoses the novel and is, in turn, metamorphosed by it" (229). In other words, adaptation is not a one-way transfer of content, but a dialogic process wherein each medium reconfigures and illuminates the other. Embracing this dialogic, intermedial perspective frees adaptation studies from the old source-centered hierarchy and opens up analysis to questions of form, sensation, and medium-specific expression. The emphasis is no longer on faithful reproduction of narrative content, but on how adaptations creatively remediate stories across art forms – engaging different senses, materialities, and audiences in the process.

Irina Rajewsky's influential typology explicitly defines cross-media adaptation as "intermediality in the narrow sense of medial transposition," meaning a process "with the way in which a media product comes into being" through "transformation of a given

media product...into another medium” (51). In her framework, the ‘original’ text or film becomes the ‘source’ of a newly formed media product, and the new version’s creation “is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process” (51). In this view, adaptation is inherently processual and generative: it is the ‘re-making’ of a story by translating it into a new set of material and formal affordances. This process is not about cloning content but about reconstituting it in another medium’s language – a concept akin to intersemiotic translation or what Lars Elleström calls media transformation. Elleström’s model helps clarify what is transformed in adaptation. He argues that any medium can be analyzed through several fundamental modalities, and that adapting a work means altering these modal combinations across media. In *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-Between*, Pethő emphasizes that intermedial analysis focuses on relationships rather than isolated structures. She argues that we must attend to “something that ‘happens’ in-between media rather than simply exists within a given signification” (1). In other words, meaning in film often emerges through the interaction of media forms – through references and sensory echoes of other arts within the film. Pethő notes how moving pictures can absorb forms of all other media, initiating “fusions and ‘dialogues’ between the distinct arts” within a film’s texture (1). For example, a film might integrate photography, painting, or literary voice-over, layering these media to create rich associational meaning. Such intermedial figurative techniques are often key to adaptations that seek to capture the spirit or atmosphere of their source material beyond mere plot. Significantly, Pethő sees intermediality as “the way in which the poetics of cinema and specific stylistic effects can be described” (2). This aligns with the idea that adaptation is not a static transfer but an ongoing aesthetic negotiation. The poetics of adaptation thus involve creative strategies that go beyond fidelity – for instance, using visual composition or sound to invoke the tone of a novel, or employing editing rhythms to mimic an author’s prose style. By attending to these in-between elements – the ghostly imprint of one medium inside another – scholars can better understand how adaptations evoke the sensorial and affective qualities of their sources. This approach is especially useful for narratives steeped in mood, atmosphere, and multi-sensory cues, as it accounts for the qualitative transformations that occur when stories leap between media.

Intermedial Aesthetics and Toxic Form

While intermediality is often approached through a comparative lens, where the focus lies primarily on how media-related qualities operate across contexts, it is important to clarify that intermediality does not necessarily require the comparison of multiple media objects; it can, in fact, be an intrinsic quality of a single work. That said, examining different media in relation to one another often becomes essential when attempting to understand

what makes a specific medium distinct. Consequently, an intermedial methodology might involve analyzing a particular narrative or aesthetic feature by observing how it manifests across diverse media forms, thereby deepening our understanding of its medium-specific expressions. This perspective shifts focus from ‘what’ is adapted to ‘how’: how do the affordances of cinema differ from those of literature, and how does the adaptation negotiate those differences to convey meaning?

In *Fever Dream*, this negotiation is striking because Schweblin’s novel is already highly cinematic in certain respects, yet deeply literary in others. The novel’s structure is boldly experimental: it is essentially a scripted dialogue between two voices – Amanda and the child David – with no extradiegetic narration outside their spoken words. As one reviewer noted, “‘Fever Dream’ is structured like a play, one that would require two actors and very little movement. The entire novel is an unbroken dialogue extruding from a void” (Tolentino 2017). Reading the book feels like listening to an eerie audio drama or eavesdropping on an urgent whispered conversation. Schweblin denotes speakers with typographic cues where David’s words appear in italics, but otherwise the reader must infer who is speaking and visualize the scenes being recounted. In effect, the literary text itself behaves intermedially: it is a written text that imitates oral/aural storytelling and relies on the reader’s mind to stage scenes as if in a theater or film. The novel’s form thus contains latent cinematic and theatrical potential, inviting adaptation.

At the same time, the novel capitalizes on uniquely literary devices: an intimate first-person voice (Amanda’s) channeled through dialogue, and a careful withholding of concrete detail to maintain ambiguity and suspense. The narrative shifts between present and past without formal chapter breaks, and Amanda’s disoriented memories bleed into the current conversation with David. This creates what we might call a hallucinated temporality, where time and space are collapsed in a feverish stream. On the page, this effect is achieved through syntax and juxtaposition: Schweblin assumes two simultaneous tracks of dialogue – one track in the present (dying Amanda and David in conversation) and another in the past (Amanda’s recollections of her interactions with David’s mother, Carla). These two threads intertwine “while narrowing them toward a single question: the mysterious horror of the worms” (Tolentino). The reader must piece together chronology and causality from fragments, much as one might assemble meaning from a series of jump cuts and flashbacks in a film.

Crucially, the dialogue-driven form also heightens the sense of claustrophobia and urgency, implicating the reader as an eavesdropper on a whispered emergency. From the very first lines, *Fever Dream* establishes its peculiar, pressure-cooker mode of storytelling. David’s voice urgently instructs Amanda: “It’s the worms. You have to be patient and wait. And while we wait, we have to find the exact moment when the worms come into being.” When Amanda asks why, David replies: “Because it’s important, it’s very important for us all”

(Schweblin 2). This unsettling opening functions like a horror film's cold open, plunging us into crisis without context. Formally, it also aligns the novel with oral storytelling or even a Socratic dialogue where David acts as a relentless interrogator, pushing Amanda (and the reader) to uncover a buried truth. The absence of a traditional omniscient narrator means that all information is filtered through frightened, unreliable voices. This narrative minimalism resonates with what ecocritic Timothy Morton calls a hyperobject, a massively distributed phenomenon (like climate change or chemical pollution) that is too vast and diffused to perceive directly. The poison in *Fever Dream* is a kind of hyperobject: everywhere and nowhere, invisible and almost intangible, yet lethal. The novel's form, by denying us a clear, external view of events, formally enacts the elusiveness of the toxic threat. Just as the characters cannot directly see the poison seeping in their environment, they notice only its symptoms and after-effects, the reader is denied an authoritative perspective and instead must navigate a labyrinth of recollections and elliptical dialogue.

Furthermore, *Fever Dream*'s style creates a palpable sense of embodied anxiety, leveraging sensory detail sparingly but potently. The text often focalizes through Amanda's weakening consciousness: vivid impressions, such as the sting of sun on skin, the strange smell of a spilled liquid, the sight of a child's muddy hands, emerge amid hazier passages, much as in cinema a sharp close-up might interrupt a blurry sequence. This oscillation between clarity and obscurity can be seen as another intermedial element, blending literary and cinematic techniques to convey toxic experience. The novel's language itself carries a contaminating effect: recurring motifs like "worms," "poison," and the ever-calculating "rescue distance" echo throughout the dialogue, infecting every topic the characters touch upon. A tranquil scene of two mothers chatting about childcare subtly becomes laden with unease about the landscape. Thus, even the banal aspects of form – small talk, fragmented memories – are toxified. Every narrative element seems tainted by the underlying crisis, demonstrating what we might call toxic narratology: the story about poison is itself delivered in a poisoned chalice of narration, seeping menace at every turn.

The novel's intermedial aesthetics therefore serve as a formal analog for the toxic crisis it depicts; a story about contamination that is itself structurally and stylistically contaminated, mirroring the poison coursing through Amanda's body and the atmosphere of contamination that permeates the story. Schweblin engineers a toxic form in which narrative structure and style convey the destabilization of reality under environmental crisis. This leads to the collapse of linear time and secure space in the novel's narration. Past and present bleed together, creating a dreamlike (or nightmarish) mosaic of scenes. The novel constantly leaks between memory and immediacy, between text and the sensations of speech or vision. This produces a state of in-between, much like being half-awake and half-dreaming. In one sense, Schweblin achieves an intermedial effect: the prose adopts the modalities of drama and cinema, contaminating one narrative form with another. In another sense, she

also mixes literary modes: environmental realism bleeds into metaphysical allegory and into fevered interior monologue, defying any single genre container. This modal hybridity can be seen as a kind of artistic cross-contamination, aligning form with content. Just as chemicals and spirits cross boundaries in the story, so do storytelling modes cross their usual borders. Toxicity shapes form here: just as a toxin disrupts biological order, the story's structure disrupts conventional narrative order. The reader, like Amanda, pieces together clues of an environmental catastrophe that is never fully seen but everywhere felt.

Crucially, these transgressions are not just stylistic – they deepen the novel's central theme of toxic seepage. By making the text itself leak between different states (speech and text, life and dream, one genre and another), Schweblin invites us to feel the collapse of safe barriers. There is no sterile zone untouched by the “poison” – not even the narrative form. Even as the content gestures toward Alaimo's trans-corporeality, the novel's toxic style also performs a kind of modal leakage, blurring the lines between distinct literary forms and collapsing conventional narrative boundaries. Yet one need not invoke theory to grasp its impact: *Fever Dream* transmits contamination viscerally. As readers, we don't simply witness the unravelling, we feel it. The novel bypasses our usual narrative defenses, seeping into our consciousness with a creeping sense of dread and disorientation. By doing so, Schweblin taps into the Gothic tradition and revamps it for an era of pesticides and pollution, producing what we might call eco-Gothic or eco-horror, a subgenre of horror that “reflects real anxieties about the natural world and its existence outside of human control” (Tidwell 114).

This deliberate entanglement of content and form aligns *Fever Dream* with broader artistic approaches that confront ecological disaster. In ecocritical literature, authors often experiment with form to represent phenomena like climate change or pollution that are temporally and spatially diffuse. Schweblin's approach resonates with what Nixon describes as the challenge of representing “slow violence,” because it is “dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). Artists must find ways to represent the unseen, to make the slow emergency perceptible. Schweblin's approach was to make the novel itself like a toxic substance – spreading uncertainty and fear in the reader's mind until a cumulative picture emerges. In *Fever Dream*, the poisoning of the community is precisely such a violence: the spread of agro-toxins in water and soil happens silently, insidiously, and by the time its effects (sick children, dead animals) are evident, the damage is extensive and largely irreversible. The novel and film each use their medium's strengths to represent this slow violence – particularly through their handling of time and revelation in the narrative.

In the novel, the story unfolds as a kind of retrospective mystery. The reader, therefore, pieces together clues gradually: odd remarks by Carla, the tale of David's illness years ago, the mention of dead horses by a stream, the inexplicable presence of “worms” inside one's body. The full picture, that a pesticide used at a local farm contaminated the water,

poisoning David and later Nina and Amanda, only comes into focus near the end, and even then, Schweblin leaves some gaps for the reader to infer. This delayed decoding mimics the temporal disjunction of slow violence, where cause and effect are separated by time, and understanding comes too late. The novel poses some thought-provoking questions about toxic exposure and how we perceive reality under such conditions. One might not realize in the moment that an exposure has occurred; the sickness emerges later, untraceable to a single moment. In effect, the novel's form forces the reader to experience slow revelation akin to slow violence: we are kept in suspense, feeling an undefined threat build, much as the villagers had been living their lives unaware of the accumulating toxins until children began to suffer en masse. Cinematically, Llosa visualizes slow violence by playing with pacing and editing. The film's rhythm is unhurried and looping; scenes often start without clear temporal markers and end without resolution, creating a feeling of *in media res* throughout.

In both novel and film, the climax hinges on the recognition of slow violence. Literature can retain ambiguity to the end (and Schweblin does – the ending is somewhat abstract, with David's voice trailing off as Amanda fades). Film tends to prefer a bit more closure or at least concrete imagery, so Llosa shows Nina being carried away by medics, and a mourning, guilt-ridden Carla in the aftermath. Nevertheless, the film resists tying everything up neatly; the final shots are reportedly dreamlike and unsettling, leaving us with an emotional impression rather than a neat resolution. This maintains fidelity to the novel's spirit – the slow violence has done its damage, and what lingers is a sense of irreversible loss and a haunting question of how many more victims lie ahead.

Eco-Cinema and Environmental Aesthetics: From Page to Screen

Rather than radically restructuring the story into a conventional linear narrative, Claudia Llosa's film adaptation seizes upon the intermedial qualities of the novel, preserves the dreamlike, fragmented form, translating it into cinematic terms. The movie opens in medias res, with Amanda already in a debilitated state, and uses voice-over extensively: we hear Amanda and David's voices guiding us through events, much like the dialogue in the novel directs the reader. This voice-over technique is a direct nod to the novel's narrative mode – an example of what Rajewsky would call the adaptation's references back to its source. Their disembodied voices create an auditory frame that mirrors the experience of reading the book's disembodied dialogue. In one chilling scene, for instance, the screen shows Amanda wandering in a dark field, while David's soft, commanding voice asks questions in voice-over, echoing the novel's interrogative structure. By employing voice-over in this way, Llosa honours the formal logic of the novel while mobilizing a distinctly cinematic device to access interior states, a method familiar from psychological thrillers and film noir. As a

result, the film becomes “haunted” by its literary predecessor; the novel’s textual voice is not replaced but rather re-materialized through sound. This speaks directly to Adrian Ivakhiv’s assertion that “a film is what a film does” (48), that is, its meaning and affective power emerge through its formal enactments. Llosa’s *Fever Dream* does not just tell the same story as the novel; it performs it, embodying the novel’s haunted, fragmented consciousness through its own medial affordances.

Intermedial theory helps elucidate why these choices are significant. While Elleström reminds us that every medium has a different configuration of sensory and semiotic modalities, literature operates through written language that the reader internalizes visually and cognitively; it can suggest sounds and images but only indirectly. Film, by contrast, operates with actual visual and auditory channels presented to the viewer in real time. In adapting *Fever Dream*, Llosa had to remediate the story – to re-encode it from a sequence of words to a sequence of audiovisual stimuli. According to Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s classic notion of remediation, new media forms often refashion older media, seeking to reproduce their content while asserting their own immediacy. Here the film explicitly refashions the novel’s dialogue-driven content but enhances its immediacy through sensory experience: the audience doesn’t *imagine* Amanda’s ragged breathing or the ominous noises of the night, we *hear* them; we don’t have to visualize the lush yet treacherous landscape, we *see* it.

Yet, the relationship between the novel and film is not one of simple equivalence. By shifting to a new medium, certain elements of the story are inevitably transformed or newly emphasized. The adaptation process can be seen as a form of dialogue or exchange between literature and film, where each medium’s “voice” contributes to the overall narrative ecology. As Elleström has provocatively stated, “everything is intermedial,” meaning that no medium exists in isolation from others. The film converses with the novel not only by borrowing its plot and words, but by responding to its implicit challenges: How can one depict an “unseen” poison on film? How can the subjective, internal experience of reading a confused narrator be conveyed to a viewing audience? Conversely, the novel almost seems to anticipate a cinematic incarnation by structuring itself in scenes and dialogue. This reciprocity exemplifies the rich possibilities at the intersection of literature and cinema. In the case of *Fever Dream*, the adaptation leverages intermediality to heighten the ecological and emotional impact of the story. As viewers, we are not just told about pesticide drums and dying horses; we encounter them, gaze upon them, perhaps feel implicated by them. As Ballard and Linden observe, “art and its accompanying creative modes of writing should be taken seriously as major commentators, indicators, and active participants in the crafting of future understandings of the Anthropocene” (142).

One of the most profound shifts that occurs when *Fever Dream* moves from novel to film is in the space of environmental representation. The text approaches this theme through

suggestion and metaphor; for much of the novel, the word “pesticide” is never mentioned outright, even as we gradually discern that agrochemicals are the invisible antagonist. Instead, the novel builds an atmosphere of dread through the perceptions and dialogue of its characters: we hear villagers speak of inexplicable illnesses, see Carla’s anxiety about “something in the water,” and witness Amanda’s mounting paranoia about her daughter’s safety. The environment in the novel is both setting and character – a “nightmarish environment” charged with menace (Pérez 148). But because of the narrative’s tight focus on dialogue, descriptions of the physical world are sparse and strategically placed. When Amanda does offer an image, a tranquil vacation house, a green field, a pond, the novel often subverts it. For example, at one point Amanda recalls a beautiful lake where she and Carla took their children to play; only later do we (and Amanda) realize that lake water was likely contaminated and is the source of the “worms”. The literature thus relies on the reader’s slow dawning comprehension to turn an innocent natural image into a site of horror.

Cinema, by contrast, has the power to make the environment immediately present and viscerally felt. Eco-cinema studies emphasizes that films are not just entertainment set in nature, but active agents in shaping our understanding of human–nonhuman relationships. Ecocinema has expanded to include films that may not overtly announce ecological themes yet “offer us needed perspectives on the relations between the human and nonhuman” (Willoquet-Maricondi 3). Jennifer Fay further complicates this by asserting that cinema tends to cultivate an atmosphere of ecological estrangement, fostering a vision of the future marked by degradation or inhospitality. Film, by its very nature, often renders the familiar world uncanny; it alienates the ordinary, exposing it as precarious or unstable. *Fever Dream* exemplifies this sensibility: though it plays as a psychological thriller, its underpinning message about pesticide contamination grounds it firmly in environmental critique. What Llosa’s adaptation does is heighten the environmental aesthetics – the look, sound, and feel of nature under threat – thereby foregrounding the ecological dimension that the novel keeps somewhat oblique. As one critic observed, “There’s an oppressive malevolence to [Llosa’s] adaptation...that seeps through *Fever Dream* like a slow-acting poison” (Ide 2021). The film’s atmosphere is its star: the rural landscape is depicted as at once gorgeous and haunted, brimming with what the Guardian review described as “fretful animal noises” and filmed by a “restive, uneasy camera” (Ide).

This crafted atmosphere aligns with what environmental aestheticians call the toxic sublime. The concept of the toxic sublime captures the conflicting feelings evoked by environments that are both beautiful and poisoned – scenes that inspire awe with their scale or beauty and simultaneous horror or disgust when one recognizes their toxicity. The film’s cinematography by Oscar Faura often bathes the countryside in golden light, capturing lush fields, tree-lined roads, and shimmering water. Yet, threaded through these picturesque images are subtle visual cues of contamination: a crop-dusting plane in the distance, a horse

carcass by a stream, wilted vegetation around a pond. The film adaptation literalizes this by eventually revealing the source of horror: containers of pesticide and the act of spraying crops (shown in a brief but jarring sequence). The truth exhumed from this tainted earth is made visually concrete, even if the film holds back this revelation for a climactic moment.

In comparison, Schwebelin's novel deals in what we might term environmental uncanny. The land and water are uncanny not because they look overtly threatening, but because characters sense something profoundly wrong beneath the surface. Carla's dialogue is laced with grief and guilt – she speaks of neighbors' children born with deformities, of her own son David becoming a “monster” after his poisoning, and a general sense of a curse on the village. Amanda, coming from the city, initially sees only the picturesque side of country life, but she too develops a sense of doom. One striking motif in the novel is Amanda's constant calculation of the “rescue distance” – the physical distance at which she must keep her daughter to be able to save her quickly in an emergency. This concept, from which the Spanish title derives, symbolizes her maternal anxiety in an environment that she subconsciously knows is unsafe. The film smartly retains this motif: Amanda is frequently depicted watching Nina with quiet intensity, gauging how far the little girl wanders. In a voice-over monologue, Amanda even explains the idea of rescue distance, echoing lines from the book. By externalizing this internal monologue into voice-over, the film again uses its medium to translate a literary element. Through cinematography, it visualizes “rescue distance,” by showing Amanda's subjective viewpoint as Nina runs too far, a shallow focus shot making Nina appear distant and vulnerable against a blurred background. The camera lingers on Amanda's worried face and then on the empty space between mother and child, making palpable the stretch of distance that so obsesses her. In doing so, the film communicates the solastalgic tension: a mother's yearning for safety in a place that no longer guarantees it.

Feral Ecologies and the Toxic Sublime

In *Fever Dream*, the natural environment is not a passive backdrop but an active, if silent, character that shapes the fate of humans and animals. As the title suggests, nature in this novel is feverish and dreamlike, familiar yet distorted, vibrant yet deadly. The term “feral ecologies” captures the essence of the landscape Schwebelin portrays: this is a world in which ecological systems have gone feral, meaning they are no longer under human control (if they ever were) and have taken on wild, unpredictable qualities. The grass, water, and soil of the Argentine countryside have been insidiously altered by pesticides and chemicals, creating an ecology that behaves in aberrant ways. The ecology has turned “feral” in the sense that it harbors unseen dangers that strike without warning, much like a domesticated animal gone wild.

One of the clearest depictions of this feral landscape is the scene of the poisoned stream. The stream itself is innocuous in appearance, yet when David dips his hands and drinks from it, the water delivers a poisonous dose that nearly kills him. There is an eerie dissonance in this image: a clear bubbling brook on a sunny day, holding death within it. Likewise, when the escaped horse returns from the stream, his grotesque swelling and death present a shocking tableau of nature gone wrong: an animal turned into a “monstrosity” after encountering what should be a life-giving element. Carla’s realization that “whatever the horse had drunk, my David had drunk too” crystallizes the horror of this feral ecology (Schweblin 114–117). The very lifeblood of the land, the water, has become a vector of suffering.

This confrontation with a corrupted nature evokes what environmental critics have termed the toxic sublime. Traditionally, the “sublime” in literature refers to experiences of overwhelming awe and fear in the face of nature’s grandeur (such as towering mountains or violent storms). In a toxic age, however, the sources of awe and fear have shifted; we now find ourselves horrified and mesmerized by polluted rivers, melting ice caps, and industrial wastelands. Jennifer Peeples defines the toxic sublime as “the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object, or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence, and ability to inspire awe” (Peeples 373). *Fever Dream* conjures a kind of toxic sublime through its depictions of the countryside. There is a muted magnificence in the way the natural and the unnatural entwine. For instance, the barrels of chemicals that Amanda glimpses being clandestinely unloaded one night are both prosaic objects and symbolic harbingers; glinting drums of poison amidst the dark fields, carrying the power to alter life’s course. The image is brief in the novel, but it resonates with the reader’s imagination: we can picture the rustling of leaves, a truck in the moonlight, men handling containers with gloves, a secret ritual of contamination. It’s an image that inspires dread, but also a kind of morbid awe at the thought that human industry has introduced these potent agents into the heart of pastoral land. The natural darkness of night and the artificial sheen of toxic waste together create an uncanny scene.

Another moment of the toxic sublime is implied in how Carla describes the landscape’s changes. She notes how the natural space has been transformed by technology for agriculture, such that “pristine” nature has all but disappeared. What remains is a post-natural world where every inch of soil is touched by human intervention, yet the outcomes exceed human intention. This is the feral ecology: engineered for profit but yielding monstrosities and illness. There is a sublime terror in the idea that no corner of the world is untouched, an awful omnipresence that is normally associated with the sublime infinite of nature or divinity, now attributed to an infinite diffusion of poison. Schweblin’s novel elicits a response of wonder and fear at how thoroughly and invisibly the environment has been penetrated by toxicity. When Amanda and Carla sit by the bright green grass of the yard, under a cheerful sky, the reader cannot help but feel tension knowing that even the sunlight and breeze carry invisible

particles that may harm them. The mundane beauty of the setting thus becomes charged with menace, a duality that is central to the toxic sublime. This reflects what the sociologist Anthony Giddens and environmental writers like Bill McKibben have noted: that we live in the end of nature, where no place remains free of human influence. In *Fever Dream*, that end of untouched nature is illustrated not with statistics but with the felt reality of living in a “post-natural” space that nonetheless “appears” natural. Such a landscape is uncannily feral: it has the outward form of the tame (the pastoral countryside) but the inner reality of the wild (dangerous unpredictability). One might say the landscape itself has become a kind of monster in sheep’s clothing.

Eco-cinema theory often discusses how films can provoke ecological awareness not just through messages but through sensory engagement. As ecocritic Scott MacDonald (2004) argued in his essay “Towards an Eco-Cinema,” certain films encourage viewers to slow down and observe environments, fostering a more attentive, ethical perception of the nonhuman world. *Fever Dream* the film, despite being a narrative thriller, integrates this principle by building stretches of quiet, observational footage. Llosa allows moments where the camera drifts over elements of the landscape – a close-up of insects trapped in water, a pan across a field under the hot sun – without immediate narrative commentary. These are brief but evocative inserts that the novel could only approximate with words (if at all). Such shots immerse the audience in the materiality of the setting, creating a sensory intimacy with the environment. In one sequence, after a scene of high tension, the film cuts to an early morning view of mist over the soybean fields, the sun piercing through in an amber glow as sprinklers spray water. The image is tranquil, even sublime, yet the informed viewer knows that in those droplets lies poison. By seducing the eye with beauty and then contextualizing it as dangerous, the film engages the viewer’s ethical and emotional response to environmental risk. This technique aligns with environmental aesthetic strategies noted by ecocinema scholars: it’s not merely telling us that pesticides are bad; it’s showing us a world where toxic risk and natural beauty uneasily coexist, thus eliciting reflection on our own world’s toxic sublime – from chemically treated lawns to smoggy sunsets.

In the feral ecology of *Fever Dream*, traditional moral frameworks also become destabilized. The novel presents a world that might be called ecologically Gothic, where the sins of the fathers (or the industries) are visited upon the children in literal ways. Carla’s resort to the witch of the green house exemplifies how people adapt morally in a feral world: she consents to a transgression of natural order (soul migration) because the natural order (innocent child + pure water) has already been hideously transgressed by poison. This is a realm of collateral damage and impossible choices, where conventional ethics falter. Schweblin’s characters, faced with feral ecology, respond in kind with feral ethics: Carla will do anything to save her son; Amanda, in turn, entrusts Carla to do anything to save Nina. Such choices reflect the breakdown of normative structures when confronted with slow, pervasive violence.

The novel thereby probes the cost of the beautiful and its collateral effects, the price paid for pursuing a perfect, bountiful landscape through chemicals. The cost is borne by bodies and souls, and by the moral certainties that once guided the community. In this way, *Fever Dream*'s feral ecology is not only a setting but a moral crucible: it tests the characters' capacity for empathy, sacrifice, and understanding in a world where old assurances (that water is pure, that mothers can shield their kids) no longer hold. The novel leaves open a haunting question: what new ethics must we forge in a poisoned world? It does not offer an easy answer, but it suggests that denial and inaction are ethically untenable. The feral ecology has no single villain to face; it is an emergent condition. In the face of it, *Fever Dream* shows individuals improvising their own feral ethics of care (or harm). The only people who survive (David, possibly Nina) do so because someone confronted the horror head-on and made a choice that traditional society would deem monstrous. In the Anthropocene context, this hints that humanity may need equally radical rethinking of responsibility and kinship – perhaps to “make kin” in unexpected ways, as Donna Haraway urges, in order to care for each other and the more-than-human in an impaired world (96). In *Fever Dream*, Carla effectively makes new “kin” by linking her son's life with another's; it is a disturbing solution yet born of profound care.

The toxic sublime also surfaces in *Fever Dream* through a quiet reverence for the persistence of life amid the pollution. Though much is dying or deformed, life continues in altered forms. What connects the novel and its cinematic adaptation in their depiction of environmental toxicity is an aesthetic that does not display contamination directly, but instead gestures toward its residual imprints, a mode that could be described as latent or residual aesthetics. Rather than presenting the poison or pollution in explicit, visible forms, both works convey its lingering effects through subtle cues: bodily symptoms, behavioral shifts, disquieting atmospheres, and environmental disturbances. These indirect signs function like cinematic and literary fingerprints, indicating the presence of something unseen but deeply felt, a toxic haunt that saturates the story. Such an approach contributes to the production of a toxic sublime, where horror emerges not from spectacle but from the persistent sense of contamination that hovers just beyond perception.

Alaimo's “trans-corporeality” emphasizes that we are always embedded in and affected by the material flows of the world, that our bodies absorb, respond to, and are reshaped by environmental forces (139). The “trans-” in trans-corporeality thus marks the instability of bodily boundaries, foregrounding the permeability that defines our existence. In the context of *Fever Dream*, however, these material exchanges become sites of fatal vulnerability. Rather than the life-affirming interdependence implied by acts like eating or breathing, here the environment delivers harm: chemicals infiltrate the body, causing physical and psychic dissolution. The result is a form of environmental horror where the landscape and the body reflect each other's slow disintegration, an aesthetics of dread rooted not in explosive disaster, but in slow, spectral ruin.

There is also a suggestion of agency in nonhuman forces – what new materialist scholar Jane Bennett would term “vibrant matter.” The poison itself, though man-made, behaves like an autonomous agent in the story, moving through water, into bodies, reshaping destinies. The land is portrayed almost as if it had intention: the phrase “the poison was always there” (Schweblin 169) lends the toxin a timeless, omnipresent quality, as if it were a feature of the land. One might interpret that line as implying that even before actual chemicals, the potential for harm was latent, or that nature always had a dangerous aspect humans ignored. In either case, the environment in *Fever Dream* is not a passive victim; it participates in the horror. This complicates the ethics – nature is both harmed and harming. The fields and streams have become what theorist Timothy Morton might call “dark ecology” – an environment that is no longer the romantic source of solace but a mesh of mutual dangers and entanglements. Yet, by giving the environment this dark agency, Schweblin also forces a recognition of human entanglement with the nonhuman. We are part of this feral ecology; our chemicals have entered the food chain, our children’s bodies, our dreams. The boundaries between natural and unnatural, self and world, are thoroughly blurred. In *Fever Dream*, to fear nature is ultimately to fear what we have made of nature and what it in turn is making of us. We might interpret the poison as a monster of our own making, an Anthropocene monster that has merged with the fabric of the world.

Conclusion

While *Fever Dream* shares DNA with other works of ‘slow violence’ literature and film that seek to make the invisible visible, what sets it apart is its economy and intensity: at a slim ~150 pages, it achieves a singular effect of unease that many longer novels struggle to muster. By the time we finish reading, the quaint notion of a clear divide between human health and environmental health has completely dissolved. We are left with the understanding that our fates are profoundly entangled with the soils, waters, and nonhumans around us – a key tenet of posthuman ecology, driven home not by manifesto but by narrative fate. By the end of the story, the reader, like Amanda, has been awakened (or unsettled) to the omnipresent danger that was ‘always there.’ Such awareness is the first step toward change. *Fever Dream* offers no simple resolution or activism plan, but it does what literature does best: it reframes reality, altering consciousness.

Within the film’s *mise-en-scène*, elements such as atmospheric conditions, animal sounds, symbolic objects, and ambient noises operate not as mere background details but as active participants in the narrative environment. This kind of ecological entanglement recalls what Lovino and Oppermann describe as “material narrativity,” a form of storytelling that emerges not solely from human discourse but through the dynamic interplay of physical entities and

natural forces. In this framing, agency is redistributed: humans are no longer the sole narrators or interpreters of meaning but share that role with their material surroundings. The film thus gestures toward a diminished anthropocentrism, suggesting that nature contributes to the shaping of meaning and perception. This interplay exemplifies intermediality not only as a convergence of media forms but also as a reflection of time, space, and cultural moment. This points toward a deeply immersive creative condition, one in which humans both emerge from and act upon their environments. Authorship, therefore, becomes distributed, shared between the artist and the world they inhabit. As Toikkanen observes, we are living in a historical moment characterized by complete immersion, where the boundaries between medium and environment dissolve and “media are what this environment is” (33).

Fever Dream also reminds us of the potency of story when it traverses media boundaries. Both works serve as ecological media in themselves, that is, they each create an ecology of meanings and sensations that reflect on ecological crisis. If the novel posed questions – How does an environment altered by chemical poisons affect our perception of reality? What are we to do in the face of such invisible but omnipresent menaces? The film uses the tools of sight and sound to make those questions viscerally felt. The novel, with its lean form, demands the reader’s imaginative co-creation: it is in the reader’s mind that the ecology of fear, poison, and maternal love takes shape. The film externalizes that ecology, presenting a carefully designed world for the viewer to inhabit. The novel on its own is stark, harrowing, and poetic, and the film on its own is atmospheric, haunting, and visceral. In conversation, each enriches the other; the literary work lends the film its depth of concept and ambiguity, while the film lends the book a tangible sensory reference. In an age where ecological crises demand new modes of storytelling to spur awareness and empathy, *Fever Dream*’s intermedial journey from page to screen exemplifies a successful eco-horror narrative that leverages the strengths of multiple art forms. The slow poison of its story seeps into us through multiple channels, leaving a lingering impression of both fear and tragic enlightenment. As the credits roll or as the final page is turned, we are left with that quiet, disquieting question that good art in the Anthropocene often poses: now that you have felt this, what will you do with the knowledge?

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