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Haunted spaces, failing myths: Spatial ecology and the collapse of environmental imagination in Indonesian horror cinema

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ABSTRACT

Background: The dystopian narrative that has long been used as a source of fear in Indonesian horror films has not been able to reduce the rate of environmental destruction. This phenomenon shows a gap between imagination and ecological awareness. This study attempts to address the failure of ecological myths through Indonesian horror film narratives in changing people's social behavior. Using Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, this study analyzes how haunted spaces are constructed as ideological arenas that reinforce fear without producing ecological reflection. This study aims to reveal how Indonesian horror cinema produces ecological spaces that are trapped in mysticism, and offers a new reading of the failure of Indonesian visual culture in building a critical ecological subjectivity. **Methods:** This study employs a qualitative design. Data were drawn from secondary sources in the form of Indonesian horror films released over the past two decades. Analysis involved repeated viewing and systematic note taking, with interpretations cross validated against ancillary sources. **Findings:** Analysis of three Indonesian ecological horror films, namely *Angkerbatu* (2007), *Eva: Pendakian Terakhir* (2025), and *Kereta Berdarah* (2024) shows that ecological space is represented in symbolic and mystical rather than reflective terms. Environmental issues are reduced to religious morality and local myth, and the relationship between humans and nature remains hierarchical and anthropocentric, reinforcing ritual ecology instead of encouraging a post-fear ecology. Indonesian cinematic space functions less as lived space and more as perceived space governed by the logics of industry, myth, and religion. **Conclusion:** These findings indicate that the failure to construct an ecological imagination is not merely a cinematic shortcoming but a reflection of social structures that struggle to envision nature beyond sacred or supernatural frames. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** The article advances a new reading of Indonesian horror cinema by integrating spatial production theory with cultural ecology and by introducing ritual ecology as a form of stagnant ecological consciousness. In doing so, it charts a new direction for ecocriticism and Southeast Asian cinema studies, showing how myth and fear configure an environmental imagination that resists reflection.

KEYWORDS: eco-criticism; failing myths; haunted space; horror cinema; spatial ecology.

1. Introduction

Indonesian horror cinema frequently centers on dystopian, mystical worlds when staging environmental terror. From an eco-critical standpoint, this orientation appears promising, premised on the hope that haunted spaces might dissuade humans from destroying nature. Popular media channels fear and concern through myth, which operates

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as a localized logic legible across social strata (Naibaho et al., 2023). In this sense, horror film becomes a pervasive arena for negotiating myth, ecology, and modernity within debates on environmental protection. Many titles depict forests as haunted terrains policed by supernatural forces that punish human ecological transgressions. Even as mainstream Indonesian horror leans more heavily on ecological myth, it struggles to speak to the crises unfolding on the ground. Continued deforestation, repeated forest fires, and climate related disasters show how little these mystical frames do to check environmental damage.

Indonesia recorded 629 forest fires in 2024, burning 376,805.05 hectares (Kementerian Kehutanan RI, 2025). In 2023, reported fires rose by roughly 466.72 percent from the previous year, a sharp surge for a hazard largely driven by human activity. By contrast, the Ministry of Environment reported that deforestation in 2022 fell by 8.4 percent from 2021, when forest loss reached 113.5 thousand hectares (Kementerian Lingkungan Hidup RI, 2023). The decline did not hold: in 2023, deforestation climbed to 175.4 thousand hectares (Kementerian Kehutanan RI, 2025). Taken together, these figures suggest uneven commitment to addressing the ecological crisis. Awareness efforts have yet to yield durable outcomes, a shortfall likely shaped by economic incentives and behaviors, limited moral salience, and gaps in public knowledge about environmental risks.

Indonesia, often described as home to the world's third largest tropical forest, bears a substantial responsibility to safeguard these ecosystems as the planet's lungs. That responsibility has not been met, as the country remains among the global leaders in forest loss (Forest Watch Indonesia, 2025). Indonesia's capacity to act as an ecological agent has weakened, in part because shared, enforceable environmental ethics are thin across social strata. Symbolic campaigns to curb destruction have likewise produced limited results (Chakrabarti, 2021). One telling paradox appears in ecological horror films, where forests once protected as sacred space become little more than scenic backdrops for fear. The post-horrorism that trades on human anxiety has converted myth into a marketable commodity, its meanings absorbed into economic logics (Piliang, 2009). At this juncture, environmental imagination falters: popular culture struggles to picture any durable form of human–nature sustainability.

Indonesian society has long been socialized through local stories saturated with mystical imagination. As Kim (2021) observes, these tales rest on enduring puritanical narratives transmitted across generations. In a context dominated by the Abrahamic religions, popular reasoning readily accommodates superstition. Supernatural agency often supplies an immediate explanation when dominant forces inflict harm on those in subordinate positions (Angesty & Mukafi, 2024). As a result, belief in the magical is deeply naturalized, making mystical narratives available as alternative frames for interpreting social inequality and ecological calamity. For centuries, such myths and local traditions have functioned as traditional ecological knowledge that orders everyday relations between people and their environments (Kristianto et al., 2024). Within these ethical conventions, communities cultivated a practical vigilance against severe environmental damage. Modern rationalities, however, have eroded the social authority of these narratives. What once operated as a lived belief in spaces governed by the supernatural has shifted into the realm of entertainment. Its ecological charge has thinned. Contemporary Indonesian horror still curates this reservoir of mystical memory, but its aesthetic now arrives largely detached from its former moral force.

Unlike many horror spaces in Western cinema, ecological dystopia is often framed through scientifically grounded causes that align with contemporary knowledge (van Leeuwen, 2024). Nature appears as a rational actor that responds to human exploitation in ways legible to science. This approach is visible in disaster driven narratives such as The Happening (2008), The Bay (2012), dan Sea Fever (2019). Epistemologically, fear generated by simulated, human caused ecological breakdown tends to work more effectively as a prompt for social reflection. Fay (2018) suggests that a film's ecological force lies in its capacity to make viewers recognize themselves as part of an ecosystem rather than as spectators standing outside the damage. When a film builds its horror on scientific explanations, it opens room for sharper debate. In the United States, conversations in the

press, universities, and environmental media studies suggest a shift toward seeing humans as part of a wider ecological whole, not the center of it (Davidson, 2024). In such films, fear operates within scientific and systemic frames, making imbalances between nature and humans more perceptible. In this sense, eco-horror's aims are articulated more coherently on both moral and rational grounds.

Horror space operates as a simulacrum of the ideological conflicts circulating in society, a site where fear is continually manufactured with the expectation that ecological awareness will follow. In practice, such fear rarely cultivates awareness; it often widens the emotional distance between humans and the nonhuman world. This dynamic produces a view of nature as a haunted other (Burke, 2021). Forests, oceans, and villages are rendered not as lived environments but as mystical zones of dread, detached from ordinary ecological experience. Fear of supernatural agency functions as a social representation that organizes space within traditional cosmologies (Kolk, 2020). Nature is shown to act through moral force and karma rather than through recognizable ecological processes. The spaces constructed on screen do more than host events; they stage a continuing moral negotiation of the boundary between humans and nature through fear (Woolhouse, 2025). In this sense, Indonesian horror tends to produce space through religious representation that operates within representational space, saturated with symbols, myths, and collective affect. This aligns with Lefebvre's (1974) account of space as a social construction shaped by ideology, power relations, and cultural practice. The strong attachment to pre modern knowledge systems that cast nature as part of a spiritual order, rather than as an ecological system subject to degradation, hampers the translation of ecological messaging into ecological awareness in Indonesia (Varughese & Mukherjee, 2023). On the surface these films appear to engage ecological questions, yet the mystical space they construct rarely functions as an ecological space; it persists as a reminder of supernatural morality, obedience, and taboo.

Space reflects prevailing power relations and the dominant mode of production. In much of Western horror cinema, ecological space follows capitalist and scientific industrial logics that treat nature as an object of exploitation, so its representation aligns with modern scientific knowledge (Suzuki et al., 2023). Such spaces function as heterotopias that both mirror and unsettle dominant social space. Ruined, contaminated, or inverted environments become places where modern societies face the results of their own extractive logic (Saari & Mullen, 2020). In these films, fear no longer rests on the supernatural. It grows from modern humans' failure to control what they have made. Ecological terror works through rational means that, paradoxically, give rise to new irrationality. Western eco-horror reframes natural settings as arenas for reflecting on the power relations of modernity, demonstrating that ecological destruction originates not in the supernatural but in humans themselves, who return as the specters haunting their own planet.

The idea of space in horror cinema is inseparable from how humans understand their relation to nature. In practice, that relation is rarely harmonious; it is ambivalent, mixing horror with a strange fascination (Kristeva, 2024). Nature can console with beauty yet also threaten with uncertainty. Morton's (2010) dark ecology rejects romantic images of nature as sacred and stable, and recasts it as a realm of darkness, chaos, and strangeness that entangles humans within ongoing destruction (Haecker, 2021). Eco-horror makes this entanglement visible. Haunted forests figure the uncanny, the sense of estrangement that emerges when nature no longer obeys moral or religious logics (Faris, 2004). Fear in such films should work not only at the level of plot but also as a social energy that reconfigures relations among body, space, and power. It can serve as an affective prompt for reflection on life within a fragile ecology. In Indonesian horror, however, this potential is often diverted into mystical and religious moral frameworks. Terror that might have opened consciousness is managed instead as a ritual of atonement: people regret, they pray, and then they forget (Ironside, 2018). The result is not a critical affect but a ritual affect, in which fear sustains the existing ideological order rather than challenging it.

Fear in horror cinema is not merely an emotional reaction but a mode of social production. Every haunted space reflects how a society organizes and understands power

relations among humans, nature, and the transcendent (Bartmanski, 2023). In Indonesian horror, ecological space is typically split by two forces: the destructive power of capital and a moral power that mystifies that destruction. The result is a contradictory milieu in which fear functions as a mechanism of social control. Material reality and symbolic representation are braided within an imaginative arena that Soja (1996) calls thirdspace. Indonesian eco-horror depicts nature as materially real yet ideologically managed, translating ecological crisis into mythic narrative. At this juncture, dark ecology converges with thirdspace. Ecological space becomes a site where humans grapple with limits and with guilt over the crises that entangle them. Yet Indonesian eco-horror often renders this thirdspace as a mystical, highly repetitive narrative, blunting its critical force.

Ecological heterotopias, which once held the potential to challenge Indonesia's social order, have been reduced to museums of guilt, places where fear is stored rather than turned into change. As a result, these films remain caught in ritual ecology, where ecological fear cultivates religious moral conscience instead of scientific and political critique. This stands in contrast to the post fear ecology that has developed in much of the Western eco-horror industry (Blazan, 2021). Post fear ecology uses fear as an instrument for epistemic reflection on environmental crisis, whereas ritual ecology treats it as a cathartic spiritual experience. Fear no longer opens ecological awareness; it diverts attention from ecological guilt. Here lies the epistemic crisis of Indonesian horror cinema: not a failure of aesthetics, but a failure to translate affect into reflection and mysticism into awareness.

Lefebvre's (1974) account of the production of space is central to reading horror cinema as a cartography of fear. Cinematic space is never empty. It is saturated with interests, memories, and residues of social trauma that move beneath its surface. Soja (1996) extends this insight with thirdspace, a domain where the material and the imaginary meet in a zone that is neither fully real nor fully fictional. In Indonesian horror, thirdspace becomes the arena in which nature, myth, and modernity negotiate and negate one another, generating a distinctive fear that is directed at nature yet also at the loss of meaning. Morton's dark ecology and Massumi's (2002) thinking on affect clarify the emotional dynamics of these spaces. On screen, ecological fear is more than a visual effect. It resonates between body and space and grows from the recognition that humans can no longer step outside the damage they have set in motion. Such fear signals a lingering sensitivity to the nonhuman world, even when it is misread as a curse. Bringing together theories of space and affect, this study approaches Indonesian horror not merely as mystical spectacle but as an archive of collective ecological feeling. Lefebvre and Soja explain how spaces of fear are produced and lived, while Morton and affect theory explain why fear stalls at ritual rather than maturing into consciousness. At this intersection, the ideas of ritual ecology and post fear ecology emerge as two phases of ecological imagination that trace a movement from repetitive fear to a fear capable of teaching something about human existence within nature.

Over the past two decades, global horror cinema has turned more directly to ecological questions, moving from mystical explanations toward systemic crisis narratives. Studies by Davidson (2024), Guyatt (2020), and Waterton & Saul (2021) show how eco-horror operates as a critique of Anthropocene anxiety, naming the fear tied to the ecological consequences of human made systems. By contrast, Indonesian horror continues to mobilize fear through mystical frames. Works by Fa et al. (2024), Hanan (2021), and Sen & Hill (2020) find that terror is typically linked to moral transgression rather than to structural causes. Nature is shown punishing human greed, yet this representational strategy has not curbed destructive behavior toward the environment. In effect, myth has shed much of its ecological function and now circulates more as a commodity than as a lived ground for ecological practice.

Research on eco-horror has largely focused on narrative and symbolism, with little attention to how ecological space is socially and culturally produced in film. This study begins from an epistemological anomaly in which ecological imagination stalls in rituals of fear rather than developing into systemic awareness of environmental crisis, even as Indonesian horror widely stages ecological terror. It offers a new reading of the failure of ecological myth, treating it not only as a failure of moral messaging but also as a failure of

spatial production that no longer binds humans and nature within a shared ecological consciousness. To address this gap, the study advances a spatial account of how horror films produce, circulate, and ultimately neutralize ecological awareness, and it introduces the concept of post fear ecology to describe a phase of ecological consciousness that emerges once fear of nature has been critically processed. If ritual ecology preserves moral order through the affect of fear, post fear ecology converts fear into ecological understanding and responsibility.

2. Methods

2.1 Data source

Guided by constructivism, this qualitative study is suited to interpretive work (Moleong, 2020). The analysis combines textual analysis and visual discourse to trace how Indonesian eco-horror organizes space, affect, and narrative. An eco-critical lens examines environmental critique, a dimension still rare in local horror film discourse (Garrard, 2004). Data were generated through repeated viewings of three films: *Angkerbatu* (2007), *Eva: Pendakian Terakhir (2025)*, and *Kereta Berdarah* (2024). The corpus was selected to capture heterogeneous supernatural approaches to environmental destruction: *Angkerbatu* exemplifies traditional spiritual space, *Kereta Berdarah* foregrounds modern mechanical space, and *Eva: Pendakian Terakhir* stages spirituality within modernization. This design allows the study to track how Indonesia's ecological imagination operates across contexts, while showing that it repeatedly resolves in ritualized fear.

2.2 *Analytical framework*

Relevant data are coded to support reduction and focus. The dataset is then analyzed and described, with interpretations verified against secondary sources such as peer-reviewed studies and reputable news reports. The core method is close reading of space, cinematography, and narrative, treating visual elements as ecological signs that link humans, nature, and power. Lefebvre's (1974) production of space and Soja's (1996) thirdspace guide the mapping of how films construct and negotiate ecological space, while Morton's (2010) dark ecology and Massumi's (2002) affect theory inform readings of how fear is staged and managed within the narrative.

Analysis proceeds in three steps. First, identify ecological spaces in each film. Second, interpret the affects that arise. Third, relate the two to derive patterns of imagination at work. This approach examines films as sites where ecological consciousness is produced rather than as mere vehicles of ontological critique. The findings are then synthesized with the frameworks of ritual ecology and post fear ecology to assess the extent to which Indonesian eco-horror cultivates ecological awareness in its communities.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Haunted spaces and environmental imagination: From myth to dystopia

Spaces in Indonesian horror cinema are fashioned as sites with their own consciousness, capable of taking revenge on those who commit crimes against nature. This follows the logic that space carries a mythical, symbolic power that is invisible to humans (Lefebvre, 1974). As in everyday life, forested realms are imagined as domains possessed and legitimized by other entities; humans become intruders when they enter a realm that is not theirs (Todorov, 1975). In this view, every space has an owner even if that ownership is not empirically visible. Indonesian horror returns to this premise repeatedly. In *Angkerbatu* (2007), fear of natural disaster is framed through ghosts who are figured as proprietors of place. The rainstorm is cast as the wrath of a forest guardian whose domain has been disturbed by development.

The wrath of supernatural beings is rendered as unending storms and episodes of mass possession in the town of Angkerbatu. The forest functions as an affective medium that links humans and nature through fear, anxiety, and disaster. Yet this haunted imagination fails to cultivate ecological awareness. Its narrative rests on a fragile foundation that relies on local mystical fears about taboo dangers and forbidden forests (Gibraltar et al., 2023). Viewers are told that calamity results from disturbing a magical realm protected by Indigenous communities as the domain of jinn. The plot resolves without confronting any substantive ecological conflict that would clarify the real risks of natural hazards. Acts of environmental exploitation, which might be framed through political critique of economic systems, are instead cast as insults to supernatural power.

Fig. 1 Interview with community members on the Angkerbatu forest guardian myth (*Angkerbatu* 00:41:17)

When Angkerbatu is struck by disaster, the remedies offered are ritual: apologizing to angry spirits, making offerings, and seeking moral redemption. There is no critical reckoning with oppressive human–nature power relations, nor any critique of the capitalist structures that commodify ecological space. Viewers are steered by local knowledge that treats supernatural forces as given, while the real contours of the environmental crisis remain obscure. Visually, the film heightens the gap between humans and nature through disaster set pieces, dense fog, and a dark palette (Bordwell, 1985). That uncertainty primes belief in supernatural agency, and quick, restless camera moves within ecological settings deepen the sense of unease. The chaos scripted as natural catastrophe reinforces the idea that nature takes revenge on the innocent. Rather than opening space to understand environmental complexity, the film reproduces an older morality in which those who disrespect the wilderness's spirits are doomed. Read through the lens of dark ecology (Morton, 2010), *Angkerbatu* sidesteps ecological darkness, namely the recognition that humans are implicated in the destruction itself.

This pattern also appears in *Kereta Berdarah (2024)*. The wrath of nature's guardians is rendered through mystical logic without concrete causes, so the disasters seem both uncontrollable and unsolvable. Humans are cast as victims of nature's ferocity without any clear account of their systemic faults. Traditional mindsets that do not align cause and effect in scientifically coherent ways position nature as a haunted realm, angry over violations of taboo norms and customs (Peterle, 2020). Nature is shown as active, yet it is objectified through a logic of fear and redemption. If *Angkerbatu* figures traditional nature as a spiritual ghost, *Kereta Berdarah* recasts nature as a technological ghost.

In *Kereta Berdarah* (2024), a space that should symbolize modernity and technological progress becomes saturated with mystical terror. The film ties present disasters to past human transgressions against forest guardians. As shown in Figure 2, a railway worker suffers bodily horror when lumps and worms emerge from within his body. The staging of suspense, reinforced by minimal lighting, frames fear as metaphysical terror (Elsaesser & Hagener, 2017). Ghosts appear as agents seeking revenge on those nearby. The train,

ostensibly a vehicle of progress, is remystified as a liminal space that brings the human world into contact with the supernatural. Yet this device never becomes an epistemic site where the two entities can negotiate the causes of ecological conflict. Instead, the train figures an ecological body split between modernity's promise of advancement and a mysticism that binds people to memories of the sacred and the profane. The film in fact has the potential to demonstrate that space is never neutral but produced through power relations among humans, capital, and traumatic memories of nature damaged by temporal "progress" (Lefebvre, 1974). Here, ghosts function as ideological residue in a space that has failed to operate ecologically. The forest, personified by ghosts, becomes a demand for recognition and accountability. This is characteristic of ritual ecology, in which humans encounter ecological destruction (Wibowo et al., 2021), yet render it as moral fear rather than as environmental awareness.

Fig. 2 The curse resulting from deforestation
(*Kereta Berdarah* 00:04:19)

The problem is clear. By making nature the main engine of dystopia, eco-horror pushes aside the imaginative work it aims to spark. Audiences are nudged away from environmental ethics and toward dissociation from nature itself (Kniss, 2022). In the post-horrorism era, media industries that capitalize on ecological fear risk cultivating ecophobia (Hosein & Pourgiv, 2023). Viewers are encouraged to consume eco-horror without being told that environmental damage is not simply the anger of a space's guardians but a systemic process that unfolds through nature's defensive mechanisms. *The Bay* (2012) offers a counterexample by tracing fear through the cause and effect of industrial water pollution, which helps audiences grasp the material and political networks that drive ecological harm.

Every space carries its own logic, whether framed by myth or by science. Yet shifts in environmental morality that chase sensation have privileged horror aesthetics and thinned ecological ethics (Bode, 2021). In effect, haunted spaces no longer mediate relations between humans and nature. They mirror unresolved social trauma while stripping away ecological context. This shift can be read as a transformation of representational space, a space saturated with symbols, cultural values, and social practice (Lefebvre, 1974). Today, haunted spaces circulate as mythic commodities produced by the logics of capitalism and popular media, so Indonesian horror tends not to cultivate ecological imagination but to affirm ecological disconnection. A gap opens between ecological representation and ecological awareness. The dystopia in these narratives does not arise from a vision of futures damaged by modernization's systems, but from a primal fear left untouched by analyses of social conflict.

3.2 The production space of indonesian horror cinema: when ecology is reduced to mysticism

The production of space in Indonesian horror cinema discloses how relations between humans and nature are built through layered ideological mechanisms. Here, myth intersects with limited access to scientific knowledge and with capitalist logics that profit from

popular credulity toward superstition (Foucault, 1980). In practice, cinematic space is produced through the interplay of material practices, conceptual representations, and symbolic meanings. Ideally, even without the proofs favored by Western empiricism, public belief could still cultivate shared moral and ethical commitments toward nature. Instead of articulating ecological space as a material system entangled with economics and politics, however, Indonesian horror repeatedly reanimates nature as a sentient spiritual entity that exercises will and punishes humans for moral transgression rather than for ecological destruction.

This framing generates a mystical space that reduces ecological relations to superstitious logic. Attempts to build a site of contestation likewise fall short because the films fail to create symbolic spaces that register with audiences. Indonesian horror appears to promise critical reflection on environmental damage but ultimately falters, absorbed in the exploitation of fear that is detached from its social structure (Estok, 2020). Nature is cast as a supernatural subject that punishes and polices morality rather than as a terrain for critiquing exploitation and capitalism. The result is a regressive spatiality that displays ecological consequences without opening possibilities for social transformation. This pattern is evident in *Eva: Pendakian Terakhir* (2025), a film that drew considerable attention among Indonesian horror fans. The forest, presented as mysterious and menacing, is the film's dominant space. The narrated dystopia no longer addresses the impacts of human exploitation; instead, it turns the forest into an autonomous agent that harms humans. A character's act of defecation enrages the forest spirits and triggers harm to many people.

Fig. 3 Community views the disaster as triggered by profane abject acts
(*Eva: Pendakian Terakhir* 01:19:56)

The angry reactions depicted in the film lack empirical grounding and rest largely on superstition and myth. The ghostly agent is shown rebuking a menstruating climber as "unclean," reinforcing a sacred–profane stigma that displaces nature's status as part of an ecological system (Eliade, 1961). In this framing, nature is imagined as a sovereign subject that governs disaster. This move lets humans sidestep responsibility for the damage they cause. Ecological violence is translated into supernatural terror, and communities route ecological anxiety through moral narratives rather than material analysis (Al-Sammarraie et al., 2022). Consequently, Indonesian horror functions as a discourse dispositif that normalizes spiritual interpretations of environmental crisis while erasing the political and economic drivers at its root. The forest and its terrors become a heterotopia where collective guilt over environmental harm is stored, only to be projected onto "other" agents called ghosts.

Mysticism substitutes for science and sin for policy, shifting ecological responsibility onto supernatural forces. In cinema, ecological space becomes an aesthetic of fear rather than a site of awareness or politics (Ambroży & Kozłowska, 2022). Haunted spaces function not as ecological third spaces that critically mediate between humans and nature, but as moral heterotopias where society watches, fears, and forgets its ecological sins. Ecological space is no longer negotiated; it is sealed off as a mystical realm and statically sacralized

through curses, karma, and taboos. Indonesian horror remains constrained by limited scientific literacy, so ecological violence is still framed within sacralized space rather than through a desacralized account of causes and effects.

Representations of fear toward environmental change in Indonesian horror remain largely static. Forests are not staged as sites of conflict between capitalism and ecology but as arenas for guardian spirits that police human morality. Relations that should be material and political are recast as metaphysical. The resulting fear nurtures not eco-consciousness but ecopiety, a symbolic reverence for the sacred without responsibility for addressing the causes of degradation (Taylor, 2020). Rather than benefiting the environment, myth becomes a tool for depoliticizing space, shifting attention from economic and political drivers of damage to vague individual morality (Debord, 1994). By contrast, many Western horror films render this fear in more concrete terms. Their dystopias arise from global threats linked to capitalism, scientific experimentation, and technological failure. *The Happening* (2008), for instance, channels human fear through environmental collapse precipitated by laboratory breakdowns.

Fig. 4. Curse resulting from deforestation
(*Kereta Berdarah* 01:26:52)

Nature is depicted as an entity that adapts to human behavior. Films of this kind show ecological space as a negotiation among humans, nature, and production systems (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2022). Indonesian horror, however, often breaks this dialectic by installing supernatural forces as the bridge between humans and nature. *Angkerbatu*, *Kereta Berdarah*, and *Eva: Pendakian Terakhir* present a revealing portrait of Indonesian eco-dystopia in which environmental ruin is attributed not to exploitative systems but to a failure of imagination about nature. The spaces constructed do not invite reflection on ecological damage; they function instead as repositories for trauma, using haunted settings to spare humans from change. These films are therefore not only about ghosts, but about a nation haunted by its limited knowledge of the natural world.

3.3 Failed dystopia: Why has Indonesia's ecological imagination not transitioned from ritual ecology to post–fear ecology in forming ecological awareness?

The Indonesian horror industry remains caught between engaging ecological themes and exploiting audiences' primal fear of environmental uncertainty. Paradoxically, this posture appears to teach respect for nature while discouraging critical understanding of ecological conflict. Nature is reduced to mythic knowledge, and myth itself is recast as entertainment within a world of simulacra. Ecological reality is displaced into a false ontological image, loosening the audience's grip on material conditions (Piliang, 2009). Myths are offered as metaphysical indoctrination on environmental issues, while the production of space that could have opened political discourse instead becomes a stage for fear rather than a site of ecological struggle (Soja, 1996). Viewers consume horror for adrenaline and dread, continually routed through supernatural forces. At this point, Indonesian horror fails to convert natural terror into ecological awareness, because fear is constructed through ghostly allegory rather than through the capitalist and political actions

that devastate nature. The result is not only a narrative shortfall but an epistemological crisis.

The representational system in Indonesian horror dystopias suggests that cinema has fashioned ecology as belief rather than knowledge. Dystopia ceases to be a project of consciousness and becomes a reproduction of pleasurable fear. What should serve as social critique of the present (Jameson, 2005) is redirected into moral reconciliation, where characters feel remorse, pray, or avoid cursed places without interrogating how economic structures, corporate behavior, and public policy destroy nature. Fear functions as an escape from complex social reality. The failure to produce cognitive spaces closes the arena of negotiation among myth, science, and politics (Latour, 1993). Haunted forests are rendered as passive heterotopias that warehouse guilt without challenging the systems that generate it. In other words, haunted spaces rarely become eco-critical discourse; they remain museums that archive fear (Bell, 2020). The spaces of horror thus mirror social spaces marked by the residues of failed modernity, becoming ecological heterotopias where environmental crisis is sublimated into spiritual terror.

The gap in Indonesian eco-horror becomes clearer when set against Western films that foreground epistemic reflection. There, horror spaces frighten because they structurally force recognition of the limits of human understanding in the wild. Nature appears as a field that tests rationality (Gajewska, 2021). Terror arises not from supernatural uncertainty but from close engagement with scientific failure or capitalist exploitation. As a result, the awareness and guilt that follow are more logically grounded and orient viewers toward the sources of harm. In *Gaia* (2021), the forest is not a site of damnation but an autonomous presence that probes the boundaries of the human. Such cinema confronts audiences with the fact that the ecological is not another realm but the space of the self (Kjærulff, 2021). In Indonesia, by contrast, nature is still positioned as a moral backdrop. The difference exposes an epistemic divide between reflective ecological awareness and ritual ecological awareness. Indonesian horror, in effect, produces a sense of estrangement from nature as the very ground of human existence.

Audiences are steered toward a metaphysical fear of sacred spaces and of supernatural agents believed to wield divine power, rather than toward the systems that destroy those spaces. The failure of dystopia in Indonesian horror arises from narratives that cultivate dread of symbols instead of dread of the real ecological crisis. This pattern also reveals the strength of ideology in shaping cultural production. Mysticism operates as a tool of depoliticization that pacifies public unrest through metaphysical rather than systemic moral reasoning (Zizek, 2008). The effect is to keep the status quo intact while closing off chances for ecological awareness to emerge from collective imagination. This is an ideological and epistemic failure, as the films cling to fearing nature instead of examining the systems that produce ecological harm.

There are two paradigms by which humans interpret their relation to nature, and these shape both their thinking and the commodities they produce. The paradigm of ritual ecology grows from puritan traditions that divide space into the sacred and the profane, producing segments to be venerated and segments to be shunned (Eliade, 1961; Lefebvre, 1974). This outlook has not produced a causal understanding of environmental damage. Indonesian horror remains anchored in ritual ecology, where fear functions as entertainment, ritualized, repetitive, and sacralized yet largely unreflective. Rather than advancing public understanding, it reinforces inherited beliefs that no longer meet contemporary needs. Elsewhere, horror has moved toward a post fear ecology that turns fear into reflection. In this phase, audiences enter an epistemic awareness in which fear is not an end or a selling point but a starting point for knowledge (Thain, 2021). The shift from ritual ecology to post fear ecology is more than a narrative change; it marks a change in collective mindset and in the prospects of the natural world. What is needed is a truthful arena in which nature is seen not as the metaphysical but as a system that demands accountability. Cinema ought to function as a lab for ecological understanding, not a shrine to shared fear.

4. Conclusions

This research finds that Indonesian horror's failure to cultivate ecological awareness stems not only from weak environmental representation but also from a logic of spatial production that remains locked in a mystical episteme. Haunted spaces function less as arenas for ecological reflection and more as ideological devices that normalize fear without knowledge. Nature is cast as the sacred to be feared rather than the damaged to be held accountable. Production practices consistently position natural settings, especially forests, as haunted ecological sites, yet the myths and disasters on screen have not raised public awareness of real environmental problems. Fear stalls at an ontological threshold and does not crystallize into reflection on destructive behavior.

The confinement of nature within ritual ecology reduces forests to perpetuators of myth rather than political and ethical subjects. This signals the absence of a transition to post fear ecology, in which horror would close the distance between humans and nature by exposing the power relations that drive ecological crisis. Indonesian cinema continues to cultivate ritualized fear as entertainment and has not yet fostered a sustained discourse of ecological awareness. Haunted spaces fail to operate as ecological heterotopias because they do not challenge human dominion over nature; instead they remystify spaces that should be desacralized for analysis. Fear is used as a sign of purification to uphold a conservative social order rather than to unsettle it.

The study's main contribution is to open a discourse on ecological subjectivity in Indonesian horror. Ecological awareness can emerge only when cinema shifts its spaces from sites of fear to sites of questioning. Fear needs to be reflective, not ritual. Horror cannot stop at exorcism; it should help viewers work through ecological trauma and imagine more balanced relations with the nonhuman world. If we use that measure, the problem is not mainly style. It is a problem of knowledge, where the culture finds it hard to aim fear at itself and admit its own damage.

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During the preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist in proofreading and improving the clarity and fluency of the manuscript. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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