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The Park Is Open: An Ecofeminist Critique of Universal's Jurassic World

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Abstract

This paper explores an interpretation of Universal Pictures' *Jurassic World* (2015) to identify naturalized representations of human relationships and human relationships to the environment. Using the concepts of scholar Noel Sturgeon, the ideological significance of these representations comes down to what she defines as "Politics of The Natural." Through this avenue, I analyze *Jurassic World* as a text and I reflect on normalized environmental worldviews, attitudes and values, as well as how these determine humans' place in this "naturalized" hierarchy. I will discuss several environmental themes in the film. First, I explore *Jurassic World* as a symbol for the western concept of the "frontier." Second, I examine the dynamics of white, patriarchal relationships with a main character, Owen Grady. Lastly, I unpack the militaristic themes presented in the weaponizing of the Velociraptors.

Keywords: environmental communication, eco-feminism, media, universal pictures, militarism, technology, critique, *Jurassic World*, Chris Pratt

The Park Is Open: An Ecofeminist Critique of Universal's *Jurassic World*

In 2015, Universal Pictures released the blockbuster film *Jurassic World*, a sequel based on Michael Crichton's critically acclaimed book and the movie series, *Jurassic Park* (1993). The storyline depicts a futuristic time where geneticists seem to have defied all laws of nature with the discovery of fossilized dinosaur DNA resurrecting extinct species to coexist as theme park entertainment in the Anthropocene. From an entertainment aspect, this film seems to be a thrilling story of science fiction, action, and adventure. However, with a critical symptomatic reading, I sought to identify ecofeminist themes concerning human relationships to the environment. Previously, scholars, such as Ingram's (2004) and his intensive work *The Ecology of Automobile Culture*, have analyzed reflections of the natural world in Hollywood media. The plot of *Jurassic World* appears to highlight, yet again, the failure of man's effort to control and manipulate the natural world and its systems for human enjoyment. Nevertheless, looming in the background behind the infamous T-Rex are countless embedded messages about militarism. This appears to promote a storyline less about animal liberation than instantiating a systemic battle between the primitive and modern, thus reinforcing capitalist ideologies and the naturalized subjugation by violent and masculinist anthropocentrism.

Interpretive Framework

The frame of my analysis, known to many scholars as ecofeminism, values non-patriarchal and nonlinear structures and "addresses the various ways that sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism and ableism are informed by and support speciesism" (Gruen & Adams, 2014, p. 1). Sturgeon (2010) engaged with ecofeminism through an analysis method she called "global feminist environmental justice" (p. 6). With this in mind, she used an intersectional approach (seeing at all times an interactive relationship among inequalities of

gender, race, sexuality, class and nation) and revealing the connections between social inequalities and environmental problems to uncover systems of power that continue to generate the complex problems we face (p. 6).

An evolution of patterns in dominant, filmic representations of the environment that promote violence and an unjust socioeconomic mindset denote the significance of this research (Sturgeon, 2010). Attfield (2014) also noted, that, through ecofeminism “...all various kinds of oppression (whether on the basis of gender, class, race or species) reinforce one another and must be combated together” (p. 18). That is to say, when looking at environmental matters and politics of what is natural, one must identify with a biocentric critique that encompasses all walks of life (including non-human species) to be relative in environmental maltreatment. Combining Sturgeon’s (2010) ecofeminism with Attfield’s (2014) observance that this theory should also address the significance of other forms of oppression, my method will seek to decode *Jurassic World*. First, I recognize *Jurassic World* and the *Indominus Rex* as a symbol of technopia and the western conception of the “frontier.” Next, I interpret the dynamics of patriarchal relationships with the main character, Owen Grady. Finally, I examine the militarized responses of the park in its time of crisis.

Jurassic World: Description of the Text

Steven Spielberg’s Amblin Entertainment delivered *Jurassic World* to Universal Pictures as the fourth installment to the *Jurassic Park* film franchise on June 9th, 2015 (IMDb, n.d.). The film won fourteen awards including the *Guinness World Record* for “Fastest time for a movie to gross \$1 billion at the global box office [13 days]” (IMDb, n.d.). Some critics protested that *Jurassic World* strayed too far from the original text of *Jurassic Park*, mostly because of its use of unfamiliar characters. Gilbey (2015) lamented that the film showed “none of the flare that

characterized the earlier installments even at their weakest” (para. 7). Even so, the film debuted in over sixty countries and became the “fifth- highest-grossing film of all time” (IMDb, n.d.).

The story takes place twenty-two years after the tragedies of Jurassic Park, where the InGen Corporation had been operating a thriving dinosaur amusement park on the secluded Pacific island of Isla Nublar, appropriately named Jurassic World. Adapting to consumer demand, the owner of the park, Simon Masrani, instructed his geneticists to engineer the park’s very first hybrid species of dinosaur to attract new visitors and investors to Jurassic World. The criteria? Bigger, stronger, and “more teeth.” (Marshall & Trevorrow, 2015). Key to this endeavor are the two main characters, Claire and Owen, who represent the business and science sides of the park’s operations. Claire is portrayed as a cold-hearted business tycoon, inferior to Owen’s white, muscular, alpha male stature. Claire is also presented as farther from nature than Owen; however, both dominate it from their separate quarters of existence in the film. Before the *Indominus Rex* exhibit’s grand opening, it is no surprise to the audience when the new hybrid species escapes and proceeds on a rampage through the island. Unprepared for the mega-dinosaur outbreak, the characters embark on an escapade to contain the Indominus before she decimates all life on the island. The chaos in the narrative subsided when the military deployed trained Velociraptors to take down the Indominus Rex and save the day (Marshall & Trevorrow, 2015).

Evaluating Meaning

Sturgeon (2010) noted that “the concept of the frontier always assumes a boundary between something called ‘civilization’ and something called ‘wilderness’” (p. 53). We see this in the universe of Jurassic World, a paradise of lush, tropical rainforests and stunning imagery in which the park sits. This setting emulates our descent into the frontier through imagery of a

technological utopia, contemporary uses of glass and silver as well as holograms, touch screens, and scientific appliances that appear far more advanced than our time. However, in opposition to the park's surroundings, Jurassic World seems to be a place of wonder where the wild and civilized can coexist in harmony – and it was only through the progress of technology that the guests of the park can be there to enjoy the space. While most of the film seems to interrogate the exploitative aspects of progress, there is an unquestioned theme of natural evolution from primitive to modern. Marx (1964) explained the myth of the frontier, writing “continued and expanding industrialization and commodification is an inevitable result of ‘progress,’ and the concomitant destruction of natural resources and environments is unavoidable” (as cited in Sturgeon, 2010, p. 55).

From a textual perspective, regardless of the space they are occupying, the “progress” of Jurassic World is the future of technology. As their technology is made more efficient, scientists are using genetics for entertainment purposes and exploring other options. The focus on war and weaponry is another frontier. After conquering the land, the science to control and manipulate DNA, and the hyper-commercial sphere, war is the next big thing. In the film, when Hoskins defends his reasoning to move forward with these plans, he states plainly, “War is a part of nature, it’s Mother Nature’s way of defining the pecking order... progress always wins” (Marshall & Trevorrow, 2015). Here, we see an example of the “naturalization” or normalizing of an evolution to be the most advanced or most powerful, and that evolution manifests itself in an inevitability of war.

Early in the film, Owen Grady is introduced to us through an upward point of view – emphasizing his elevated status above the raptors with the sun beaming down on him in an angelic way. Grady seems to have a lot of success dominating the animals, but it is clear that his

behavioral research on the animals has far to go when a rookie employee falls into the cage. Jumping to the rescue, Grady risks his life to save the young boy. According to Andersen (2017), “This scene demonstrates how dangerous the animals are, but possibly more importantly, how brave and competent Grady is” (p. 471).

We also learn that Owen was once a military man himself and was recruited to Jurassic World from the Navy. Frequently called upon as a soldier, he is the one to help save Claire’s nephews and lead the mission against the Indominus. With all of this paired with Owen’s rugged good looks, brawn, sensitivity to animals, and courage, Gilbey (2015) raved, “What [*Jurassic World*] can boast is an awe-inspiring miracle of nature, otherwise known as Chris Pratt. Oh, and a few dinosaurs” (para. 7). Seeing this pattern through a global feminist environmental justice perspective, we could see the militia institution as being “masculinist,” or in other words, “legitimated by ideologies or patriotism involving strength through violence, equating all three with extreme masculinity” (Sturgeon, 2010, p. 156). This pattern of militarism and patriarchy defines Owen’s character throughout the film.

The leading female role, head operations manager of Jurassic World, Claire Dearing (played by Bryce Dallas Howard), is presented as a cold, career-obsessed woman. If Owen is the relaxed nature man, then Claire is his polar opposite. She appears to be so out of touch with her family life and emotion that it takes her several awkward seconds to react when her nephew hugs her. The first time Owen and Claire meet, their dialogue uncovers that they have previously met. In the same scene, Claire mentions his ability to “control the raptors.” To this, he corrects her by saying, “I don’t control the raptors, it’s a relationship based on mutual respect. That’s why we [Owen and Claire] never had a second date.” This line insinuates that since she didn’t have the

same “mutual respect” for him as the raptors do (the mutual understanding of who is alpha and who is not), that this makes her an unacceptable match for him.

While on a hunt for Claire’s nephews, Owen states plainly, “I’m in charge out here [in the wild] and you do everything I say exactly how I say it” (Marshall & Trevorrow, 2015). It is in this moment, when Claire conforms to become Owen’s “beta,” that he changes, accepting her romantically, even kissing her when she picks up a gun and shoots a Pterosaur to save his life. Sturgeon (2010) noted, “[Women] achieve the status of true citizen only if they become like male fighters and welcome violence, competition and pride in their status as killers” (p. 153). From this point on, Claire is subject to his commands just like the raptors, and in her character’s transition, she also adopts a more motherly role with her nephews.

Claire is presented as out of her element in the rural jungle through her bright white business attire, yet she pulls off some remarkable feats, such as outrunning the Indominus in high heels and single-handedly leading the T-Rex to help save the humans. But what Andersen (2017) reminded us is that “her character must enter the terrain of action adventure, battle sequences, and military adventures, and then wield a gun before she gets any respect” (p. 473).

As a symbol, the dinosaurs of Jurassic World are polysemic, carrying multiple meanings. On one hand, they stand in for nature’s past – a primitive wildness and a time before the tampering reach of man. On the other, they also stand for the present – the way in which these creatures were made is far from natural; they exist due to the humans’ cutting-edge technology. In this present aspect, they also tell of human desire to dominate, control, and manipulate nature for its instrumental value. The third meaning is representative of the future. The motivation for Owen’s research with the raptors is to eventually use them in place of soldiers to reduce human casualties in war. As Owen rides his motorcycle into battle alongside his squadron of

Velociraptors through the untamed jungle, aside from the obvious representations of dominant masculinity, we see a black and white comparison between a past and future efficiency in innovation by visualizing the primitive versus the modern. Anderson (2017) offered an explanation: “The heroic Navy soldier and the militarized animals are powerful messages to the audience that confirms the narrative theme of nature as the model for fighting, a new terrain in the frontiers of future war” (p. 479).

So, what do the Raptors tell us about our *real* environmental future? As our current ways of living struggle to be sustainable in the face of globalization, the message is clear. When resources run low as we tamper with, manipulate, and exploit our planet, war will be the only answer. This message is reinforced by the fact that no humans killed any dinosaurs in the film; the Indominus was taken down in a team effort by the Raptors, T-Rex, and the surprise heroism of a Mosasaur. So if “progress” meant that the dinosaurs would eventually become weapons, then the plan succeeded. This interpretation aligns closely with Andersen’s (2017) argument, which emphasized the military and weaponizing of another species, as well as how the film may be priming its audience to be more susceptible to this concept happening in real life.

Symptomatic Reading

In her evaluative work on environmental media representation in *Green Screen or Smoke Screen?* Moore (2016) cited Althusser and Balibar (2009) to “broadly define *symptomatic reading* as a “dual reading” (p. 32)”:

“[*Symptomatic reading*] consists of an initial interpretation of a text focusing on manifest details (in this case, the narrative and characters), followed by a ‘second,’ deeper reading designed to reveal ideological messages through identification of key “lacunae,” or silences in the text” (p. 86; cited in Moore, p. 5).

In performing a critical symptomatic reading of *Jurassic World* as a whole, I must also speak for the silence of what, or who, inhabited this island before it was purchased and occupied for commercial interest. The western accents and mentions of business conglomeration show that this theme park is clearly American. Many of the Jurassic World attractions even mimic the contemporary crowd-pleasing tricks we see today, such as the Mosasaur jumping out of the water and splashing the audience, just as the whales and dolphins do at many American water-themed parks. Sturgeon (2010) noted the spread of dominant western ideology in this context through the theory of American Exceptionalism:

[North America] involved a set of powerful ideas, some of them myths with their own labels—such as ‘virgin land’, manifest destiny, ‘frontier thesis’, and American Exceptionalism. Together, these myths legitimated the process of settlement called, ‘progress’ by the conquerors and ‘conquest’ subjected to it, even as the United States moved its pattern of imperialist conquest past the North American continent. (p. 82)

The ideological significance of this silence is seen in the myth of natural expansion, and the fact that the theme park in the film is inherently American, promoting this myth specifically by naturalizing *western* expansion. Referred to as an island off Costa Rica and distant from the U.S, it is assumed that this place was an empty, conquerable space for human enjoyment, which is also reinforcing a subjugation of the “undeveloped” – an example of the myth of progress.

Tying further into the concept of the environment, this film also silences the enormous stress that tourism puts on local land use, leading to increased pollution, natural habitat loss and more pressure on endangered species. This is clear as the audience first sees the island, where there has been a large amount of construction and some still in progress. With its focus on hyper-commercialism in the theme park and the production industry that looms behind it, the film

simply ignores the fact that the natural resources on which tourism depends will gradually be exploited and destroyed.

Lastly, we see unquestioned notions of Americanness in the assumption that the genetics company, InGen, is the only one holding this technology. Sturgeon (2010) noted that, “the United States promotes itself as the single global superpower. In particular, the reification of purity that acts as a foundation for individualistic and consumerist notions of health and safety often results in upholding existing economic privileges” (p. 178). In *Jurassic World*, the representation of U.S economic privilege is seen in the possibility of genetic modification for entertainment and also in the economic privilege of war technology.

The silences toward gender contained in this film include the clear sexist ideology between Claire and Owen. In discussing the politics of what is natural, Sturgeon (2010) noted, “The politics of reproduction- of people, families, economies and environments- center on gendered arrangements of work and sexuality” (p. 122). Over the course of the film, we see these characters’ relationship become very heteronormative. For example, Owen’s position as “alpha” to the raptors carries over into his relationship to Claire. Similarly, his military background puts him in a position of social power and expertise over other males in the film.

Another instance of unquestioned heteronormativity is seen in female subordination and the female as closer to nature. Again, we see Claire transform from a masculine position in her career to becoming subject and vulnerable to Owen as her leader. The nature of both Claire and Owen’s jobs in the park are not very different. Claire controls the production and presentation – controlling the business side of nature, which is frequently frowned upon by other characters. Owen’s job is to actively control and manipulate the raptors, but he is unquestioned and praised for his efforts. Claire’s character becomes emotionally closer to nature, adopts mothering skills

with her nephews, and becomes comfortable taking commands from her male counterpart. She is not normalized until she accepts herself into this ideological role, and this reinstates the “natural” function of females in society.

The trope of bio-warfare can be considered an ideologically significant, interpretive shift that plots nature and war onto a common conceptual grid. As a symbol of geoengineering, Andersen (2017) feared that the depiction of the Raptors might be the beginning of naturalizing a new form of military weaponry called “Biomimetics”. Andersen (2017) stated, “In jumping into the visual and textual discourses of what future warfare might be like, *Jurassic World* and other films, have pushed the theme of bio-warfare into the genres of science fiction” (p. 465). Within this theme of military entertainment and military as frontier, there are three key silences to interpreting its message about the inevitability of warfare. The first is the direct damage that military activity has on the environment. Citing Seager, an expert in feminist geography and global environmental policy, Sturgeon (2010) noted that “military is one of three of the most environmentally destructive institutions (along with governments and corporations), and it is often the most devastating because of the cloak of secrecy and the assumption of necessity that militaries enjoy” (p. 161). The second silence is the unquestioned expectation that there will be a necessity for greater weapons and that war will always exist. The ideological significance of this assumption is reinforcing war as a frontier and an unavoidable part of human nature. Lastly, all themes of manipulation of nature and using living organisms to serve and protect the human species are insinuating a very anthropocentric worldview of human supremacy: the myth that there is, and should be, a natural domination of humans over all other forms of life.

Conclusion

Although this film is focused on the context of *Jurassic World* (2015), it should be noted that the environmental narratives told in the background are patterned through various other Hollywood films and television shows. The critical perspective that I have offered gives light to the current acceptance of anthropocentrism, masculinist ideas of power, and the longstanding misconception of humans as part of a separate ecosystem, superior to the rest of the planet. Analyzing these problematic messages about nature and what society accepts as natural can help us to understand the need to connect environmentalism with popular culture as well as embrace a future that will help us think critically about socioeconomic inequality and the natural environment.

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