Movie-Watching, Money-Craving Murderers of Earth

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General Education
Nominated by Erik Trump, Professor of Political Science

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Many people watch movies simply for entertainment and pleasure, without realizing that they are possibly being slowly and subtly taught to destroy the planet. Like other works of art, films are created to express various thoughts, messages, and ideas, and viewers tend to absorb these messages, whether consciously or not. From there, the human mind creates a perception of reality based on the arsenal of ideas gathered through constant exposure to art, and thus adopts a certain ideology. Many popular American films have subtle environmental themes that aid in shaping society's views about the importance of protecting and coexisting with the natural world. However, the amount of emphasis placed on these themes is too small, and despite their grave importance, the messages are obscured and undercut by a disproportionate focus on convenient and efficient plot resolution.

Murray Edelman's *From Art to Politics* provides a framework for the argument that films can indeed shape people's thoughts and outlooks on the world. The main premise is that "art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent actions ultimately spring" (Edelman 2). In other words, although it may be tempting to contend that forms of art—including movies—are created to reflect certain political ideas, it is most often the case that political ideas arise only after people face ongoing contact with such art. In addition, Edelman argues that art influences the ways in which people view particular ideas or issues, leading them to categorize things based on perceived value, importance, and relevance. The "creation of [contestable] categories provides one kind of aesthetic lens through which conception and vision are constituted and reconstituted [and] what we 'know' about the nature of the social world depends on how we frame and interpret the cues we receive about that world" (Edelman, 109). People classify images and ideas on the basis of universally accepted criteria, and will, from the point of initial contact, regard them based on predetermined attitudes and judgments of like ideas. For example, a character represented in a work of art who acts righteously and does good will be classified as a hero, and therefore be viewed in a positive, respectful light.

In his essay "The Thematic Paradigm," author Robert Ray argues that American movie viewers are particularly attracted to stories that deal with the adventures of an outlaw hero, a sub-category within the general classification of hero. This type of plot involves a character who is at first somehow distanced from and skeptical of society. He does not maintain any real relationships, follows streams of thought different from the general population, and isn't afraid to disregard laws he finds unjust or useless. Then, spontaneously, a crisis occurs that severely limits the character's outlaw freedom, and forces him to act on behalf of the common good. In doing so, he becomes the story's official hero. Ray maintains that this model is so popular because it allows people to reconcile dichotomies. In other words, a hero can be both an immature outlaw and a

sophisticated upstanding citizen, and because "the American, on the whole, lives by two sets of 'truths,'" there is extreme appeal in a character and a lifestyle that embodies "diametrically opposing traits" (Ray).

The type of logic embodied in "The Thematic Paradigm" transfers from fictional stories into real American society, leaving the general public susceptible to another diametrically opposed belief: that they can preserve the natural world while simultaneously disregarding the effects that their actions may have on it. "Dark green" environmentalist Dave Foreman expresses in his book *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* just how profound societal influences can be on humans' attitudes towards the environment, and he shows the negative impacts that result when people fail to acknowledge the realities of pollution, resource exhaustion, and habitat destruction. He argues that humans have been conditioned over time to treat nature as a bank of resources rather than a valuable, living entity. "Society has lobotomized us. Our social environment today can work as a drug…to keep us in line, to sedate us, to remove our capacity for passion" (Foreman 5). Essentially, humans are being trained to develop indifference to their responsibility for the devastation of their natural surroundings, and thus are led to take part in activities that harm the Earth without thinking twice about it.

Included in this "social environment" discussed by Foreman is the film industry; many notable American movies casually incorporate environmental destruction into their storylines. Common themes within these films include the negative impacts of waste and pollution, destruction of native habitats and ecosystems, exhaustion of natural resources, and the perceived superiority of the corporation over nature. These ideas often serve as the source of conflict in the stories, and therefore the viewer is led to understand that they are truly problematic. However, in the typical Hollywood storyline, the conflicts are often resolved unrealistically, lessening the degree of seriousness and urgency placed on these environmental issues. Thus, audiences leave the theater feeling as though the problem has been completely solved. Ironically, such films rationalize the view that humans are superior to all other forms of life on Earth by clearly and continually diminishing the importance of environmental protection, and thereby influence people to accept the destruction of nature as a normal and perfectly acceptable occurrence.

Many prominent and popular films focus on the oversimplified resolution of problems associated with the environment. Two recent films, as well as two that debuted in the 1990's, illustrate this point rather clearly. *Avatar,* a 2009 blockbuster hit directed by James Cameron, follows a paralyzed Marine named Jake Sully as he fights to keep a powerful corporation from obliterating the natural habitat of the Na'vi people, a tribe of aliens that reside over a massive deposit of precious minerals on a planet called Pandora. Pixar Animation Studios' *WALL-E*, released in 2008, tells the story of a robot built specifically to clean up waste from the Earth, because humans had made such a mess that the planet had become entirely uninhabitable. Two earlier films have a similar perspective. *Pocahontas* (1995), one of Disney's greatest classics, focuses on the white man's invasion of Native American lands, their overuse of resources, and their annihilation of animals' habitats. Lastly, *Flipper*, originally created in 1963 and remade in 1996, documents the efforts of a young boy and his friends to stop pollution in their area and cure a dolphin that became sick as a result of toxic waste being dumped into the ocean.

All four films make an attempt to call attention to the problems associated with harming the environment. In each story, there are clearly identifiable antagonists who perform activities that are harming nature, and the movies revolve around the plight of the "good guys" trying to undo that damage. Through an appeal to sympathy and passion, the films easily convince viewers to take the side of the protagonist and wish defeat upon the polluters and habitat-destroyers. In *Flipper*, for example, the audience grows to love a boy named Sandy and his dolphin pal, Flipper, so when it is discovered that Dirk Moran, a commercial fisherman with a reputation for making trouble, is shooting dolphins and dumping toxic waste into the ocean, it becomes easy to declare him the story's indisputable villain. Similarly, the British explorers in *Pocahontas,* who are clearing the forest in search

for gold, and the humans that are mining for the mineral unobtanium in *Avatar* both act as brutal oppressors, as they destroy the natural environment and force relocation upon the tribes they conquer. More recently, *WALL-E* shows the evil of an entire human race that produced an unbearable amount of waste, destroying the Earth's ability to sustain life.

These agents responsible for environmental damage within the films are unarguably the villains of the story, and the basic human response to resist a villain theoretically will lead a person to also oppose that villain's actions. According to Edelman, to classify someone as a villain is to place them in a predetermined "stock category" that consists of negatively characterized individuals who are generally disliked and distrusted (126). Within this stock category are many variations of the typical villain, and these four environmental films use the same specific model—a greedy, selfish character who will sacrifice anything, including the well-being of others and the environment, to increase his personal wealth. They are "fiends who hold nothing of value but a greasy dollar bill [and they] are tearing down the pillars of evolution" (Foreman 5); because they fit perfectly into the stock villain category, they are viewed by the audience as cruel, terrible, and wrong. In theory, the easily identifiable existence of these characters is instrumental in getting the attention of the audience and making the claim that actions that harm the environment are indeed negative; "the reduction of rational action to neat contrasts between evil and virtue, competence and error, evoke[s] a herd spirit" (Edelman 127).

Both *Pocahontas* and *Avatar,* with similar storylines, illustrate the consequences of humans intruding on natural habitats in search of resources. When the British explorers in *Pocahontas*, led by Governor Ratcliffe, landed on the shores of the New World, they were purely on a quest for gold, with no regard for the Native Americans, animals, or other wildlife that stood in their way. Kocuom, a member of Pocahontas's tribe, is killed by one of the British men. In *Avatar*, the humans in search of unobtanium had very similar motives, and when discussing them with Dr. Grace Augustine, the lead scientist devoted to protecting and studying life on Pandora, the head of the mining corporation pointed to a piece of the mineral and remarked, "This is why we're here. Because this little gray rock sells for $20 million a kilo. That's the only reason." Not only did the actions of these greedy individuals destroy the environment, but in both movies, their efforts resulted in the ultimate negative consequence—death; Augustine is shot while stealing a helicopter in an attempt to help the Na'vi people. These deaths, victimizing the people who stand up for the natural world, further highlight the contrast between the good and the evil characters, and provide an excellent showcase of just how negative the impacts of invasion and habitat destruction can be.

Flipper and *WALL-E*, on the other hand, are more concerned with the effects that pollution and waste have on the environment. In *Flipper*, when Dirk dumps toxic waste in the ocean, he puts both of the story's main characters in direct danger, and thus evokes anger and hatred from the audience. Flipper becomes very sick as a result of exposure to harsh chemicals, and although Sandy and his friends are able to save him, many other fish and animals were killed. Not only was Sandy forced to deal with the sickness of his beloved dolphin, but his own safety was also directly compromised by the villain's actions. Dirk's boat hit and destroyed the dinghy Sandy was riding in, causing him to be thrown into the water and pursued by a hungry shark whose food supply had dwindled after the toxic dump.

In *WALL-E*, the main problem was garbage; humans had consumed so much and created so much waste that Earth was deemed uninhabitable and everyone was evacuated to live in space stations. The humans left trash-compacting robots to try and clean up the mess, but when the planet wasn't any cleaner after about five years, the people began to lose hope of returning home. When the story begins in the year 2805, WALL-E was the only robot left working. He lived a lonely life, and the only thing that brought him joy was collecting little treasures he found among the trash. Like *Flipper*, the struggles of a beloved character evoke pity, sympathy, and adoration from the audience and again reinforce the negative light cast on the story's main agent of environmental harm.

No matter the nature of the problem, in each of the stories an unlikely hero rises to solve it, in accordance with Ray's thematic paradigm. The heroes begin distanced from society: in *Avatar,* Jake Sully is a depressed Marine who was paralyzed in the line of duty; WALL-E is completely alone on a contaminated Earth; John Smith from *Pocahontas* is the only one of his British comrades who has moral and unselfish intentions about exploring the New World; and *Flipper's* Sandy is a rebel child sent from the city to spend a summer at the beach with his uncle and learn a thing or two about behaving. They find themselves accidentally in a position with the chance to do the right thing, and transform from outlaws to respected, righteous saviors of society. According to Ray, continued use of this type of hero "not only overcame binary oppositions; it [has] systematically mythologized the certainty of being able to do so."

Americans love to see a hero rise to the occasion and save the day, but this paradigmatically structured resolution takes away from the political and environmental statements the films try to make. The stories wrap up nicely in relatively short periods of time—less than three hours—and the wrongdoers are punished or forced out, leaving the heroes and their societies to live happily ever after. At the end of *Avatar,* the corporation in search of unobtanium withdraws from the fight with the Na'vi and removes all of its people from the planet Pandora. Auto, a robot that tried to keep the humans from returning and cleaning up Earth, is deactivated by his maker after WALL-E exposes his lies. *Pocahontas* concludes with the British explorers boarding their ships and heading back to Europe, leaving the New World in peace. In *Flipper,* Dirk Moran's evil deeds are revealed to a crowd on the pier as he is arrested and hauled off to jail. These resolutions are misleading, though, because problems don't end so simply in the real world. People are continually awaiting heroes and solutions that may never come.

Hollywood wants to use familiar, cherished story outlines because the industry is more concerned with film popularity, which translates into dollars grossed, than it is with exposing the public to political ideas. It is not uncommon to see movies judged based on box office totals. *Avatar* has been called the greatest movie of all time, because it grossed an unprecedented $2.8 billion (imDb.com). *Pocahontas, WALL-E,* and *Flipper* also cleared large profits, making $346.8 million, $521.3 million, and $20 million, respectively (imDb.com), and consequently are also highly regarded. The emphasis of wealth over moral messages can be considered typical in this "insane world where short-term greed rules over long-term life" (Foreman 9), because producers would rather fill their wallets with green money than fill the minds of their viewers with green ideas of biocentrism and environmental protection.

This disproportionate concern with money can be connected to the transformation of the environmental movement from a change-seeking conservationist organization of people to a professional business-like establishment. Foreman points out that unlike the passionate volunteer activists of the past, today's so-called environmentalists are career-oriented technicians who spend little time immersed in nature and are increasingly distant from the grassroots volunteer efforts that originally started the movement (202-206). It is easier for someone who is motivated solely by money than it is for someone truly passionate about the issue at hand to forget the cause they are advocating. Though professionalization attempts to award and compensate both movie-makers and people within the environmental movement for their work, it must be noted that it also hinders their ability to clearly communicate necessary messages.

This pattern of taking the focus off important issues is just another example of Ray's claim that there exist "two sets of truths" by which Americans live. Viewers see, within the same short film, the environment being destroyed and restored, and thus accept that both processes can occur simultaneously and harmoniously, ultimately resulting in an Earth that is at peace. Ray contends that "when faced with a difficult choice"—such as the decision whether to put the Earth first and thus stop the flow of profits, or continue to destroy the environment and make immense amounts of money—many stories resolve the problem "simplistically (by refusing to acknowledge that a choice is necessary)" (6).

Through this model, audiences subconsciously seek to eliminate the dichotomy between an Earth-protecting and Earth-destroying lifestyle. However, since this is not possible, the idea that the conflicts will be continually resolved far outweighs the notion that the environment is indeed being greatly harmed.

Movies should obviously be entertaining and enjoyable, but their typical conflict-resolution plots detract too much from the deeper themes. Many viewers likely didn't even notice that *Avatar, WALL-E, Pocahontas,* and *Flipper* and were so environmentally based; they were just enjoying aliens and robots and cute animals and dolphins and villains and heroes. According to Edelman, "well-known works of art often construct contradictory messages" (6), but the way in which a narrative is framed—by the producer or director of a film—shapes the audience response. In the case of these four movies, focus was shifted onto the rise of an outlaw hero, and thus the messages about preserving the environment faded into the background.

Edelman touches on this problem when he states that "images carry latent meanings that can mask their ideological implications and the reasons for their emotional thrust" (15). In other words, though the heroes and villains present in the films are intended to symbolically represent the destruction and restoration of nature, that meaning is sometimes concealed by the sheer fact that they are simply heroes and villains, good guys and bad guys, friends and foes—just characters in an entertaining story. As a result, the film industry is yet another influence on human perception that has encouraged a skewed view of environmentalism and the realities of anthropogenic devastation of the environment. Because there is a continual increase in a sort of "alienation of society from nature" (Foreman 69), and because humans are receiving fewer and fewer opportunities to experience the natural world firsthand, people are accepting films as accurate representations of environmental reality. Nature is detached from modern human life, and while works of art, including films, possess "floating significance into which political groups read whatever serves their interests" (Edelman 9), if the interest is misguided—toward the accumulation of wealth, and not the protection of nature—the fundamental messages will be misinterpreted or completely ignored, and destruction of the planet will continue.

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