BENJAMIN THEVENIN

Princess Mononoke and beyond: New nature narratives for children

ABSTRACT

Eco-cinema for children is a growing sub-genre of film that attempts to introduce environmental issues to young audiences. The conventional approach employed by many of these films from Bambi *(Algar et al., 1942) to* The Lorax *(Renaud and Bauda, 2012) is to use a melodramatic narrative structure in which heroic nature is pitted against harmful humanity. The use of melodrama makes sense given the narrative tradition's revolutionary roots and its accessibility to wide (and young) audiences. However, the efficacy of such an approach is debatable, especially in regards to its positioning of the audience as passive consumers rather than active participants. Given the understanding of film viewers as 'active audiences', this issue of the subjectivity of the child spectator is especially important. The following article engages in a comparative analysis of the conventional approach to eco-cinema for children and a new nature narrative, principally demonstrated by Hayao Miyazaki's* Princess Mononoke (1997). *While including certain elements from melodrama,* Monoke *is able to more effectively represent some of the complexities of environmental discourse and subsequently encourage more critical, active participation among its young viewers. Finally, the article argues that* Princess Mononoke *initiated a new trend in nature narratives for children, and that films like* Wall-E *(Stanton, 2008) continue to demonstrate the efficacy of eco-cinema for children that artfully balances complexity with accessibility.*

KEYWORDS

eco-cinema
children's film
melodrama
animation
environmentalism
nature
Miyazaki
Disney

As debates over the scientific evidence of global warming – and the legislative policies and industry practices that such science would necessitate – dominate the public sphere, these discussions are not limited to those had on the floor of the Senate. Especially since the rise in public awareness about global warming, environmental issues have appeared in a number of popular feature films, and not just *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004) or *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006). Interestingly, in the last few decades, environmental issues have been the subject of a number of animated children's films. From more subtle commentaries on the relationship between humanity and the natural world, like 1942's *Bambi*, to more polemical environmentalist narratives like 2012's *The Lorax*, there is a growing sub-category of film, 'eco-cinema for children'. 'For our children and our children's children', reads the title at the conclusion of *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (Kroyer, 1992), a perfect demonstration of this sub-genre's intention to present environmentalist narratives in accessible ways to promote engagement among young viewers.

This trend makes complete sense given the urgency of some of the environmental issues represented on-screen and the potential for cinema to shape public perceptions of them. Today, a child's awareness of, for example, over-fishing in the south Pacific is much more likely to come from the film *Happy Feet* (Miller, Coleman and Morris, 2006) than a piece of investigative journalism or findings from a scientific study of population patterns of oceanic animal life. These films, intentionally or not, are providing children with some of their first exposures to debates on global warming, pollution, animal rights, deforestation, over-fishing, etc.

This article does not intend to address whether or not children's films *should* address environmental conflict – here, the importance of introducing environmental concerns, through film or whatever means, is a given. Rather, considering the potential value of such representations, it is of greater concern *how* eco-cinema might represent these issues in ways that will most likely contribute to young viewers' preparation for informed, effective engagement in environmental discourse. Here, we address the (relatively short but not insignificant) tradition of eco-cinema for children and examine how common aesthetic and narrative approaches – particularly the reliance on *melodrama* – position viewers in certain ways, and therefore encourage certain readings of the films and understandings of the issues represented in these films. After evaluating these films' use of melodrama and their subsequent treatment of environmental issues and positioning of the audience, the article will explore these issues through an analysis of the 1997 film *Princess Mononoke*, representative of a fresh perspective on nature narratives for children, and will advocate for the development of an eco-cinema that more adequately prepares (especially young) viewers for effective engagement in environmental issues.

ECO-CINEMA FOR CHILDREN

Admittedly, this categorization of films – eco-cinema for children – is loosely defined. What constitutes cinema for children, especially given that many of the films addressed here might be considered 'family films', enjoyed by children and adults alike? This question is given much attention by I. Wojcik-Andrews who writes the following in the Introduction of his book *Children's Films: History, Ideology, Pedagogy, Theory* (2000):

There are in fact many ways of thinking about the 'idea of cinema for children' including the way in which we might define a children's film. It's a complicated issue and involves a range of personal, pedagogical, critical, textual, institutional, and cultural/imperial points of view. There are films aimed at children, films about childhood, and films children see regardless of whether or not they are children's films … Indeed, any attempt to universalize children's cinema, a children's film, or the nature of the child viewer, only reveals more closely the contradictions in which children's cinema finds itself situated.

(2000: 19)

It is notable that despite Wojcik-Andrews' acknowledgment of the difficulty of defining children's films, he situates this challenge as one facing any study of genre, style or narrative approach, and yet he goes on to discuss children's films at length. While admittedly the category of 'eco-cinema for children' is anything but universal, for the purposes of this article it may include films intended for, accessible to and/or enjoyed by children that address environmental issues whether explicitly (as in *Happy Feet*) or implicitly (as in *Monsters Inc.* Docter, Silverman and Unkrich, 2001).[1]

While a number of studies have examined approaches to nature narratives in literature for children (see Brooks 1972; Lebduska 1994; Op de Beeck 2005; Sigler 1994; Wolfe 2008), given the increased popularization of eco-cinema, there is a growing interest in the representation of environmental issues in film. J. Halberstam identifies this recent trend of socially conscious (and in particular, eco-oriented) films as 'pixarvolt – meaning animated movies depending upon Pixar technologies of animation rather than standard linear animation and foregrounding the themes of revolution and transformation' (2007). R. Murray and J. Heumann (2011) offer a particularly comprehensive overview of the representation of nature in animated feature films. Tracing the current trend of environmentally themed children's films back to early 'enviro-toons' – including Disney's *Bambi* (1942) and the Warner Bros-produced Goofy Gophers series from the 1950's – the authors locate contemporary films like *Wall-E* (2008) within an American cinematic tradition. Murray and Heumann particularly point out the role of this cinematic tradition at encouraging critical engagement with environmental issues among (especially young) viewers. They write,

Enviro-toons – animated shorts and feature films with ecology at their center – ask an audience to re-perceive everyday issues, themes, and knowledge related to differing phases of the American environmental movement …

(2011: 2)

As Murray and Heumann suggest, a brief overview of the history of eco-cinema for children reveals that 'enviro-toons' often represent environmental concerns that were particularly prevalent in public discourse. As R. Lutts (1992) notes, *Bambi* (1942) was produced by Disney among the emergence of animal rights and nature preservation movements (as well as the first critiques of hunting culture). Murray and Heumann (2011) suggest that after *Bambi*, Disney's tradition of animated, anthropomorphized animal protagonists – in *Lady and the Tramp* (Geronimi, Jackson and Luske, 1955), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (Geronimi, Lusker and Reitherman, 1961),

1. Also, given the majority of the films this study addresses are animated – the exceptions being *Hoot* (2006) and *Yogi Bear* (2010) (in which the animal characters are animated within live-action footage) – it may seem more appropriate to use the category 'animated eco-cinema'. However, this study's particular interest in the *audiences* and given the (often explicitly stated) intent of these films as environmentally oriented stories accessible to children, the category of 'eco-cinema for children' more adequately describes the traditions addressed here.

The Jungle Book (Reitherman, 1967), *The Aristocats* (Reitherman, 1970), *Robin Hood* (Reitherman, 1973), *The Rescuers* (Lounsberry, Reitherman and Stevens 1977), *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (Lounsberry and Reitherman 1977) and *The Fox and the Hound* (Berman, Rich and Stevens, 1981) – blurred the line between human and non-human nature, and therefore provided a subtle contribution to the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, the deregulation and neo-liberal expansion of the last few decades seem to have provided the most fertile ground for ecocinema for children – some of most explicitly ecocritical children's films have been produced during this era. And it is interesting to note that while in earlier eras, films have offered subtle, metaphorical tales featuring cute forest animals, recent examples of ecocinema for children – *Wall-E* (2008) and *The Lorax* (2012) – feature dystopian societies in which humans have ravaged the Earth in search of resources and are now struggling to regain an environmental conscience and revive the natural world. These narratives acknowledge the immediate threat that issues like global warming pose and even seem to take for granted humanity's inability to adequately address these problems (at least until after a global catastrophe).

The correspondence between the emergence of environmental movements and the creation of children's narratives has not gone unnoticed by scholars of media, popular culture, and the environment. In recent years, critical analyses of children's films – from Disney's *Bambi* (Lutts 1992; Whitley 2008) to Dreamworks' *Shrek* (Caputi 2007) – are becoming more common. In particular, there is a growing interest in the gradual diversification of environmental voices and approaches within environmentally themed children's films. For example, given the importance of issues like global warming, there is particular concern as to whether these recent films are framing environmental issues in ways that will facilitate informed, effective participation among rising generations.

The emergence of a 'new nature narrative' – specifically in the animated films produced by Japan's Studio Ghibli – has been a recent area of scholarly interest. D. Chute (1998) discusses how the works of Ghibli director Hayao Miyazaki emphasize ecology – both in the films' representations of the nature and engagement in environmental discourse as well as their interest in the interaction of part and whole, self and society, humanity and the world. S. Napier (2001) contrasts the cinema of *reassurance* (typified by Hollywood – and particularly Disney – studio productions) – 'in which all problems are solved and harmony is restored under the aegis of US ideology and values' with Miyazaki's cinema of *de-assurance*, which challenges this overly idealistic (and US-centric) notion. L. Goodhew and D. Loy (2004) discuss *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (Miyazaki 1984) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) in relation to their representation of traditionally Buddhist perspectives on non-violence (in relation to ideological, and specifically environmental, conflict). L. Wright (2005; and with Clode 2005) discusses Miyazaki's work as uniquely combining practices and perspectives of Shintoism – in particular the tradition's regard for nature – with postmodern, multicultural cinematic narratives to create a sort of 'modern myth'. D. Cavallaro (2006) surveys the work of Miyazaki, from *Nausicaa* to *Mononoke*, and discusses the relationship between the artistry of his animation and the complicated themes in his narratives – including issues of gender, culture, history, violence and the environment. And M. J. Smith and E. Parsons (2012) contrasts the environmental perspectives in *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* and *Princess Mononoke*, noting that while *Mononoke* strays

from the dominant representation of environmental issues in what they term 'children's enviro-tainment' (epitomized by *FernGully*), it nonetheless is 'antithetical to environmentalism' due to its rejection of 'the principles of deep ecology in displacing responsibility for environmental destruction on to "supernatural" forces and exhibit anthropomorphic concern for the survival of humans' (Smith and Parsons 2012: 25).

The following analysis of eco-cinema for children draws upon this body of scholarship that recognizes Miyazaki's films as aesthetically interesting and ideologically nuanced contributions to a growing category of eco-cinema for children. In particular, this study makes similar observations found in Smith and Parsons' comparative analysis of *FernGully* and *Mononoke*. However, despite the shared interest in dominant and emergent approaches to eco-cinema for children, this study arrives at very different conclusions than Smith and Parsons' article. Rather than fault *Princess Mononoke* for its failure to adhere to the tenets of 'deep ecology' or any other established critical ecological tradition, this article identifies how the film (and others which employ a similarly complicated eco-critical perspective) is evidence of an emergent narrative tradition within eco-cinema – one that departs from established narrative and ideological approaches to eco-cinema, and in so doing, more effectively introduces young audiences to environmental issues and invites their engagement in them.

YOUNG AUDIENCES: A CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH

Discussions of the relationship between children and media have been traditionally dominated by debates over 'media effects'. Since the Payne Fund's 1933 study of Motion Pictures and Youth, communication scholars, policy-makers and parents have been especially interested in questions first posed by W. Charters, director of the landmark study: 'Do the pictures really influence children in any direction? Are their conduct, ideals, and attitudes affected by the movies?…In short, just what effect do motion pictures have upon children of different ages?' (1933: v). And these are understandable concerns, especially given the state of contemporary society in which media messages are particularly ubiquitous, not least in the lives of youth.

While decades of research (see e.g. Bandura 2002; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944; Gerbner 1958, 1969, 1998; Schramm et al. 1961) have tried to document any measurable effects media have on audience's attitudes and behaviours, another group of scholars, in particular those coming out of the Birmingham Center for Cultural Studies in the United Kingdom proposed an alternative perspective on this relationship between children and media. Scholars like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall led studies that examined the 'lived practices' of communities – especially marginalized ones like the working poor, racial minorities, as well as youth – and in particular, their uses of popular media (see e.g. Clarke et al. 1976; Hall 1980; Hoggart 1959; Williams 1961). They too were interested in the power of media, especially in relation to children, but their approach acknowledged the active role that audiences necessarily play in shaping interpretations of media messages and integrating these experiences into daily practice. In 1980, Stuart Hall published 'Encoding/decoding' which articulates the perspective shared by these British cultural scholars. Like media effects discussions of 'agenda setting' and 'framing', Hall argues that media messages are 'encoded' with particular ideological perspectives. But instead of reducing media's influence on its audience to that of mere

cause and effect, Hall posits that before any media can have any effect, 'it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded' (1980: 165). And rather than position, for example, the film viewer as passively consuming cinematic content, Hall argues that the audience is actively engaged in decoding the filmic text, deriving meaning from it, and integrating it into existing perspectives on the world.

David Buckingham further develops Hall's approach and introduces a cultural studies approach to the study of children and media, in particular. This model identifies three potential sites of meaning-making: *production*, the *text* itself and the *audience*.[2] Buckingham discusses the importance of such an approach to the study of this relationship between children and media, writing

> Rather than seeing meaning as something that the media simply deliver to passive audiences, it focuses on the diverse ways in which meanings and pleasures are constructed, defined and circulated. It begins from the assumption that audiences are indeed 'active,' but that they act under conditions that are not of their own choosing – and to this extent, it challenges the tendency to equate 'activity' with agency or power. In the case of children, their relationships with media are structured and constrained by wider social institutions and discourses …
>
> (2008: 232)

Buckingham emphasizes the active role that audiences, and specifically children, have in making sense of media texts, but he is careful to acknowledge that this activity is always constrained by the other factors – culture, class, gender, race, education, individual experiences and elements of the text itself.

The following discussion of eco-cinema and young audiences will examine how particular aesthetic approaches – and the ideological perspectives subsequently 'encoded' in the text – position spectators in particular ways, constrain their potential readings of these nature narratives, and influence their engagement in environmental issues. To a certain degree, this discussion also continues a tradition of cinematic theories that address audience subjectivity. In Nick Browne's discussion of the 'spectator-in-the-text', he examines how cinematic rhetoric positions the spectator in relation to the cinematic narrative, and by implication encourages the spectator to identify with certain characters (and by implication, certain ideas) (Browne 2004). Laura Mulvey's famed feminist critique of the 'male gaze' argues that aesthetic and narrative conventions of cinema promote a certain, gendered subjectivity among film viewers (1975). And Manthia Diawara discusses the black spectator's response to the white subjectivity implicit in most of mainstream cinema (2004). These theories, while not explicitly referenced in the following analysis, provide a context in which studies of cinematic subjectivity – and particularly the cultivation of eco-critical audiences and citizens – may be further explored. The following analyses of environmentally themed children's films will address the use of melodrama to do just that – to position the young viewer in relation to the fictional representation of environmental conflict in certain ways, and therefore potentially influence her identification with particular environmental perspectives in the real world.

Admittedly, the following discussion, while interested in the subjectivities created by particular narrative approaches to eco-cinema and the audience's subsequent readings of and responses to these films, is not an ethnographic analysis of young film viewers. In many ways, the following comparison of

dominant and emergent approaches to eco-cinema for children relies upon some concept of the 'ideal viewer'. However, acknowledging the work of cultural theorists like Hall and Buckingham, this article will also seek to prob-lematize the concept of the 'ideal viewer' and discuss the possibility for multiple readings of these texts and multiple perspectives on the issues at hand.

MELODRAMA: A BRIEF HISTORY

Before analysing approaches to eco-cinema for children, and in particular these films' utilization of melodrama as a narrative structure for these fictional depictions of environmental conflict, it might be helpful to briefly review the historical roots of melodrama. While the etymological derivation of the term *melodrama* can be traced to Greek theater, the more common conception of the narrative structure finds its origins during the French Revolution. As a result of the National Assembly's 1791 decision to remove restrictions imposed by the *ancien regime*, authors, actors and audiences sought open expression of radical ideology. These artists created moral tales that emphasized emotionality and spectacle, thus engaging their audiences in the works' socio-political themes. Peter Brooks identifies melodrama's efficacy in communicating transforma-tive ideologies, describing it as 'the genre, and the speech, of revolutionary moralism: the way it states, enacts, and imposes its moral messages, in clear, unambiguous, words and signs' (quoted in Bratton et al. 1994: 16). And while melodrama was gradually incorporated into the dominant discourse and divested of its radical perspective, this moral clarity was maintained as a primary convention of the genre.

For example, melodrama was the primary narrative approach used by European theatre, and later, European and American silent cinemas. These narratives typically exhibited a moral didacticism consisting of archetypal characters, representative of polarized moral perspectives, who encounter and ultimately overcome conflict in an especially conclusive narrative resolu-tion. While founded in realism, this melodrama characteristically exaggerated reality in its spectacular action sequences and extreme emotionality. The audi-ence was drawn in by the spectacle, shared emotions with the characters, and was reassured by the moral triumph at narrative's end (Singer 2001: 52–58).

However, some cinematic and theatrical uses of melodrama maintained the revolutionary politics originally associated with the narrative approach. Shortly after Bolshevik Revolution, theatres funded by the Communist cause produced melodramas for the specific purpose of promoting radical ideology among young audiences. Makariev, a playwright of such theatre, describes the efficacy of the genre in inculcating a specific ideological perspective in its viewers, writing 'In the course of the performance the spectator performs complicated emotional work as he seeks the answer to the all-important questions: Who is right? Who is guilty? Who is good? Who is bad?' (Bratton et al. 1994:192) These moral quandaries were not left to the children to resolve on their own, but rather the moral conclusivity characteristic of melodrama provided politically motivated, emotionally charged narrative and ideological resolutions for the young audiences.

ECO-CINEMA FOR CHILDREN: MELODRAMA AND ENVIRONMENT

While the growing field of eco-criticism is interested in nature narratives that date as far back as antiquity, this study looks at the recent popularity of environmentally themed children's films and particularly their utilization of

the familiar melodramatic structure. Films such as *The Secret of Nimh* (Bluth, 1982), *The Rescuers Down Under* (Butoy and Gabriel, 1990), *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* (1992), *Once Upon a Forest* (Grosvenor, 1993), *Pom Poko* (Takahata, 1994), *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995), *A Bug's Life* (Lasseter and Stanton, 1998), *Tarzan* (Buck and Lima, 1999), *Monster's, Inc.* (2001), *Over the Hedge* (Johnson and Kirkpatrick, 2006), *Open Season* (Allers, Culton and Stacchi, 2006), *Happy Feet* (2006), *Hoot* (Shriner, 2006), *Bee Movie* (Hickner and Smith, 2007), *Open Season 2* (O'Callaghan and Wilderman 2008), *Up* (Docter and Peterson, 2009), *Yogi Bear* (Brevig, 2010), *Happy Feet 2* (Miller, Eck and Peers, 2011) and *The Lorax* (2012) – mostly western, and particularly American studio productions – are among the majority of children's films that rely on the melodramatic narrative structure to address environmental issues. In these narratives, the hero (partnered with or even representative of nature) is challenged by a villain (most often an embodiment of industry, harmful environmental practices or even humanity), but ultimately overcomes evil through physical conflict. And in the meantime, the audience is treated to spectacle – beautifully animated action sequences and song-and-dance numbers. The eventual victory of the heroes and heroines (*Tarzan*'s Tarzan and Jane or *Happy Feet*'s Mumble the penguin) over their villainous counterparts (*The Rescuers'* poacher Percival McLeach, *The Lorax*'s capitalist Aloysius O'Hare, or just humanity in general) symbolizes the environmentalists' ideological victory.

The use of melodrama in such representations of environmental issues is self-explanatory, especially given the historical precedent in which the form is used to clearly communicate progressive political ideology to the masses. And the use of melodramatic rhetoric is not limited to fictionalized representations of environmental conflict, but is often employed by activists and policy-makers as well. S. Schwarze writes that 'given the stakes of our environmental challenges and the mighty economic, political, and cultural resistance to addressing those challenges in a significant way, it is not surprising that contemporary advocates see melodrama as a timely and appropriate rhetorical strategy for addressing environmental issues' (2006: 257). The very grave consequences of inaction regarding issues like global warming, deforestation, water pollution, etc. encourage the use of mobilizing, unifying political rhetoric that melodrama provides.

And given the young audiences of these animated films, melodrama's simple, instructive approach proves even more effective at introducing children to the basics of environmental discourse. The use of melodrama in stories – environmentally oriented or not – for children is supported by child-psychologist and cultural theorist Bruno Bettleheim. In *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettleheim discusses the significance of fairy tale representations of complicated moral and ethical issues using simplified, polarized characters (often engaging in conflict).

> The figures in fairy tales are not ambivalent – not good and bad at the same time, as we all are in reality. But since polarization dominates the child's mind, it also dominates fairy tales. A person is either good or bad, nothing in between … Presenting the polarities of character permits the child to comprehend easily the difference between the two, which he could not do as readily were the figures drawn more true to life, with all the complexities that characterize real people.
>
> (1976: 9)

According to Bettleheim, children are not equipped to comprehend complexity and are thus dependent upon stories' simplified representations of moral and ethical issues to make any sense of them. Because of the simplicity with which it represents moral issues, melodrama is, then, ideally suited as a narrative approach for introducing environmental discourse to young audiences.

ECO-CINEMA FOR CHILDREN: ENVIRONMENTAL EFFICACY

While these children's films are fueled by progressive environmentalist ideologies, a closer analysis of their use of melodrama will determine, as discussed by Smith and Parsons, 'whether these elements indeed encourage environmental activism by engaging child political agency is … considerably more complicated than a film about the tragic destruction of a forest might at first glance appear' (2012: 27). The intentional use of melodrama in this predominant approach to eco-cinema for children – demonstrated by the long list of films in the previous section – is similar to its earliest manifestations in seventeeth-century France – to challenge the dominant paradigm by advocating revolutionary ideology. Yet by so often over-emphasizing spectacle, reducing issues to conflicts between morally polarized characters, and concluding with tidy narrative and ideological resolutions, these films reinforce a very particular type of environmental discourse and constrain the audiences' engagement in that discourse.

Among these critiques of the conventional approach to eco-cinema for children is the problematic nature of so prominently featuring spectacle, at the expense of developing character, forwarding story, and communicating theme. Cavallaro points out that oftentimes, in these films 'technique tends to take precedence over narrative, to the point that the story often becomes primarily a way of celebrating the animator's technical expertise' (2006: 10). This is particularly notable in the beautifully animated (but arguably counterproductive) spectacular sequences in movies like Disney's *Tarzan* and *Pocahontas* and Warner Bros' *Happy Feet*. In an effort to dazzle their audience, they overemphasize the spectacular elements. And while Tarzan's tree-surfing and the penguins' performance of pop songs undoubtedly attract the attention of young viewers, *education* (while admittedly not the primary purpose of these films) clearly takes a back seat to *entertainment*. Given the fact that these films are tent-pole summer blockbuster films, produced by large Hollywood studios for hundreds of millions of dollars, their emphasis of the spectacular is no surprise.

Now, this is not meant to suggest that eco-cinema for children must avoid spectacle; rather, the concern is that a film's overemphasis on action sequences or musical numbers positions the viewer as passive, capable only of identifying a beautified, stylized environment as 'nature' to be saved and content to consume these extraordinary exhibitions of animated artistry and technological trickery. In his discussion of Disney's *Bambi* (1942), D. Whitley remarks that beautified representations of nature (and worse, 'cutified' representations of wildlife) 'may create a barrier, making it more difficult for viewers to understand and relate to a "real" nature that has not been so carefully manicured and stage managed as spectacle' (2008: 3). As a result, these films' beautiful depictions of the natural world potentially alienate their young audiences from 'real' nature, rather than invite them to be more mindful of it.

The reliance on spectacle also distracts its audience from the matters at hand. Pom Poko's shape-shifting raccoons and Pocahontas' song 'Colors of

3. The villains in a number of Pixar's films are not depicted as evil opponents to nature, but rather as greedy individuals with irresponsible environmental practices. Oftentimes these characters, when faced with the depletion of needed natural resources, threaten the innocent protagonists who, of course, are sympathetic to nature. In *A Bug's Life*, Hopper and his grasshopper minions force the ants to provide them with food for the winter. In *Monster's Inc.*, Mr Waternoose constructs a machine that forcibly extracts screams from children, in order to supply the monster community with energy. And in *Up*, Muntz throws young Russell out of his blimp when he foils his attempt to capture a rare tropical bird.

4. While this idea of collective public action as the means of resolving environmental conflict is excellent, the fact that the community is mobilized as a result of Ted's planting one tree misrepresents the struggle of such environmentalist efforts.

the Wind' are among these films' most impressive, and as a result, memorable sequences, but the awe that they elicit from the audience is only serviceable to environmental causes when it increases interest, raises awareness and encourages action. As a result, when the penguins of *Happy Feet* cover Prince songs, young viewers are *diverted* (in both senses of the word) – they are captivated by the spectacle, but also distracted from any environmental sentiment expressed in the film.

Next, in an effort to make the story and its environmental implications accessible to young audiences, the conventional approach often resorts to depictions of archetypal characters that embody moral polarities. In probably the tradition's most obvious example, *FernGully: The Last Rainforest*, a band of forest fairies battle evil logging machinery that literally transform into monsters and maliciously attack the vegetation and wildlife. And Disney has nearly a century-long tradition of pitting heroes against villains. In the case of these films, wild animals and sympathetic humans like Tarzan and Jane must battle poachers like Percival from *The Rescuers Down Under* and Clayton from *Tarzan*. J. Zipes describes this polarization, writing 'The message in these "black and white" films is simplistic … There is no complexity in a Disney fairy-tale film, no exploration of character or the causes that created obstacles for the protagonists in the narratives' (2006: 209).[3] Whether destroying the natural environment itself or just threatening the safety of others through greedy or irresponsible environmental practices, the tactics of these antagonists parallel those employed in contemporary industry.

Again, the representation of such villainous antagonists in these films is not as concerning as the way in which these representations present environmental discourse as the clashing of completely antithetical world-views. By reducing such a complicated dialogue to a battle between good and evil, these films suggest to children both that the issues at hand are uncomplicated, and that the way to victory is through (often violent physical) conflict.

Lastly, eco-cinema's use of melodrama often involves concluding the narrative (and by implication, the ideological struggle) with a definitive resolution. In order to conform to the conventions of melodrama and the expectations of most viewers, the films must end with '… and they lived happily ever after'. Mumble the penguin's dancing abilities make him an international sensation, and as a result, global fishing practices are regulated. Ted, from *The Lorax*, finds and plants the last seed in Thneedville, and seeing its beauty, the citizens abandon their materialistic practices.[4] And at the conclusion of *FernGully*, Crysta the forest fairy sacrifices herself and, as a result, is able to defeat the evil logging machinery. Specifically discussing the tidy resolution of environment conflict in *FernGully*, Wojcik-Andrews writes

> … what stops water and air pollution, 'acid rain pouring down,' environmental racism and 'toxic love' is green politics not green aesthetics, collective forms of political organization rather than individualist forms of self-sacrifice.
>
> (2000: 132)

But again, the concern is not that these films end with such neat narrative resolutions. These stories' conclusions – in which villainous industry is soundly defeated by heroic nature – are optimistic, and understandably so. The real concern is that in representing these victories, the films fail to offer (even metaphorically) any effective avenue for real-world, environmental

activism. Instead, young viewers are told a story in which the singular act of an individual – whether it be doing a dance, planting a tree or sacrificing oneself – resolves the issue at hand. At best, these stories fail to represent the ongoing, collective, organized engagement of communities in environmental struggles. At worst, these stories so resolutely solve these problems on-screen that audiences are likely to feel little urgency in learning about or engaging with real-world conflicts. After all, the 'good guys' won, right?

At the conclusion of their very exhaustive survey of environmental representations in animated films, Murray and Heumann remark how this dominant approach limits (rather than enables) viewers from engaging in discourse and action related to these grave environmental issues: 'We end this book, then, with at least one area of concern: How can enviro-toons make the jump from environmentalist messages couched in entertaining animated features to tools of the environmental movement?' (2011: 249). It seems that if, ultimately, the intent of eco-cinema is to mobilize audiences to question their relationship with nature and participate in environmental activism, the happy, tidy conclusions of these entertaining movies is not doing the job.

While this eco-cinematic tradition represents environmental issues in ways accessible to their young audiences, the melodramatic rhetoric employed in such representations suggests a reductionist, sensationalist environmentalism that does not adequately address the complexities of the issues. And given that these films for children utilize this specific melodramatic approach, they have essentially established a dominant nature narrative with debatable environmental efficacy. The reliance on spectacle attracts young audiences, but it also encourages passive consumption of entertainment, rather than critical consideration of story and theme. The films' heroization of nature and its allies and vilification of industry and humanity creates a conflict that excites the audience, but as a result suggests that environmental discourse is a war between good and evil, without complication, perhaps bringing hope to an energized audience, but more likely delivering to them fictional, uncomplicated, idealized victories in place of inviting them to engage in their own activist efforts.

Ultimately, this discussion of the dominant approach within eco-cinema for children is only beneficial when contextualized within broader cultural studies of children and media. Buckingham's model, for example, underscores the importance of

> … how texts address and construct the child viewer – for example, the various ways in which the viewer is spoken to; how the viewer is or is not invited to be involved; the function of children as actors or participants within the programmes; how adult-child relations are represented or enacted; and more formal devices, such as how the visual design of the studio, the camerawork, graphics and music imply assumptions about who children are, and what they are (or should be) interested in.
>
> (2008: 230)

Yet, this emphasis of the relationship between text and audience is only one among many potential sites of meaning-making. Children's readings are necessarily influenced by textual elements (including the use of spectacle or the moral polarization of characters), but they also draw upon broader social and cultural practices and perspectives, the children's knowledge and experience with institutional purposes and processes, as well as their personal inclinations and experiences. So, while the dominant approach to eco-cinema

would seem to position the ideal child viewer in certain ways (as potentially passive or, to use Napier's term, *reassured*), this is only what is encoded in the text, and cannot account for the diverse ways in which young audiences might *decode* these messages.

MIYAZAKI'S NEW NATURE NARRATIVES FOR CHILDREN

While the previous discussion examines a particular pattern of eco-cinema for children, its treatment of the audience, and its environmental efficacy, it is important to acknowledge that this conventional approach is not without exception. Films such as *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), *Wall-E* (2008), *Ponyo* (Miyazaki, 2008) and *The Secret of Kells* (Moore and Twomey, 2009) also introduce young audiences to the tenuous relationship between humanity and nature, and often do so utilizing elements of melodrama. However, as the following discussion and narrative analysis of the film *Princess Mononoke* will demonstrate, these films are arguably more successful at positioning young viewers in ways that encourage them in developing informed perspectives and an active engagement in environmental discourse.

Before continuing the discussion of competing eco-cinematic representations, it might be helpful to address the dramatic difference in cultural representation between dominant and emergent approaches. While the long list of films in the previous section was comprised of mainly Hollywood studio productions, *Princess Mononoke* and these other, few outliers (with some exceptions) are mostly Studio Ghibli productions (the exceptions being the US-produced *Wall-E* and Ireland-based *The Secret of Kells*). This is no coincidence. In Bazalgette and Staples' history of children's films, they write

> That children's cinema – and cinema generally – should be so thoroughly dominated by American companies seems perfectly natural in the United States, as one would expect. That it also seems perfectly natural in many other countries is the outcome of a cinematic cultural imperialism that has been energetically promoted throughout the twentieth century.
>
> (1995: 97)

The political economy of global cinema reveals how over the twentieth century Hollywood became synonymous with cinema – and by implication, Hollywood produced children's films with 'cinema for children'. And the reality of cultural imperialism necessarily affects this discussion of dominant and emergent approaches to eco-cinema for children.

It is no wonder that, given the incredible dominance of Hollywood over the global cinematic landscape that the dominant eco-cinematic approach would be found in American-made, studio-produced movies. It is also no coincidence that the films that challenge these dominant narrative and ideological approaches would be produced outside of Hollywood. And this might be for a few reasons. First, given the historical roots of melodrama – predominately in western civilization – it makes sense that a more traditionally melodramatic structure (emphasizing spectacle, clearly communicating particular ideologies to its viewers, etc.) would be a part of nature narratives produced in the West. This can be attributed, in part, to the historical use of melodrama from early American silent films to the summer blockbusters produced today. But perhaps

more to the point, the Judeo-Christian theological and cultural traditions of the West seem fertile ground for the cultivation of ideologically explicit, morally polarized (and in our case, ecologically aware) approaches to storytelling, and in particular eco-cinema. Whereas Ghibli's films, produced in Japan, are more likely to reflect theological and cultural traditions more commonly associated with the East – Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Confucianism, etc. – that draw upon different traditions of storytelling and often present alternative moral perspectives than the traditionally western notions of good and evil.[5]

Having created films of worldwide critical acclaim and box-office success, animator and director Hayao Miyazaki may be the most celebrated contemporary Japanese film-maker. A common subject matter of his films – whether included explicitly in the plot or implied in the beautiful, natural settings – is the relationship between humanity and nature. In fact, Goodhew and Loy (2004) identify Miyazaki as a 'deep ecologist, for his obvious belief that the natural world does not exist only for humans to exploit it; rather, the flourishing of all the earth's creatures has its own intrinsic value, independent of their usefulness for us' (2004: 85–86). Yet despite the strong environmental focus of many of his films, this categorization of Miyazaki's environmental perspective is somewhat oversimplified. While his films, and in particular *Mononoke*, address the relationship between humanity and nature, the ideological complexity Miyazaki portrays in his of his works cannot be accounted for by a particular environmental perspective. 'Miyazaki steers clear of commending any one ideological agenda, led by his own personal disillusionment with revolutionary politics to beware of any codified system of thought' (Cavallaro, 2006: 32–33), writes Cavallaro. The difficulty to locate Miyazaki within an existing ideological approach to environmental issues is perhaps due to the long history and incredible diversity of ecocritical thought in Japan (relative to the West, and in particular the United States). As R. Forrest et al. (2010) write, Japan's environmental movements can be traced back to the fourteenth century (when, as will be discussed shortly, *Princess Mononoke* is set), when community councils responded to rapid deforestation with the establishment of environmental regulation policies. In the following centuries, Japan's central governments enforced policies regulating deforestation, waste management, and pollution. However, this history is not without incident. During what is a period of rapid industrialization, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular, Japanese citizens often protested against harmful industrial practices – the emergence of 'Minimata Disease' (mercury poisoning due to toxic drinking water) in the 1950s being among the most widely recognized of these cases. Environmentalist efforts in Japan today range from wetland restoration to anti-nuclear power protests, reflecting the nation's history of locally led, incredibly varied environmental movements. So, while Miyazaki obviously draws on some existing ideological constructions, the environmental rhetoric employed in his work defy simple categorization.

The rejection of simple, conclusive ideological perspectives provides a fresh approach to environmental issues, particularly for young audiences. Miyazaki's films answer the call for a 'new nature narrative' – one in which traditional narrative traditions and ideological formulations are complicated to more effectively address contemporary environmental politics. And the fact that Miyazaki allows such complexity in children's films indicates both his confidence in young people's involvement in the issue and the responsibility he feels to adequately prepare them (in his own small way) for that involvement. Speaking of *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki states 'I think that if you are

5. Again, this perspective is explored in depth by Goodhew and Loy (2004) and Wright (2005).

very genuine in doing films for young children, you must aim for their heads, not deciding for them what will be too much for them to handle' (Cavallaro 2006: 121). The expectation he has of his young audience, manifest in this statement, as well as the sophistication of his animated films contrasts greatly from the oversimplified, morally conclusive children's films that dominate the industry and its participation in environmental discourse.

PRINCESS MONONOKE AS MELODRAMATIC ENVIRONMENTALISM

Now, the following discussion of this refreshingly multifaceted, counter-conventional approach to eco-cinema for children (and particularly in *Princess Mononoke*) does not dismiss the use of the melodramatic narrative structure in these films. In fact, of all of Miyazaki's films, *Mononoke* most obviously utilizes melodrama. As the subsequent analysis will demonstrate, *Mononoke*'s particular use of melodrama is able to effectively communicate to children the nuanced environmental perspective Miyazaki advocates. However, an analysis of the film's narrative conventions is only possible with a basic understanding of the plot.

The story takes place during Japan's Muromachi period (between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries), and follows a fictional conflict between nature and the developing industry. When a boar god, poisoned by an iron bullet, transforms into a demon and attacks a village, the young protagonist Ashitaka must protect his people. He defeats the demon but, in doing so, is wounded. In his wound, Ashitaka carries a curse, caused by the iron bullet, that will eventually consume him with hatred and cost him his life. Ashitaka leaves his village to find the source of this curse and to 'see with eyes unclouded'. During his travels, Ashitaka encounters two competing communities: iron-works directed by Lady Eboshi and a pack of wolf gods led by the human San (or Princess Mononoke). Lady Eboshi and her people compete with San and the animal gods for control of the forest. Ashitaka is sympathetic to both sides' perspectives and works to end the war between them. However, Eboshi angers the forest gods by seeking to slay the Deer God, the deity that controls the life and death of all plants and animals. Eboshi fights San and the animal army, and is successful in decapitating the Deer God, causing the immediate ruin of the land. In the end, Ashitaka rescues both Eboshi and San from death and restores the Deer God's head. The forest is revived; Ashitaka is healed of the curse; but the Deer God remains dead. Despite their budding romantic relationship, Ashitaka and San separate – the former returning to help rebuild the ironworks, the latter staying in the forest with the animals.

This summary of the narrative is helpful in locating the film in a context of the conventions of melodrama – specifically the use of symbolism and spectacle. As discussed earlier, the melodramatic narrative traditionally utilizes an allegory in which opposing ideologies come into conflict. The film's battle between San and the forest gods and Eboshi and the ironworkers effectively parallels the contemporary environmental conflicts between nature and industry.

Melodrama often utilizes physical conflict to represent competing values, and thus the victors in battle are represented as those possessing moral uprightness. Brooks writes

> The final act of melodrama will frequently stage a trial scene … in which the character of innocence and virtue is publicly recognized through its

signs, and publicly celebrated and rewarded, while the villain is bodily expelled from the social realm: driven out, branded as evil, relegated to a space offstage and outside the civilized world.

(1972: 19)

The film ends with the restoration of the forest and the destruction of the ironworks, implying the temporary ideological victory of the natural environment.

Also, in traditional melodrama, the conventional narrative is supplemented with a strong sense of spectacle. B. Singer writes that, 'Crucial to a great deal of popular melodrama [is] sensationalism, defined as an emphasis on action, violence, thrills, awesome sights, and spectacles of physical peril' (2001: 48). *Mononoke*'s beautifully designed sets and characters, its ground-breaking animation, and the emphasis on action throughout the film undoubtedly qualifies it as spectacular.

Miyazaki's adherence to these conventions of melodrama in *Princess Mononoke* allows the film to function as the genre was used in its earliest forms. The narrative presents an environmental conflict using allegory – in which characters are representative of certain ideological perspectives – making these issues more accessible to its young audiences. The victory of nature in the film (or at least the absence of its defeat) is an indicator of the film's environmentalist perspective. And given that the film is arguably specifically intended for children, the symbolism and especially the spectacle are effective at engaging the audience in the story and helping them understand the ideological issue being addressed.

While *Princess Mononoke* exhibits many of the conventions of the genre, the film cannot be categorized as simple melodrama. In his development of complex characters, careful use of spectacle and avoidance of absolute resolution, Miyazaki deviates from the traditional form of the genre. In service of melodrama's simple allegory, characters are often simplified as one-sided personifications of moral values. Singer concludes that 'Melodrama's worldview is simplified; everyone's ethical status is immediately legible' (2001: 46). While *Mononoke* takes a firmly environmentalist stance, its characters are not reduced to stereotypes.

In their analysis of *Mononoke*,[6] Goodhew and Loy note that in the films 'humans are not stigmatized as evil, nor is nature romanticized'; rather, each group is 'trying to the best it can, within its own world-view and limited understanding' (2004: 87). San and the gods seek to protect their family and the forest, yet they are ruthlessly violent and vengeful. Lady Eboshi, while hateful towards San and unapologetic in her ravaging of the natural landscape, is compassionate to her own community. She takes in prostitutes and lepers, employs them at the ironworks, and gives them the respect of which they have been deprived. She even keeps a garden, implying that her desire is not to destroy nature, but rather to use it as a means of providing for her community.

The complexity of the characters is further demonstrated by the divisions among both the humans and the animals. Wolves, apes and boars share contempt for the destructive humans, but they dispute with one another over the best method to approach the conflict. And the humans are no less divided – the ironworkers, riflemen and samurai fight one another as well. For example, as the ironworkers hear of the samurais' attack their homes, the men rebel against Eboshi and return to defend their families. While humans

6. It is also necessary to acknowledge that many of the same narrative and aesthetic elements are present in Miyazaki's 1984 film *Nausicaa: Valley of the Wind*, which Goodhew and Loy also address in their analysis.

and animals may be representative of opposing ideological positions, each group is far from demonstrating a unified perspective.

Above all, Ashitaka, the film's protagonist is the embodiment of this complexity of character, being both physically and morally divided in regards to the conflict. The scar that Ashitaka received from the demon god provides him with great strength but threatens to consume him with hatred. Ashitaka must reconcile this passion with his respect for life. In a pivotal scene, Ashitaka uses his increased strength to prevent Eboshi and San from destroying one another. Because of his inner struggle, Ashitaka is able to sympathize with each of the women's perspectives, but he refuses to take sides and resort to violence. Instead, he is empowered by this inner struggle to more capably resolve the conflict. (In addition, his refusal to join the conflict provides a particularly funny moment in the film when another character, confused by Ashitaka's behaviour, asks 'Whose side is he on anyway?')

As noted above, *Princess Mononoke* is not without spectacle, but the manner in which the visuals are presented exceeds simple sensationalism. First, while the characters (strange animals, demons, demons, gods and various historical peoples) are all carefully designed and the animation is innovative (in *Mononoke*, Miyazai pioneered the use of digital effects in drawn animation), the aesthetic efforts still support the film's communication of ideas. The careful character design and use of computer animation adds elements of realism otherwise unachievable in animated films, therefore contributing to the film's beauty and grounding the fantastic film in a tangible reality.

Finally, the film's most significant deviation from convention is the ambiguity it allows in its communication of 'revolutionary moralism'. While *Mononoke*'s conclusion offers a hesitant resolution (Ashitaka, San and Eboshi's lives are spared and the forest is restored), the greater conflict between industry and nature is left unresolved. Both humans and animals suffer severe loss of life, the Deer God is dead, and the ironworkers return to rebuild their community at the edge of the forest. Interestingly, the film's ending even avoids another typicality of melodrama: heterosexual union as a metaphor for ideological reconciliation. While San and Ashitaka's growing love for one another is evident, they decide to live apart. In an interview about the film, Miyazaki discussed this lack of resolution, saying 'I gave up on making a happy ending in the true sense a long time ago. I can go no further than the ending in which the lead character gets over one issue for the time being' (Cavallaro 2006: 6). Miyazaki's obligation to present more accurate depictions of complex matters requires him to deviate from the conventional, simplified approach.

PRINCESS MONONOKE: ENVIRONMENTAL EFFICACY

Compared to dominant approach to representing environmental conflict in children's films (addressed earlier in this article), Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* more adequately addresses these concerns, particularly in the way in which it complicates melodramatic conventions to create a 'writerly text' and subsequently positions its young viewers as an active audience, encouraging their engagement in environmental discourse (Barthes 1974).

First, while other films' emphasis of spectacle often distracts and detracts from the ideological argument, *Mononoke*'s use of spectacle serves the narrative and thematic objectives. This is most evident in *Mononoke*'s representation of violence, and especially in a sequence involving the newly empowered Ashitaka. As the curse has endowed him great strength, it has also given him

the capability to commit greater acts of violence. So, when Ashitaka attempts to ward off some attacking samurai with his bow and arrow, he unintentionally dismembers and decapitates them with his powerful shots. But rather than allow the audiences to revel in the violence, the film accounts for these acts. Ashitaka is disturbed by the destructive power that he now wields, and he struggles for the rest of the story to contain these dark powers. So, while violence, typical of melodrama's spectacle, is included, it functions to reinforce one of the film's themes. As a result, the audience – rather than being 'sutured' into the cinematic world (with its particular ideological perspective) through the use of animated action sequences – experiences some alienation (in the Brechtian sense) and is prompted to consider the consequences of the violent spectacle often depicted in the dominant approach to eco-cinema (and in mainstream film, in general).

Allegory is another convention that, while sometimes misused in the conventional children's films, is successfully utilized in Miyazaki's film. These conventional environmental films position humanity and industry as 'nature's principle enemy' while *Mononoke*'s complex characters problematize this perspective and provide a more insightful look into environmental issues for young viewers.[7] Both San and Eboshi demonize each other, much like the antagonists in the dominant approach to eco-cinema are demonized. However, within its narrative, the film acknowledges the inadequacy of this approach. While demonizing the opposing perspective is helpful in one's justification of violence against them, this violence is ultimately ineffective at reaching a resolution. Instead, Miyazaki's film demonstrates the complexity of the situation. Through sympathetic depictions of characters on both sides of the conflict, the acknowledgment of the grave consequences of violence, and the positioning of Ashitaka as a mediator between the two sides, *Mononoke* more effectively demonstrates the conflict between humanity and nature. Both San and Eboshi are seen as protecting and providing for their community, not requiring the absolute destruction or preservation of the natural environment.

As a result, the audience is encouraged to examine the motivations and actions of both sides. The battle between the two groups is followed by great losses of life on both sides. This representation of grave violence demonstrates the inability of vicious ideological battles to achieve positive results. And because the film's protagonist Ashitaka must navigate between the two sides of the conflict, the viewer is placed in a position to seek her own mediation on the issue. Smith and Parsons (2012) stress the significance of the film's treatment of the subject and the young audience.

> Ashitaka leads viewers through this intellectual journey in that he cares about the forest and Iron Town apparently in equal measure and his multiple-allegiance makes any simple binary opposition between good and evil impossible to draw. There is no simple good and evil split that disallows the implied child viewer the opportunity to intellectually engage with the most pressing issue of our times.
>
> (Smith and Parsons 2012: 29)

Finally, while the dominant environmental narratives end with a resolution in which nature triumphs over industry, *Mononoke*'s conclusion provides only a temporary pause in the conflict. While Disney's villains are defeated (*The Rescuers'* poacher McLeach drowns, *Tarzan*'s gorilla-killing Clayton antagonist is strangled to death, and *Up*'s Charles Muntz obsessive hunter

7. For a broader discussion of the relationship between the representations of nature and the effects of these texts on audiences, see McComas and Shanahan (1998).

falls from his dirigible), Eboshi's life is spared by her supposed enemies. And while *Happy Feet*'s Mumble and *The Lorax*'s Ted are able to miraculously change societal practices through individual acts, Ashitaka and San witness the death of the forest gods, despite their heroism. The battle was not won, and the war is far from over. Cavallaro notes that Miyazaki's work 'refuse[s] to camoflauge life's sorrows or simplify its complexities in a Disneyesque fashion' (2006: 12).

The reassurance typical of the dominant eco-cinematic approach is substituted for Miyazaki's hesitant hope. And rather than feel relieved at the neat resolution depicted in these other films, *Mononoke*'s viewers are encouraged by the open-endedness of the narrative to engage in the issue themselves. Napier describes the film's conclusion as 'a wake-up call to human beings in a time of environmental and spiritual crisis that attempts to provoke its audience into realizing how much they have already lost and how much more they stand to lose' (2011: 236). So, *Mononoke*'s disconcerting conclusion functions to make the audience aware of the current, complex environmental conflict and encourage them to get to work.

Again, while this discussion of the particular narrative approach and ideological perspective in Princess Mononoke is helpful at understanding how young audience might decode film, this study does not intend to suggest that these 'ideal' readings are universal. Without engaging in the type of cultural studies of media audiences pioneered by Hoggart, Hall and others, this study is necessarily limited to a discussion of potential meaning-making processes, facilitated by certain textual elements, with the caveat that audiences (and in this case, young audiences) are influenced by a number and variety of textual and contextual factors in their readings of and responses to any text.

In fact, if critical responses to the film are any indication of actual audience responses to its environmental message, the film's complexity might be met with some trepidation – not necessarily from young audiences, but from their adult companions. While the reviews of the film have been generally very positive, a number of critics add commentary on the film's less conventional, more 'challenging' characteristics. One reviewer describes *Mononoke* as having 'an extremely complex and adult script' (Klady 1999). Another writes,

> It's an art film, a densely plotted and visually stunning piece of animation, and not a movie for everybody. Little kids for example. They may watch with wide eyes, but making sense out of the story is another matter. 'Princess Mononoke' is often scary and violent … In addition, little kids may not easily catch the names of the characters … Good and evil aren't clear cut.
>
> (Stack 1999)

And these responses are not unjustified – for parents accustomed to their children watching beautified, cutified and sanitized (but as we have discussed, often ideologically problematic) Disney films, the complexity, brutality and ambiguity of *Mononoke* may seem alienating. Some young audiences may be prevented from engaging with some of the important themes, not because they are unequipped to do so, but because they are not allowed to watch the film in the first place. Other reviews note the exciting and potentially productive aesthetic and ideological characteristics of the film (even while

carefully contextualizing some of the content for younger viewers). Andrew O'Hehir writes

> What I'm trying to say is that 'Princess Mononoke' is likely to do the impossible – it will thrill audience members aged from about 10 to 100 (although the violence in this movie is never gratuitous, it may prove too intense for younger children), *and it may also get them thinking*.
>
> <div align="right">(1999, emphasis added)</div>

And on a similar note, Todd McCarthy writes, '… the PG-13 film, while mainstream in its appeal, is too violent and, at 133 minutes, too long for small fry, *and departs from the anthropomorphic and musical Disney conventions in so many creative, exciting ways*' (1999b, emphasis added). Some parents may not permit their children to view the film and some children who watch it may be frightened or confused by it (as the reviewers suggest), but these responses only serve to support the argument that the dominant approach to eco-cinema for children has become so pervasive that films like *Mononoke* – interested in both entertaining and educating children – are a rarity, and may be met with hesitancy.

But acknowledging the lack of empirical analysis of young audiences and the somewhat mixed response from popular movie critics, it is still fair to discuss how *Mononoke*'s openness – its moral complexity and lack of narrative conclusivity – potentially promotes the audience to actively interpret and act upon the themes of the film. Hall's discussion of encoding and decoding (and much of cultural studies of media today) draws upon the post-structuralist perspective on the process of signification, forwarded by scholars like R. Barthes (1974) and U. Eco (1989). Then, the lack of empirical engagement with media audiences in this study is, at least partially, offset by the acknowledgment that certain textual elements more effectively (or perhaps, more transparently) encourage audience interpretation and action. So, when Eco writes of the post-structuralist turn in aesthetic, and in particular narrative, traditions, he provides us with a helpful context for eco-cinema (like Mononoke) that might be understood as 'open works'.

> These poetic systems recognize 'openness' as the fundamental possibility of the contemporary artist or consumer … The poetics of the 'work in movement' (and partly that of the 'open' work) sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It poses new practical problems by organizing new communicative situations. In short, it installs a new relationship between the contemplation and the utilization of a work of art.
>
> <div align="right">(Eco 1989: 57)</div>

Understanding eco-cinema as potentially 'open works' – from both the perspectives of creation and reception – might answer the question posed by Murray and Heumann: 'How can enviro-toons make the jump from environmentalist messages couched in entertaining animated features to tools of the environmental movement?' (2011: 249). As films like *Mononoke* forward 'a new relationship between the contemplation [audience reception] and utilization [political action]' of environmentally themed media, this jump might be made.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF ECO-CINEMA FOR CHILDREN

As demonstrated in this comparative analysis of approaches to eco-cinema for children, *Mononoke* stands out as an alternative to the dominant mode that relies on melodrama's spectacle, moral polarity, and narrative conclusiveness. As Smith and Parsons point out,

> *Princess Mononoke* challenges social norms, requires child viewers to weigh complex questions, and demands a critical and intellectual engagement with the issues at stake without comfortable resolution in ways that invite what educationalists call 'transformational learning' as part of the filmic experience.
>
> (2012: 36)

However, *Mononoke* is not unique in respect to this invitation to young audiences to more critically and actively engage in environmental discourse and action. As mentioned earlier, a growing number of children's films including *Wall-E, The Secret of Kells* and Miyazaki's own *Spirited Away* and *Ponyo* are exhibiting a similarly complicated approach to environmental issues. Miyazaki himself describes the benefits of this approach to eco-cinema for children, expressing that he intends to make films that encourage young viewers 'to be in the movie theatre with a sense of humility about the complexity and difficulty of the world that we live in' (quoted in Wright and Clode 2005: 50). Miyazaki's films, and the tradition of eco-cinema following his lead, openly acknowledge the complexity of the issues and the necessity for young people's active involvement in them. For example, in response to probably the most explicitly environmentalist, but refreshingly nuanced, animated children's film released in recent years, Murray and Heumann write,

> In *WALL-E*, questions regarding [environmental] conflicts remain unanswered. In a nod to the environmental contexts to which they respond, the conflicts remain too complex for a simple solution. Instead, the film draws on both human and organismic approaches to ecology and offers a resolution that requires an ongoing commitment to conservation and interdependence.
>
> (2011: 227)

While the film includes many of the familiar elements of melodrama – visual spectacle, action sequences, a love story, and a villain – *Wall-E* (like *Mononoke* before it) is nonetheless able to communicate complicated environmental issues with complexity and encourage the active participation of young viewers with efficacy. And as a result, a new approach to cinematic nature narratives for children is being established – one that is less concerned with determining on behalf of the young viewer 'Who is good? Who is evil?' but instead is interested in encouraging them, like *Mononoke's* heroic and empathetic protagonist Ashitaka, 'to see with eyes unclouded'.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Benjamin Thevenin is an Assistant Professor of Media Arts at Brigham Young University. His research focuses on the intersections of youth, media, education, and civic participation.

Contact: Media Arts, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 801-422-3305, USA.
E-mail: benjamin_thevenin@byu.edu