

**ARTICLE**

# The Monsters of Nature: Representation of Environmental Ethics in Cinema

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This article asks the question: how can one understand the kinds of environmental ethics represented in film? It argues that this can be done by analyzing films through the lens of various central themes in the field of environmental ethics. This study demonstrates this argument through a comparative case study approach. The two cases are *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, a 1984 animated film directed by Hayao Miyazaki, and *Missing Link*, a 2019 animated film directed by Chris Butler. The stories of both films center on the relationship between humans and non-human species that are considered monsters. *Missing Link* represents an anthropocentric (human-centered) environmental ethics, one that only applies instrumental value to nature as it serves and relates to human beings. Conversely, *Nausicaä* represents non-anthropocentric environmental ethics that challenges the common human-centered perception of nature and advocates for the recognition of its intrinsic value. This study argues that even though the representation of non-anthropocentric environmental ethics in world cinema is not unheard of, the mainstream commercial film industry today represents and labels anthropocentric environmental ethics as progressive.

**Keywords:** Environmental Ethics; Cinema; Anthropocentrism; Feminism; Identification

## Introduction

*One may look at a fly and say: "Why was it created?" not knowing that the fly too looks at a human and says: "Why was it created?"*

—Muhammad ibn Mahmud Tusi (12th Century), *Wonders of Creation*

"Environmental ethics is the discipline in philosophy that studies the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents" (Brennan and Lo 2016). Contemporary environmental ethics, as an academic discipline, can be traced back to the 1970s, although its roots can be found in writings during the 1960s (Brennan and Lo 2016). For instance, in a paper titled "The historical roots of our ecologic crisis," Lynn White (1967) discussed the anthropocentric characteristic of modern western technology and its roots in Judaism and subsequently, Christianity. She argues that Christianity, in contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White 1967, 1205).

Brennan and Lo (2016) argue that the distinction between the instrumental and intrinsic value of nature is a central area of debate in the field of environmental ethics. They define instrumental value as "the value of things as means to further some other ends," and intrinsic value as "the value of things as ends in themselves regardless of whether they are also useful as means to other ends" (Brennan and Lo 2016). Brennan and Lo argue that:

Many traditional western ethical perspectives [...] are anthropocentric or human-centered in that either they assign intrinsic value to human beings alone [...] or they assign a significantly greater

amount of intrinsic value to human beings than to any non-human things such that the protection or promotion of human interests or well-being at the expense of non-human things turns out to be nearly always justified (2016).

For instance, in the *Lectures on Ethics* chapter titled “Duties to Animals and Spirits,” Immanuel Kant (1997) defines animals as beings beneath humans since in his view they lack self-consciousness. Consequently, he argues that humans do not have any immediate ethical duty toward animals and that their ethical duty toward animals is an indirect duty toward other human beings.

On the other hand, many scholars contemplating environmental ethics after the 1970s have argued in favor of the intrinsic value of nature. This shift reflected “an already widespread perception in the 1960s that the late twentieth century faced a human population explosion as well as a serious environmental crisis” (Brennan and Lo 2016). For example, O’Neill finds adopting environmental ethics equivalent to applying intrinsic value to nature and argues that “to hold an environmental ethic is to hold that non-human beings and states of affairs in the natural world have intrinsic value” (1992, 119).

The movement toward recognizing nature as intrinsically valuable has provided a space for a critical study of traditional anthropocentric environmental ethics and their consequences. At the ontological level, a number of authors have observed three fundamental dualisms in what Escobar refers to as the dominant form of Euro-modernity: “the divide between nature and culture, between us and them (or the West and the Rest, the moderns and the non-moderns, the civilized and the savages, etc.), and between subject and object (or mind/body dualism)” (2018, 93). Ecologists and feminists place emphasis on the mind/body, and culture/nature divides as a foundation to patriarchal cultures, reductionist forms of science, and today’s ecological crisis. I discuss these critiques in more detail in the following sections.

The study of the representation of environmental ethics in cinema is a relatively new area of interest. For example, in his book titled *Environmental Ethics and Film*, Pat Brereton (2015) explores environmental ethics through the medium of cinema. Although his book is an important contribution to the literature, its filmography indicates that his study is mostly focused on films by western directors. Quoting Brereton himself, since “for the moment, at least, contemporary Western societies remain predominantly influenced and anchored within broadly anthropocentric principles,” (2015, 209) his book, alone, does not render a comprehensive view of the topic at hand.

This article mainly follows the themes and the framework Brennan and Lo (2016) use in their discussion of environmental ethics, since it provides a comprehensive overview of various tracks within this discipline. These main themes include the problematic use of identification as a literary tool, the (mis)representation of power dynamics, and the political and epistemological differences of adopting and representing an anthropocentric or non-anthropocentric ethical perspective towards nature. I turn now to discuss the ways in which two films portray and interrogate these themes.

### **Monsters in Two Films: *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* and *Missing Link***

The reduction of an artwork to a short plot synopsis cannot be used as a substitute for the direct experience of that work. Therefore, the following brief plot summaries for the two films explored are meant as a reminder for the reader to help with the discussion about the main themes as they are represented in each case.

*Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* tells the story of Nausicaä, the princess of the Valley of the Wind. In a post-apocalyptic earth, human civilization is reduced to a number of isolated states, separated from one another by an expanding toxic jungle. The toxic jungle has grown over the polluted soil and water that was created after a world war that ended by the Seven Days of Fire, which destroyed civilization. The toxic jungle is also home to mutant insects, including giant worm-like insects called Ohm. Tolmekia, a military state, tries to eradicate the toxic jungle, along with its mutant insects, by stealing the embryo of a giant humanoid bioweapon from another kingdom, Pejite. The embryo is the only surviving weapon from the war. After stealing the embryo, the Tolmekian plane carrying it crashes in the Valley of the Wind on their way from Pejite to Tolmekia. Using military force, Tolmekians occupy and decide to mature the embryo at the Valley of the Wind. Pejites, seeking revenge, try to use a baby Ohm as bait to guide a large flock of angry Ohms towards the Valley of the Wind. Nausicaä, who is aware that the jungle ecosystem is actually purifying the polluted soil and water, manages to free the baby Ohm and calm the angry flock of Ohms, while the embryo is destroyed.

*Missing Link* tells the story of Sir Lionel Frost, a British explorer. In a desperate attempt to join a private club, Frost sets out to find evidence of the existence of Sasquatch, a mythical creature that he believes to be the missing link in human evolution. Following clues from an anonymous letter, he finds the Sasquatch who

turns out to be a polite and well-behaved creature. The Sasquatch is able to speak, read, and write English and confesses to writing the anonymous letter. The Sasquatch promises Frost to provide him with the necessary evidence he needs if Frost helps him to find his Himalayan cousins, the Yetis. After an adventurous journey to Himalaya, the Yetis reject the Sasquatch just as Frost remains rejected by the members of the private club. However, the film's events create a lasting friendship between the characters, which leads to future adventures together.

### **The Representation of the Monsters and the Problem of Identification**

An important distinction between the two cases, which suggests the kind of environmental ethics they represent, is the way they characterize "the monster." In *Missing Link*, the monster, Sasquatch, is a close relative of human beings. Even the title of the film places emphasis on this aspect of the character. He is represented as a hominid, slightly bigger and hairier than *Homo sapiens*, but still, one who walks on two legs and can be easily assigned with the male gender. Interestingly, the character insists on being called Susan. This is, however, only a small cultural misunderstanding and not a refusal to accept the binary concept of sexual identity enforced by his new human surroundings. He even perfectly understands, speaks, reads, and writes English.

On the other hand, in *Nausicaä*,<sup>1</sup> the monsters are giant Trilobite-like insects. They do not speak to human characters nor present any facial expressions. This is an intentional effort to prevent identification. Cohen defines identification as "an imaginative process through which an audience member assumes the identity, goals, and perspective of a character" (2001, 261). Although identification is a strong tool to promote empathy, it is problematic in this case since it only encompasses a very limited section of the non-human contents of nature. In other words, it only promotes empathy toward those species who share similar attributes with humans.

Bley argues that there are two inherent dangers in identification as a literary device: "The first is the establishment of false and unattainable ideals. The second is the acceptance of attainable but undesirable ideals. Of these, the first is more widespread, the second more ominous" (1945, 28). The use of identification in cinema to attain the audience's empathy toward nature falls under the second category since it reduces the totality of nature into a small, manageable fraction (the attainable aspect) and implicitly promotes the dominance of humans over nature and its non-human contents. This approach promotes the existing status quo and refuses to accept any more fundamental solution for the environmental problems humans face today (the undesirable aspect). As Bley points out, this is an indication of the kind of fiction that can consciously or unintentionally serve as propaganda (1945, 29).

It is important to distinguish this "shallow" use of identification with the kind of identification Naess (1990) describes. Brennan and Lo summarize Naess' view:

The idea is, briefly, that by identifying with nature I can enlarge the boundaries of the self beyond my skin. My larger—ecological— Self (the capital 'S' emphasizes that I am something larger than my body and consciousness), deserves respect as well. To respect and to care for my Self is also to respect and to care for the natural environment, which is actually part of me and with which I should identify (2016).

Naess' use of identification is to promote "oneness, wholeness, and Self-realisation" (1990, 171). This way of using identification is at its core the rejection of the human-nature dualism and therefore incompatible with a traditional anthropocentric environmental ethics that maintains this dualism.

### **The Representation of Existing Power Dynamics between Humans and Nature**

In *Missing Link*, the Sasquatch is a helpless, lonely creature who begs for help and companionship from his human savior. Even at the end, Frost is still reluctant to call the Sasquatch his partner. This image suggests the film's representation of the relationship between humans and nature. Nature is reduced to a fragile and endangered entity, which requires humans to help and support while humans are raised to the role of the savior.

This image fundamentally distorts the current existing threat of global warming or more generally the fast deterioration of resources needed by human beings in nature. Although human activities have led a large number of non-human species to extinction, the survival of human beings themselves is in question,

<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion, whenever *Nausicaä* is used as the abbreviated version of the film's title, italicized letters are used.

while nature, in its totality, will not cease to exist. This distorted image suggests a level of control by human beings over nature that is not in accordance with realities. This imagined level of control creates a sense of comfort that is false.

In *Nausicaä*, the Ohms and the toxic jungle, in general, are powerful entities. Nausicaä is represented as a savior figure, but not for the Ohms or the jungle, but rather for the human beings. It is actually through her acceptance by the Ohms that she finally emerges as the savior figure predicted by the prophecy.

### The Politics of Representation of Environmental Ethics

As Val Plumwood (2002) argues, the rationality that claims mastery over nature relies on anthropocentrism, self-centrism, Eurocentrism, and androcentrism. Beneath the anthropocentric environmental ethics presented by *Missing Link* runs a colonial mindset. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines colonialism as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (Kohn and Reddy 2017). It is not just any human who has complete dominance over nature, it is the white, western man. The savior, Sir Frost, is an affluent Englishman. Meanwhile, the Himalayan wise-woman, who is the only character showing genuine respect for nature, is ridiculed by the chicken-on-head joke<sup>2</sup> (a representation of civilized versus savage duality). And at the end of the film, it is not the Himalayan Yetis who give refuge to the Sasquatch, it is the Englishman.

This is what Naess calls the “shallow ecology movement,” which he defines as the “fight against pollution and resource depletion [with the] central objective [of] the health and affluence of people in the developed countries” (1973, 95). Around the same time, by the mid-1970s, Feminist writers and theorists enriched this critique, arguing that patriarchal modes of thinking not only inferiorize and colonize women, but also people of color, animals, and nature (Brennan and Lo 2016). The study of interconnections between various forms of oppression becomes the central core of the concept of intersectionality. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), argues that for many with intersectional identities, such as women of color, the experience of oppression is the product of intersecting patterns of oppression and therefore, should be addressed as such.

The parallels between the oppression of women and nature can be seen in two modes. In one mode, human exploitation of nature is seen and justified as an extension of the oppression of women. In this view, attribution of feminine characteristics to nature, such as the term “mother nature,” serves that purpose (Brennan and Lo 2016). In the other mode, the oppression of women and nature is seen as two forms of oppression within an overarching structure that leads to mutual reinforcement and existing commonalities between these two stances. Plumwood (2003) argues that dualism is a central feature in this structure. In this view, constructed opposites such as male/female, human/nature, and civilized/primitive open the path for the exploitation of the latter in each case (Brennan and Lo 2016).

If these forms of oppression reinforce one another, it makes sense to assume that the fight against these forms of oppression is interconnected as well. Nausicaä is praised as one of the strongest female characters created by Miyazaki (see Kraemer 2000). At the same time, although Nausicaä can be perceived as a white female character, two aspects add nuance to this image. One is the fact that the character speaks Japanese. The other is the difference in the way Miyazaki portrays the opposing powers inside the story. The Valley of the Wind is pictured as a rural agricultural town versus Tolmekia, which is described as an industrialized military state. As a result, Valley of the Wind is perceived mostly as the colonized in contrast to Tolmekia being perceived as the colonizer. Hence, Nausicaä is a female character from the “non-modern” world.

### Positivism and Environmental Ethics

Based on Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmid Noerr’s (2002) work, Brennan and Lo argue that:

[As the result of the] narrow positivist conception of rationality—which sees rationality as an instrument for pursuing progress, power and technological control, and takes observation, measurement and the application of purely quantitative methods to be capable of solving all problems [...] nature (and, likewise, human nature) is no longer mysterious, uncontrollable, or fearsome. Instead, it is reduced to an object strictly governed by natural laws, which therefore can be studied, known, and employed to our benefit. By promising limitless knowledge and power, the positivism of science

<sup>2</sup> The Himalayan wise-woman is pictured as an old woman with a chicken nested on top of her head. The main characters are advised to refrain from looking at the chicken, whose existence is apparently unknown to the wise-woman herself. Of course, the advice only leads to the main characters fixing their attention on the chicken.

and technology not only removes our fear of nature, [...] but also destroys our sense of awe and wonder towards it (2016).

Frost in *Missing Link* is representative of this “narrow positivism.” His entire agenda is to find and expose the hidden monsters in nature. He sees these monsters as the few remaining dark spots in nature, the last fronts of nature’s resistance over the total domination of the human race. While the film presents as a representation of a blooming friendship between humans and nature, between Sir Frost and the Sasquatch, it is, in reality, a demonstration of the domestication process.

On the other hand, *Nausicaä* is about acceptance of nature as a force beyond the humans’ control. Both the Tolmekians and the Pejites try to control and manipulate nature and its non-human contents, the Ohms in this case, to their advantage, which leads to disaster. In contrast, Nausicaä accepts the agency of nature and appreciate it beyond narrow rational reasoning. A strong example of this is an early scene in the film during which Nausicaä is wandering around the toxic jungle alone. What she represents in that scene is close to what Adorno defines as “sensuous immediacy:” an aesthetic attitude which discourages “seeing nature as primarily, or simply, an object of consumption” while promoting direct and spontaneous acquaintance with nature “without interventions from our rational faculties” (Brennan and Lo 2016).

### The Films’ Endings

How the two cases decide to end their stories is a good representative of the way they envision possible solutions for our current environmental crisis. *Missing Link* ends with Sasquatch losing hope in the Himalayan Yetis (untouched nature) and finding the companionship he was looking for in the company of Frost. Beyond the fact that this ending fundamentally distorts what the problem is and who is to blame, as I have argued in the section discussing the representation of power dynamics, it suggests that the solution is within the current practices of the more progressive section of the scientific community (Frost vs. the private club). The film fails to recognize explicitly Frost as the very source of the Sasquatch’s problem. Sasquatch’s alienation is the direct result of Frost’s positivistic worldview which through othering defines nature and all its non-human contents as mere subjects of exploration and exploitation.

On the other hand, *Nausicaä* ends with a climax of the human folly that leads to the emergence of Nausicaä as the savior promised by the prophecy. Here, Nausicaä represents her belief that the real monsters are not the toxic jungle or the Ohms, but rather humans themselves who polluted the earth through the war that led to the Seven Days of Fire. Also, an important feature in the film’s final scene is realizing that the golden fields in the prophecy, are actually Ohms’ golden tentacles. Therefore, the ending does not promise a return to a romanticized version of nature in the past but rather accepts the totality of nature as is.

### Conclusion

The ongoing debates around the current environmental crisis, and in specific the problem of global warming, and the inability of current international institutions to foster a collectively accepted strategy to address these concerns have attracted public attention to even more abstract aspects in the field of environmental ethics. Given such a context, it is only natural that an increasing number of films include environmental themes. However, unsurprisingly, these films approach this subject from various perspectives.

I have argued in the previous sections that through a close study of the story and the representation of the characters, it is possible to determine the underlying environmental ethical principles in a film. This requires analyzing the development of the characters and, specifically, the use of identification as a literary tool, the representation of the existing power dynamics between the characters, and political and epistemological orientations within the story and characters.

In the case of the two films discussed here, they represent two fundamentally different tracks within the field of environmental ethics. *Nausicaä* is a representative of non-anthropocentric environmental ethics, which advocates for the intrinsic value of nature and departure from the anthropocentric ethical traditions. On the other hand, *Missing Link*, a more recent film, represents anthropocentric environmental ethics, the more traditional track within the field, which limits the value of nature and its non-human contents to their instrumental value for humans. The decision to adopt one of these two tracks of environmental ethics by film directors is an ethical decision in itself. As discussed above, such a decision has important implications that reach far beyond one’s attitude toward nature alone. In this light, I argue that *Nausicaä*’s representation of environmental ethics is deeper and more expansive than *Missing Link* since its notion of empathy is more inclusive.

Finally, Brereton points out that “emphasis on human agency and the primacy of an anthropocentric approach remains central to the vast majority of storylines in Hollywood cinema” (2015, 9). A more comprehensive study would be required to make a judgment about how often non-anthropocentric environmental ethics is represented in cinema. However, an anecdotal observation would suggest that it is in rare cases.

Similar to other forms of artistic expression, cinema can connect with its audience on various logical and emotional levels. It can reinforce stereotypical images of nature with unrealistic dreams of humans ruling it or it can choose to create new imaginaries, ways of knowing, and meanings of our environment to pass through the crises we are facing.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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