

Cradle to Crave: The Commodification of the Environment in Family Films

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, Universal Pictures released *The Lorax*, a film based on Dr. Seuss's children's book of the same name published 30 years earlier. The book addressed the environmental harm caused by overconsumption, and Universal claimed the movie contained the same message; however, it also included embedded advertisements and numerous product tie-ins (Hetter 2012). Product placement and the flood of marketing that accompanied the film drew criticism that the studio was corrupting Seuss's original environmental message by replacing it with one of consumption. Drawing from the controversy surrounding *The Lorax*, this chapter analyzes the portrayal of environmental problems (and their solutions) as presented by popular Hollywood movies for children, including *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (Fox Searchlight Pictures 2006), *WALL-E* (Walt Disney/Buena Vista Pictures 2008), and *The Lorax* (Universal Pictures 2012). Although it does not focus on environmental problems, Disney's global mega-blockbuster *Frozen* (2013) is also considered near the end of this chapter for its unique perspective on global climate trends.

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These films were chosen from an embarrassment of riches when it comes to family movies with an environmental theme. In addition to those included in this chapter are *Finding Dory* (Disney, 2016, which focuses on ocean pollution, conservation, and biodiversity), *Finding Nemo* (Disney, 2004, which touches upon reef health and industrial pollution), *Happy Feet* (Warner Bros, 2006, highlighting ocean pollution and overfishing), *Over the Hedge* (DreamWorks, 2006, depicting suburban sprawl and loss of wilderness habitat), *Fern Gully* (20th Century Fox, 1992, depicting the loss of rainforests due to commercial development), and *Chicken Run* (DreamWorks 2000, which makes continuous references to concentrated animal feedlots). The films that do comprise the focus of this chapter, though, were carefully selected due to the direct, clear, and sustained focus on one or more environmental issues.

With such a wide selection of Hollywood films that touch upon ecological problems, it is clear that producers and filmmakers are paying attention to societies' growing concerns on a global scale. But how accurately do the films portray these issues to young audiences, and does the fact that these are films made (mostly) for children alter the message? Before beginning analysis, this chapter first underscores the importance of considering the intended audience for these films and why it matters. With American industries increasingly targeting children as a lucrative demographic, it is important to draw back the curtain to see how environmental messages are tailored for a younger market. The chapter progresses with a discussion of the political economic context for the production of children's animation by Hollywood and why this matters for analysis of environmental themes in film. Finally, I outline a particular theoretical lens—Althusser and Balibar's (2009) *symptomatic reading*—that can be useful to consider not only what the films choose to include about ecological problems, but what is omitted. It is these omissions, I argue, that become ideologically relevant when it comes to films about environmental issues.

“CHILDREN’S” FILM, “FAMILY” FILM, OR ANIMATION? A QUESTION OF GENRE

As Grant (2007, 259) observes, the generic form often referred to as “children’s films” may be “divided into two categories: those made expressly for the child audience, and those made about children

regardless of audience.” The films chosen for analysis in this chapter clearly fall within the former definition—films made with children in mind. However, other scholars have argued for the use of the term “family film,” as it is the case that many of the films intended for children are not consumed only by children but by a wide range of audiences, both young and old.¹ Brown (2012) claims that the designation “family film” “sits awkwardly in relation to the question of genre” because it includes content similar to a multitude of other genres, including science fiction (as is the case, in this chapter, with *WALL-E*), fantasy, and comedy.² The universalism of family film ventures further than genre hybridity because this category often attempts to transcend “all possible cultural and biological barriers, such as age, race, social class, gender, nationality, and religious and sexual orientation” (Brown 2012, 1). However broad and inclusive the category, “family film” is perhaps the most accurate and useful, while still recognizing the potential for hybridity and “universalism.”

In his impressive treatment of family film, Brown (2012) provides a very thorough and useful historical background, noting that the generic form really grew out of an early twentieth-century desire to create content that would appease early movie censors and permit films to be released to wide audiences.³ Now, mediated family fare comprises a great deal of the Hollywood market share and is an industrial, cultural, and economic force to be reckoned with. One example is Disney’s *Finding Dory*, which (as I write, in June 2016) last weekend broke box office records for an animated film by drawing in \$136 million and taking the top box office perch (Christian Science Monitor 2016).

While some uncertainty exists regarding the generic boundaries of the films included in this chapter, another complicating factor can be considered: that of the technological medium in which many family films are made. One can consider animation as being closely linked to children’s fare, and several scholars do: Grant (2007, 260) notes that in their early history animated features primarily targeted the child audience, especially when Disney was the central producer and driver of the children’s animation market in the USA.⁴ Cartoons for children had a slow start in terms of popularity, but all that changed with when Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released in 1937, mostly because the film “demonstrated that films with a particular appeal to children were a viable source of revenue for the studios” (Grant 2007, 260). When Hollywood studios lost interest in children as a movie-going demographic in the 1980s,

Disney rejuvenated the culture industry's interest with the release of *The Little Mermaid* in 1989 (Grant 2007). Although the profit potential of animated feature films had been recognized by Hollywood studios for decades, the medium finally took off in the mid-1990s due to technological advancements in computer-generated imagery (CGI), which allowed for rapid proliferation and production (Brown 2012, 204–205).

However, it is also true that in the last few decades animation has increasingly been seen by the media industry itself as fare for adults as well as children in what has been referred to as “kidult” media: Felperin (1999) provides several examples of this, including cartoon television shows like *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *Stressed Eric*. Mark Zoradi, Disney's motion-picture group president from 2006–2009 attributes Pixar's enduring commercial and cultural success to the fact that the company's films are “not children's movies. They're movies for everybody. Children absolutely adore them, but parents enjoy them on a different level” (Germain 2008, 2). It is important to note that although the films selected for this chapter are considered family fare, children remain a key demographic, for in the appeal to them is the potential to draw in the rest of the family. As Brown (2012, 3) recognizes about family film, “Mainstream cinema has always sought types of entertainment capable of attracting mass audiences, and it is axiomatic that films capable of playing successfully to all ages and social groups stand the best chance of commercial success.”

Although animation is treated as a medium here, it is important to recognize how the technological form has influenced the genre.⁵ Wells (2003, 214) believes animation to be significant first due to its “omnipresence” (on websites, films, television, commercials, sitcoms, and the like) as well as its ability to foster and encourage “aesthetic and technological experimentation.” He also observes that the form of animation created by Disney clearly lent itself to the corporation's “utopian ideology” that is so well known today. Finally, Wells (2003, 235) recognizes that “much of the enduring success of animated film within popular culture is in the way in which ‘character’ transcends the film and becomes part of a social discourse. From Mickey Mouse to Woody and Buzz, this has ensured that animation has historical presence.” Although animation's origins can be traced globally, it is clear that Disney and other American animation industries remain a key producer and driver of the industry, prompting Cavalier (2011, 13) to note that “the history of

animation is largely the history of American animation,” thus making US animation “the sun around which all other animation has orbited.”

The animated family film as broadly defined is important when it comes to consideration of how films within this generic form treat ecological issues. As is true with all genres, the profit motive is important to consider, but perhaps in family fare even more so. Brown (2012, 192) points out that contemporary “family entertainment” media “can be regarded as a spectrum of widely intelligible, interrelated products based around core brand images” that are largely the product of Hollywood’s attempt at standardization for broadly palatable media fare to ensure commercial success. Studios’ desire to produce movies that are easily digestible by a wide audience means that the promise of “basic comfort and reassurance ... has been one of the primary instruments” of the genre (Brown 2012, 197). Adding to this is the broad effect of genre itself: the recognition of how genre both flattens, distorts, and soothes, especially when it comes to the economic logic of Hollywood, is especially important when considering the rise of the new consumer culture (and media culture) aimed at children on a global scale.

HOLLYWOOD, THE NEW CONSUMER CULTURE, AND THE CHILD AUDIENCE

Hansen (2010, 8) contends that “The artifacts of media culture are ... not innocent entertainment but are thoroughly ideological artifacts bound up with political rhetoric, struggles, agendas, and policies.” Mediated representations of the environment are especially important to study when it comes to youth because, although children learn about the world around them from myriad sources—including family, community leaders, school, and peers—they are developing increasingly intimate relationships with technology and mediated content due to media proliferation. According to McDonagh and Brereton (2010, 134), “film has a profound influence in framing how we conceptualize and address ourselves and lifestyles, and by inference our global problems.” Animated films in particular provide “intricate teachings” that are reinforced by other sources in childhood (Lugo-Lugo and Bloodsworth-Lugo 2009, 167), and can encourage specific understandings about individuals’ place in society (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 84).

But what are these teachings, exactly? Media texts intended for consumption by a younger audience can contain powerful ideologies that are directly relevant to a consideration of how children consider their role in environmental problems faced on a global scale. Drawing from one of his best-known works, Dorfman and Mattelart (1975, 37) recognizes the potent consumerist ideologies in the cartoon Donald Duck, where Disney's "sole ethical code" is "consumption for consumption's sake. Buy to keep the system going, throw the things away ... and buy the same thing again, only slightly different, the next day." Writing on Disney's non-treatment of the Peruvian Incas in *The Emperor's New Groove*, Helaine Silverman (2002, 299) finds that although the film clearly draws from the Incas, they are never mentioned by name, nor is any cultural context given. This omission is critical, she observes, because "as a quintessential form of American public culture, animated movies [are] ... where collective social understandings are created ..." Silverman continues by arguing that "the visual signifiers in these animated movies ... are interpreted uncritically by most viewers in accordance with a culturally sanctioned hegemony" (299–300). Regardless of whether or not one agrees that most viewers read visual texts without an interrogative gaze, one can still recognize, as Giroux and Pollock (2010, 28) do, that "entertainment is always an educational force."⁶ The educative potential of visual media is recognized by other media scholars as well: Mayumi et al. (2005) go so far as to argue that popular films have a particular need to address environmental issues because of their ability to reach a broad audience with a compelling message. The clear teaching potential of film invites discussion as to what sorts of lessons about the environment are given to children by a commercial entity like Hollywood.

The significance of understanding how the culture industry hails children is underscored by the formation of an increasingly intimate relationship between children, consumer culture, and commercial media in the USA. As Kellner keenly recognizes, dominant ideologies "must be understood within the context of the political economy and system of production of culture" (1995, 37). The trend of media deregulation and resulting waves of conglomeration that started in earnest in the 1980s and have continued to the present day are well documented in political economy scholarship, leaving few arguments that the US media system is both hypercommercial and highly concentrated. Although considerations of Hollywood's economic logic, drive, and ownership are a constant theme in all the chapters of this book, special attention here is paid

to political economy and recent changes in children's consumer culture as a way to understand Hollywood's treatment of environmental issues in this particular genre. In his discussion of his term "hypercommercialism," McChesney contends that American culture is subject to incessant commercial "carpet bombing" (2004, 146) that leaves no space untouched. The trend of hypercommercialism in the USA is in perfect step with the exponential growth of consumer culture in the USA, with numerous scholars noting that consumption has become the foundation of the US cultural system (McAllister 2007; McDonald and Wearing 2013; Schor 2004; Steinberg 2011; Turow and McAllister 2009).

Most germane to this growing trend of hypercommercialism is recognition of a relatively new focus on children by American corporations: in the corporate system, children are not excluded from consumer culture, but instead are placed in its spotlight. Schor (2004) notes that marketing to the child audience became a multi-billion dollar industry when companies realized the increased spending power of children. The primary consequence of this is that children are being incorporated into the marketplace as part of a broader trend in American capitalism where "life stages" translate into different types of potential markets (Langer 2004, 254). Steinberg (2011) terms this new marketing focus on children as "Kinderculture," a sort of hypercommercialism aimed directly at children. Thus the three key implications of a new children's consumer culture is that children, now considered a highly lucrative market, are targeted as a key demographic (McAllister 2007; Schor 2004), invited into consumerist identities at increasingly young ages (Hill 2011; Jennings 2006), and offered very few noncommercial opportunities in American media culture (Schor 2004).

The hypercommercial milieu in which Hollywood operates has a well-documented impact on all aspects of the industry, from origination to content and marketing. One of the first trends worth noting is in regards to merchandizing: while the increase of product placement in movies has been well documented (Andersen and Gray 2007; Miller 2001; McChesney 2008; Wasko 2003), commercially driven non-media entities like toymaker Hasbro have gone a step further by partnering with studios to produce blockbusters like *GI Joe: Retaliation* (2013), *Battleship* (2011), and *Transformers* (2009), with many more films in the works.⁷ The reason toymakers have gotten into the movie-making business (and vice versa) is clear: it is the potential to create highly lucrative ancillary markets through product sales, resulting in an "unprecedented synergy"

between movie producers and merchandisers (Townsend 2011, 56). Most every Hollywood studio now wants its productions to be “toyetic,” where the plot and characters lend themselves easily to the creation and sale of merchandise to children. Because of this, Schuker (2009) notes, Hollywood is being transformed: “Toys now are receiving the same A-list treatment that any bankable movie star has come to expect. That includes top billing and contracts with special perks. They even have their own talent agents.”

Related to merchandizing are corporate tie-ins, as many Disney films have been “criticized for their open marketing of toys and other products to children and their promotion through product tie-ins with various fast-food chains” (Grant 2007, 261). *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* partnered with the sandwich chain Subway, which had various characters from the film on kids’ meal bags. Corporate tie-ins are not limited to fast food: Disney and Pixar’s *Finding Dory* had multiple corporate deals with big-name brands like Coppertone and Kraft’s Macaroni and Cheese, as well as Subway, which featured the film’s characters on “3D Scene Makers” that came with a purchase of a mini-sub for children.

Finally, other scholars like Brown (2012, 192) note another aspect to the economic logic of “family films” when it comes to varied media platforms: “they have been developed as multi-media franchises because their core brand images are widely accessible, possess an existing consumer base, and lend themselves easily to cross-media exploitation.”⁸ Most films made for children have related content available on myriad platforms, including websites, television shows, children’s magazines, and video games, among others. This multiple platform strategy enables increased corporate synergy, as one media arm or venue may promote another to reach the maximum amount of consumers possible.

As a result of the above trends, many contemporary “blockbuster” films are criticized for simply being vehicles to sell products to young audiences, prompting Andersen and Gray (2007, 176) to suggest that “films are no longer singular narratives, rather, they are iterations of entertainment supertexts, multimedia forms that can be expanded and resold almost ad infinitum.” A great example of this comes from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*: set for release in 2001, it was anticipated to be one of the most popular film releases of the year (if not the decade), but the fact that it would *not* be met with a merchandising and tie-in frenzy (reportedly because the author, J.K. Rowling, didn’t want it) was what merited media attention: one Bloomberg article went to

lengths to note how unusual the lack of merchandising was (Grover 2001). Thus, *Harry Potter* proves an exception to the new industry rule, which is well represented by *The Lion King*, which only grossed Disney \$313 million at the box office, but the film's total profits exceeded \$1 billion in ancillary merchandise sales (Broeske 1995).

Considering the defining economic characteristics of the US culture industry and the new trends in consumer culture, the question that receives the most focus in this chapter is: *In a hypercommercial society that treats children as one of the newest, most lucrative markets, and with a genre focused on reaching as large and wide an audience as possible, how does a highly concentrated culture industry represent a subject like the environment to the young audience?* The answer to this question could be obtained through many different avenues, but is perhaps best achieved through the critical lens of the “symptomatic reading.”

THEORETICAL AND INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS

Analysis of these animated children's films is aided through the employment of a *symptomatic reading* as defined by Althusser and Balibar (2009). In their critical work on Marx's *Das Kapital*, Althusser and Balibar (2009) broadly define *symptomatic reading* as a “dual reading” (32) that consists of an initial interpretation of a text focusing on manifest details (in this case, the narrative and characters), followed by a “second,” deeper reading designed to reveal ideological messages through identification of key “lacunae,” or silences in the text (86). The central purpose of a symptomatic reading is to draw out, or reveal, the *problematic*, which Althusser and Balibar describe as “an answer given to its absent question” (32). Storey (2012) provides a clear demonstration of the utility of identifying “silences” about the environment through the problematic, noting that the common depiction of automobiles as isolated in natural settings is a way to counteract potential questions about cars' contribution to both pollution and road congestion

showing cars in both nature (unpolluted) and space (uncongested) confronts the claims ... In this way, the criticisms are answered without the questions themselves having been formally posed. The emphasis placed on nature and space is, therefore, a response to the twin questions (which remains unasked in the advertisement itself—in the text's “problematic” ... (75–76)

Here, Storey reveals the a priori “answer” provided by advertisers to perceived concerns about environmental impact. It is this advance answer to as-yet unarticulated concerns that creates key *lacunae* within a text, for the *problematic* often serves to silence future questions by making them appear irrelevant. In symptomatic interpretation, then, the first reading examines the manifest text and progresses to identify the “lapses, distortions, silences and absences” characteristic of the latent text and its ideological foundations (Storey 2012, 244). In permitting a focus on silences, the key reason to using this interpretive framework is able to highlight what media producers may want to ignore—or actively deflect attention from.

Applied to this research, there are several potential “silences” regarding environmental problems that can be examined in the films, including (1) what problems exist; (2) how they are defined; (3) what their causes are; (4) who is responsible; (5) the potential impacts and consequences; and (6) what solutions are available. As Entman (1993, 54) notes, “omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience.” The assessment of silences reveals the problematic embedded in the texts as well as the films’ subjectivity—how they invite their young audiences into certain identities. This type of interpretation coheres with Althusser’s critical praxis, where ideology is defined by a relationship between the producer of a text and the subject, including how the subject is positioned by the text (Althusser 2008).

This type of analysis provides the basis for a critique of American hypercommercialism and consumer culture as contextualized within a political economy framework, placing the focus on concentrated media ownership and the concomitant drive for profit as a way to understand how messages about the environment are distorted by the culture industry for young audiences. Although a symptomatic reading would be beneficial for any and all films included in this book, it is used here to highlight the need to identify key *omissions* regarding environmental problems when it comes to very young audiences who are still in the process of learning about not only global environmental issues but about the world itself. Thus, part of the reason for the focus on what Althusser and Balibar (2009) refer to as “lacunae” is due to the relatively young age of the audience intended for these films. While it is true that omissions are almost always ideologically significant for the power structures

they reveal, in a young audience one can make this case with even more justification.

REPRESENTATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS IN HOLLYWOOD'S ANIMATED FAMILY FILMS

ICE AGE: THE MELTDOWN

Fox Searchlight Pictures (now 20th Century Fox) and Bly Sky Studio (owned by 20th Century Fox) released this film in 2006 as the second installation in the *Ice Age* franchise that focuses on the adventures of a small pack of ice age mammals, Sid the sloth, Diego the saber-toothed tiger, and Manny the woolly mammoth. Its Brazilian director Carlos Saldanha is known for his involvement in other films in the Ice Age franchise, along with *Rio* (2011). The script was written by the two Hollywood comedy writers, Peter Gaulke and Gerry Swallow. The Environmental Media Association, which works with Hollywood studios on their environmental rhetoric, gave it their highest award in 2007. It also did well at the box office, earning \$71 million in opening box office and holding the top spot for several weeks, tying the astronomically popular *Finding Nemo* and *The Incredibles* for second-largest animation debut in history (Fritz 2006).

Fox Searchlight Pictures operates under 20th Century Fox, which is owned by Rupert Murdoch.⁹ 20th Century Fox has produced and/or distributed several films included in other chapters of this book, including *Kingsman: Secret Service* and *Promised Land*. Murdoch and the conglomerates he owns are well known for having conservative messages, which makes the treatment of the environment in these two films (and in *Ice Age: The Meltdown*) both complex and intriguing.

Ice Age: The Meltdown Summary

The film begins with a short vignette of Scrat, a squirrel who gives perpetual chase for an elusive acorn in an icy landscape. He eventually finds an acorn, but in the process pokes holes in a giant ice wall, which begins to spout water. In this way, the film introduces the concept of climate change and attendant melting ice in a comical fashion as Scrat attempts to stop the flow of water with various body parts.

Once the central part of the film begins, it is clear that “global warming” (identified by this phrase in several scenes) is impending. Large, clear pools with crystalline ice slides have been created by warmer temperatures, and a wide variety of animals are playing in them. The opening scenes thus look like the glaciated version of a recreational water park: the sun is shining while adults and kids play and sunbathe.

However, soon a turtle named Fast Tony draws a crowd due to his loud claims about global warming while he tries to sell useless “survival” items in the confusion and fear he has created. At first, no one believes him, but most animals become alarmed once the stars of the film (Manny, Sid, and Diego) confirm that the changes are real: all the characters are living in a giant “bowl” that will fill up once the ice dam behind them breaks. In their panic, the animals travel together in a group to a “boat” (made out of gargantuan piece of curved wood) to escape both the flood and the carnivorous monsters that have been freed by the melting ice.

Eventually, a portion of the ice wall holding back the water breaks and the flood occurs, appearing as gigantic waves cresting mountaintops that thunder towards the animals. The animals scream and crowd on to the makeshift ark-shaped boat. It looks as though all animals will perish until Scrat reappears: prized acorn in paw, he punctures a second set of holes in the ice wall, thus creating a fissure through which all the water can escape. Once the waters recede, the consequences of the melting ice are revealed: areas once covered in ice are replaced with green pastures. Sid capitalizes on the remaining water to start a swim school and Manny finds the rest of his herd and realizes his species is not extinct. Most interesting is that the land, now ice free, looks fertile and rich, and somehow already has a palette of green vegetation growing, which will feed the animals. The ample water flows through clear, clean, warm pools. Thus, the film ends on a positive note for all of the animals except one turtle, killed by the monsters.

Ice Age: The Meltdown Analysis

At a superficial level, Fox Searchlight’s *Ice Age* sequel can be seen as an environmental film in that it provides an introduction to—and encourages awareness of—“global warming” by making the issue central to the narrative and by speaking directly to the child audience about environmental degradation. In addition, the film initially presents global

warming as an authentic and considerable threat: the animals' terror of both the approaching mountainous waves and the sea monsters they bring provides clear cues that climate change brings significant danger and requires our attention. In this sense, the film introduces a sense of *realism* as described by Ingram (2004) and Whitley (2008), where texts make a claim to events in the outside world. Ties to the real world, however, dissolve when one considers omissions in the text.

One of the first silences in the film is there is no clear definition of "global warming": it is presented only as a brief warming trend that results in melting ice and floods, which is reinforced by continuous use of outdated and misleading phrases for climate change. Also absent is any clear *cause* of the warming: it cannot be due to human activity, as there are no humans in the film, which is a significant absence given that the vast majority of scientific data reveals that human activity is at the very least partly responsible for these changes. Instead, the film hints that Scrat the squirrel has precipitated the disaster through his comical hunt for a nut.

The references to Noah's Ark and the flood are intriguing. First, the animals travel mostly two-by-two (or as families with young ones) to the large boat. Second, according to the Christian Bible, God sent the flood to punish humanity's wickedness, thus the flood in the film seems to blame some kind of sin as the potential instigator of catastrophic environmental change. The religious references are somewhat baffling unless one considers that they may be a way to avoid discussing the anthropogenic cause of climate change. Considered in conjunction with the depiction of Fast Tony, who tries to profit from global warming, and even the very outdated name given to the environmental issue, the film's treatment of climate change seems to come from a somewhat cynical and politically conservative perspective. This makes more sense when one considers that Rupert Murdoch's Fox Searchlight Pictures produced the film. In the USA, Fox News (also owned by Murdoch) has been long critiqued for its support of conservative politicians and topics as well as its denial of climate change. Seen from the perspective of ownership, omissions regarding the potential causes of climate change in *The Meltdown* make more sense.

The film also contains a silence regarding possible resolution of "global warming": the animals are doomed to drown in the flood until Scrat once again intervenes and the flood waters recede. Because the plot defines climate change as episodic (and thus only briefly catastrophic),

it also omits recognition that this environmental problem is also a *process*: one that is complex, difficult to understand, and with long-lasting effects. Perhaps the most important lacuna exists in the lack of consequences: after the flood, almost every animal has a better life in a warmer, greener environment.

Perhaps needless to say, this representation flies in the face of what is known scientifically about climate change, including that it is almost certainly: (1) caused by human activity; (2) is a complex process that is difficult to understand and predict; and (3) that it has and will continue to result in waves of extinction for thousands of species. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which is governed by the United Nations and receives information from thousands of scientists worldwide, in 2014 published its most recent report regarding climate change. Titled “Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report Summary for Policymakers,” the report notes that it is “extremely likely that more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature from 1951 to 2010 was caused by the anthropogenic increase in GHG [greenhouse gases] concentrations and other anthropogenic forcings together” (5). Regarding non-human animal extinctions, the IPCC report also observes that

a large fraction of species faces increased extinction risk due to climate change during and beyond the 21st century, especially as climate change interacts with other stressors (high confidence). Most plant species cannot naturally shift their geographical ranges sufficiently fast to keep up with current and high projected rates of climate change in most landscapes; most small mammals and freshwater molluscs will not be able to keep up at the rates projected under RCP4.5 and above in flat landscapes in this century (high confidence). (13)

The IPCC also notes that humans will be significantly impacted as well, with especially great risk predicated for “disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development” (13).

The numerous silences in the film—regarding the definition, causes, consequences, and solutions for climate change—fulfill the function of the problematic to preclude additional questions and ward off critique by presenting “global warming” as a simple phenomenon with an unknown etiology that can be resolved quickly and simply to the benefit of living creatures. Here, a consideration of landscape is essential due to the

significance of the contrasts before and after “global warming” occurs. The film is bookended with mostly pleasant scenes of the environmental milieu in which the animals find themselves: the water is clean, bright, and pure, as are the enormous glittering ice sculptures created by melting ice. In the middle of the film, the ice wall that looms over the creatures provides an apt (if incomplete) signifier for the enormity that is climate change as well as its tremendous potential danger. The thundering waves that crest the mountains clearly represent the enormous potential threat to living creatures, as well as the fact that the animals are powerless to stop it. At the end of film, however, the landscape is more beautiful, more fruitful, and more hospitable to sustaining life because of climate change—a troubling message. This bookending of pleasant, life-giving landscapes thus contains ideological implications, as the problem of climate change is presented in over-simplified, optimistic, episodic terms, hinting that this serious environmental problem need not be solved but instead welcomed.

WALL-E

This 2008 film was the brainchild of Pixar executives operating under Disney after its acquisition in 2006 and was directed by Angus MacLane and Andrew Stanton. Stanton is well known as a director of many a popular film, including *Finding Nemo*, *Finding Dory*, and *Toy Story*. *WALL-E* won numerous awards and nominations for cinematic quality, including an Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film of the Year.¹⁰ In addition, it was lauded for its message of sustainability: Keim (2008) in *Wired* magazine described it as “the decade’s most powerful environmental film.”

The film did well at the box office, achieving the top spot in its opening weekend and earning approximately \$62.5 million, continuing “the perfect track record of Pixar, the Walt Disney unit that has made nine films, all of them critical and commercial successes, including *Cars*; *Monsters, Inc.* and the *Toy Story* movies” (Germain 2008, 2). As noted earlier, Pixar’s creations tend to draw in both adults and children, and *WALL-E* was no different, which contributed to its commercial and cultural success.

WALL-E Summary

WALL-E opens on a somber note with a slow aerial pan of a large American city at dusk with large skyscrapers below. More detail is provided on the screen until it is gradually revealed that the majority of the “buildings” are actually thousands of stacked trash cubes in a dusty, dirty, sterile brown landscape. From this point, the film quickly introduces the audience to the significant environmental problems on Earth: seemingly endless mountains of trash; gargantuan dust storms that roll through with regularity; and no vegetation, animals, or humans anywhere, since Earth can no longer support life.

The role of large corporations in this environmental apocalypse is made clear through the vestiges of “Buy N Large” (shortened to “BNL” in the film): old billboards for the corporation clutter the skyline; dollar bills littering the ground are actually BNL currency; and a “public service announcement” reveals that the last American president (named Shelby Forthright, in a bit of dark humor) was also the CEO of BNL.¹¹ As several billboards suggest, BNL recognized that there was a problem with “too much garbage in your face,” and so created robots to start cleaning up the mess (while still trying to sell more products). As the billboards note, “there’s more space, out in space!”, and so humans escaped the trashed and sterile Earth to live in spaceships. The message “We’ll clean up the mess while you’re away!” suggests that this move was temporary and that the plan was for people to return to Earth once it was cleaned up.

Only two creatures seem to have survived in this desolate, decaying landscape. *WALL-E* (“Waste Allocation Load Lifter, Earth Class”) is a solar-powered, rusty, dirty, slightly crazy but likeable robot whose task is to clean up the world while the humans live on a large spaceship. He has been compacting the trash on Earth for over 700 years. In his loneliness, he has become an obsessive collector of trash, saving jewelry boxes, lighters, car keys, an iPod that plays *Hello, Dolly!*, and Apple “mice” that scurry across the floor when he comes home. He recharges himself daily (in a comical scene that likens his low battery to adults needing coffee in the morning), and makes the Apple start-up chime when his battery is full. The only other organism that has survived is a cockroach that *WALL-E* keeps as a pet.

WALL-E’s loneliness is solved with the arrival of EVE, who comes to Earth not to clean it, but to scan for any sign of life. Luminously white,

intelligent, sleek, and powerful, she hovers above the ground, seemingly weightless (unlike *WALL-E*, she can fly). When she recognizes a living plant that *WALL-E* has found, she takes it back up to the spaceship where humans are living.

The film then introduces the audience to the superficial lives of humans on the spaceship, who are overweight due to lack of physical activity and continuous distraction from computer screens, controlled by BNL, and obsessed with consumption. The film makes clear that the distracted humans will not be the ones to help save Earth; instead, the catalyst for positive change comes from EVE and *WALL-E*'s efforts. Together the robots fight off the bad guys (BNL robots) and help to bring a potentially enlightened group of humans back to Earth to start anew.

WALL-E Analysis

Unlike *Ice Age*, *WALL-E* defines its environmental problem and attendant consequences very clearly: overconsumption, operating within a powerful consumer culture driven by large corporations, is devastating the planet. The film makes clear which parties are responsible for the degradation: equal blame is assigned to both the large corporation "Buy N Large" as well as the humans who have let this happen. The text invites audiences to be horrified by overconsumption's catastrophic effect on the environment, including the devastated natural landscape, but also the deteriorated human mind and body, providing an example of an "overt" critique of consumerism that Heumann and Murray (2009) describe. In so doing, the film "risks engagement with controversial elements of the environmentalist agenda in more overt ways than any previous animation" (Whitley 2008, 141) and appears to be an example of the "radical" environmentalism defined by Ingram (2004) that operates outside the typical consumerist milieu. However, like *Ice Age: The Meltdown*, there are significant inclusions and omissions that become apparent in the latter half of the film with the comparison of *WALL-E* to EVE, and these fundamentally change the message of the text.

First, it is important to delve into the significance of the film's representation of the degraded landscape. Aside from the one plant that *WALL-E* finds (and the very few others seen at the end of the film), the landscape is devoid of any plant or animal life. Thus, the film provides very little respite from the visual depiction of human's devastating impact

on the environment: everything is a shade of brown, and even the blue sky takes on a smoggy, brown-tinged hue. Gandy's (2006, 316) observation that "desolate spaces" like this provoke "deep unease" has resonance here, because it appears *WALL-E*'s scenes are meant to wake us up to understand the true devastation of our planet. The massive dust storms that thunder through with regularity are a reminder of the unsustainable agricultural practices, drought, and environmental degradation that set off the Dust Bowl predicament in the 1930s. Visually, then, the film's portrayal of the landscape provides a constant condemnation of humans' over-consumption (and is similar, in its dystopian vision, to another science fiction film—*Interstellar*).

WALL-E, with his rusty, aging body that functions as a trash compactor, represents humans' past sins of overconsumption and willful ignorance. Firmly rooted to the ground, he is cumbersome and dirty, representing the trash he is trying to organize. His centuries-long efforts to clean up the Earth is also a reminder throughout the film that over-consumption is our fault as humans, that someone needs to clean it up, and that we cannot continue with our current practices.

By stark contrast, EVE's weightlessness and luminosity suggest that she has no negative impact on the Earth: she's a different breed of technology that represents a clean, enlightened future. Significantly absent from her presentation is an explanation of her actual role in a clean environment. Does she represent a break from older patterns of wasteful manufacture, overconsumption, and environmental degradation? EVE's physical form itself presents the *problematic*, for her spotless body seems associated with no waste at all, and thus can allay the potential concerns of young audiences watching the film regarding her role in Earth's future.

The silences surrounding EVE's production invite additional exploration of this unusual heroine into a film critiquing consumption. The first important clue about EVE comes from Disney's acquisition of Pixar 2 years prior to the creation of *WALL-E* that enabled Steve Jobs, founder of Pixar and Apple, to become a board member and largest shareholder at Disney (La Monica 2006). It was Jobs' influence at the three companies involved—Pixar, Disney, and Apple—that shaped the creation of both *WALL-E* and EVE. According to Stanton, *WALL-E*'s director (in Siklos 2008), "I wanted EVE to be high-end technology—no expense spared—and I wanted it to be seamless and for the technology to be sort of hidden and subcutaneous. The more I started describing it, the more

I realized I was pretty much describing the Apple playbook for design.” The way in which EVE was designed (through meetings with Stanton and creative designers at Apple) prompted Siklos (2008) to note “It may be the first time a character was based on a true corporate sibling.” The collaboration between the corporations explains the product placements in the film, including the Apple “mice” in *WALL-E*’s home, *WALL-E*’s classic Apple start-up chime when he reboots, and Disney’s musical *Hello, Dolly!* shown on an iPod. It is important to note, however, that *WALL-E* represents a new trend in Hollywood away from mere product placement:

People talk about how products and brands will sponsor movies... that’s what’s going to happen. But Apple has already done that here without being directly involved ... I would call it product *homage*. And that is way more valuable than product placement. It doesn’t just reinforce a single Apple product, it reinforces Apple’s *entire design approach* from MacBook to iPod to iPhone. (McQuivey, in Bulik 2008, emphases added)

Returning to the Althusserian *problematic*, *WALL-E* provides assurance that, while humans have made mistakes, the environment will be protected in the future with a combination of enlightenment and cleaner technology. But it is important to note that it is not just any technology—or any corporation—that can provide a sustainable future. “Buy N Large, a thinly veiled reference to giant discount retailers like Walmart, is a hazard for the environment, as is older technology and overweight individuals, whose “Middle America” obesity stands in for the gluttony and selfishness associated with mindless consumption. Thus, while the film purports to criticize environmental degradation due to overconsumption, it really functions as a critique of the working and middle classes, for it is only the *wrong* type of consumption (say, buying in bulk at discount prices) that leads to catastrophe.

Ultimately, there appear to be two messages contained in the film. In the first half, the film sends the message that humans live on a finite planet with limited natural resources and that overconsumption is devastating the environment. The film takes a strong position on this through the visual depiction of the landscape in a way that directly references the idea of the “life cycle” or “cradle-to-grave” process with consumer goods. One example of this is China’s “cancer villages,” where the natural landscape and human health have been destroyed due to technology production and disposal. The film also appears to reference the other end

of the harmful global e-trade patterns: the end life of technology. The documentary *Digital Dumping Ground* (Dornstein 2009) reveals that entire regions of Ghana have been destroyed by e-waste shipped from the USA and Europe. This irresponsible disposal pattern (only about half of the computers shipped to Ghana actually work) means that Ghana's environment and people are struggling to deal with the end cycle of these products that contain harmful chemicals and heavy metals. In one terrible example, an area called Agbogbloshie used to be a pristine wetland; now it is a toxic dumping ground for wealthy nations' e-waste, thus providing a terrible instantiation (and extension) of Alfred Crosby's conception of *ecological imperialism*.

By broadly referencing ecological degradation on a global scale from overconsumption, *WALL-E* initially provides an anti-consumerist message, which would be very powerful for audiences both young and old. However, the message delivered in the second half of the film, which contradicts and threatens to disarm the power of this message, is that the purchase of Apple products is good for the planet. Children are invited to see EVE—and associated Apple products—as part of the solution to environmental problems rather than an integral part of the old, destructive consumption pattern. Thus, although there is initially an “ecologically attuned version of environmental attentiveness” that Whitley (2008, 150) recognizes, the message is completely undercut by the fact that Apple products provide the starring roles.

When I discuss the promotion of Apple within *WALL-E* with my students, the question inevitably arises as to how much impact this placement has—that is, my students wonder how much of this could the audience possibly recognize and acknowledge? My answer to them is that while an overt advertisement (naming the company and/or making the logo highly visible) might make the Apple brand more recognizable to audiences, the inclusion of highly visible product placement in this film might prompt some uncomfortable questions for Apple (and the film's producers) about the link between consumption and the environment. In my classroom I then re-play the scene where *WALL-E* re-charges his battery (which makes the Mac “start-up” chime). While it is true that the child audience might not make a conscious, direct connection between *WALL-E*'s heroes and Apple, the company's distinctive chime encourages a subtle yet pleasant association between beloved Disney characters, sustainability, and the computer company. As I argue above, while the film itself makes a very strong and bold connection between

consumption and environmental devastation, it places Apple outside of this detrimental cycle, potentially reducing the effectiveness of the film's environmental message.

THE LORAX

Directed by Chris Renaud, of *Despicable Me* fame, this 2012 Universal Pictures film had a particularly robust showing at the box office, pulling in \$122 million in the first two weekends and taking the top spot for weeks in the USA (Barnes 2012). It won several awards, including Teen Choice, Kids Choice, and one from the Environmental Media Association. The film is based on Dr. Seuss's book of the same name that is widely considered an unequivocal critique of American consumer culture and a chronicle of "the human race's ecological crimes" (Little 2012). Like the first two films, *The Lorax* focuses on a specific environmental problem—in this case, the loss of indigenous forests and wildlife.

The Lorax Summary

The narrative focuses on Ted, a young boy who lives in an artificial landscape devoid of natural vegetation. The suburb in which he lives contains semblances of plant life (colorful plastic trees and flowers line his suburb), but they are entirely manufactured. Due to the lack of real trees, as well as the nearby factories, the air quality is so low that one company—run by the uniformly charmless and single-minded businessman Mr. O'Hare—sells bottled air to those who can afford it. Ted, like most of the town's younger inhabitants, is not concerned about the loss of living trees because he does not know that real ones ever existed. He plays with his remote-controlled airplane, rides his sleek razor-type scooter around town, and shyly chases after his female neighbor.

Once he hears about the existence of trees (and his potential girlfriend's interest in them), however, he goes in search of a knowledgeable yet elderly recluse named "the Once-ler" who holds the key to the mystery of their disappearance: all the trees were destroyed, he explains, through the production of "thneeds," odd-looking items that serve only an ornamental purpose. In his desire for profit, the Once-ler did not listen to a small creature called the "Lorax" who lived in the forest and tried to stop its destruction. The Lorax provides the moral compass in the film: he knows that needless consumption is wrong and that trees

are needed for a healthy environment. Ted's ultimate attempt to reintroduce a tree into the environment is thwarted by O'Hare, who believes that enlightenment of the population will hurt his business. Through Ted, O'Hare is ultimately defeated, and the people in the town realize the importance of trees for environmental health. In the end, wisdom about the connection between overconsumption and environmental degradation resonates across generations, enabling the natural environment to thrive.

The Lorax Analysis

The Lorax contains an environmental message that, on the very surface, can be distilled into one clear point: mindless consumption of useless "thneeds" unequivocally causes environmental destruction. The film defines deforestation and loss of wildlife habitat clearly, as it does the consequences: the forests are not able to grow fast enough to sustain high demand for products, and the loss of native forest precipitously decreases biodiversity by devastating the natural landscape, which ultimately harms humans. The film also identifies the cause of environmental damage clearly, placing responsibility for the destruction on both the corporations that mass produce "thneeds" as well as the people that engage in overconsumption. The film (like the book) parodies the fads prevalent in consumer culture where useless items are collected and highly prized for a short time, providing a powerful critique of hypercommercialism.

The film's multiple portrayals of landscape are worth investigating due to the clear contrasts made between them. There are three depictions that are particularly significant: Ted's plasticine suburban town, the devastated landscape around the Once-ler's house, and the scenes of Truffula tree forests in their original, healthy state. It is clear from the portrayal of the artificial, plastic-filled landscape in which Ted resides that we are not meant to want to live there: the absence of trees means that people suffer from poor air quality and (it is suggested) compromised health. Interestingly, however, the film does not dwell too much on the plastic nature of this suburban landscape, and so, while we are told that this is an artificial landscape, we also see that Ted and his multi-generational family are in excellent health. Here is a somewhat contradictory message.

The second significant landscape is the area surrounding the Once-ler's home, which is bleakly monochromatic and dark. There is old, dead vegetation surrounding the house and brown-grey skies overhead, visually suggesting that where once there was life, now nothing can grow. The message this landscape sends is that this man is living in an environmental "hell" that he himself has created.

The third type of landscape exists, according to the film, only in the past and (perhaps) to the future: this is the pristine natural landscape of the past that the Once-ler shares with Ted through his stories. When the Once-ler was a boy, the sky was blue, Truffula forests remained untouched, the rivers ran clear and pure, and biologically diverse wildlife thrived. It is in this colorful and healthy landscape, not a degraded or plastic environment, that we are meant to live, according to the film. The message through visual depiction of landscape, then, is one of conservation and reduction of consumption, which ties into the central message of the text.

Although it has clearly critical messages regarding deforestation and the need for biodiversity, the film falters somewhat by individualizing the problem in the form of both the young boy, Ted, and the evil Mr. O'Hare. Ingram (2004) notes that Hollywood often avoids a strong critique of consumer culture through *individualization*, where blame for environmental problems is placed on one bad person or corporation: by this logic, once that person or organization is stopped, an entire environmental issue is resolved. In *The Lorax*, Ted is seen as the solution to the problem of deforestation: he alone can bring a healthy environment back. Conversely, Mr. O'Hare provides the one impediment to Ted's endeavors: Ted must defeat him before the environment can thrive. The film thus presents a simplistic solution to a very complex problem and ignores the deep structural realities and complexities of environmental degradation. In so doing, it presents a profound silence about what is truly needed to help mitigate the problems it defines: lessening overall consumption.

For the most part, *The Lorax* avoids the rampant product placement seen in *WALL-E*, although there is a subtle but clear plug for Converse All Star shoes when Ted kneels down to play with his toy aircraft. What becomes visible at this angle are white high tops with a black circle near the ankle. During the film release, the Converse website and other stores displayed shoes featuring The Lorax characters, revealing the strong likelihood of a corporate merchandise tie in. Thus, another significant lacuna

is closely tied to the film's marketing. The fact that the film had over 70 product tie ins (Hetter 2012), including products like Hewlett Packard printers (using "green" packaging) and a new Mazda Hybrid SUV, prompted *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott (2012) to note that "The movie is a noisy, useless piece of junk, reverse-engineered into something resembling popular art in accordance with the reigning imperatives of marketing and brand extension." Indeed, *The Lorax's* official movie website had numerous links to contests sponsored by Target, Seventh Generation, and Sun Maid. American cultural critic Stephen Colbert phrased his dismay over merchandizing of the film in Seussian verse in a humorous and succinct way:

To the producers of the movie I say:
 This cashtacular sellout is not quite enough,
 I'm demanding more branding of Loraxian stuff!
 With what you could buy, boy, the sky is the limit:
 A filet-of-fish meal with real humming-fish in it.
 Film makers get cracking, the market is lacking,
 A splendiferous Lorax-themed drill made for fracking!
 Or the fine, certain something that all people need,
 Indeed you'll succeed if you sold us a thneed!
 They're easy to make if you only take
 All the Truffula tufts off the trees by the lake.
 They're comfy and thick as the thick ironies,
 Of *The Lorax* and Seuss hawking big SUVs.

The silence regarding real solutions to environmental problems, paired with the mass marketing that accompanied the film, points to the Althusserian *problematic*: the problem with consumption of contemporary "thneeds," according to the movie, is that they are not green enough. What is needed is not less consumption, but more "sustainable" consumption. The film thus accomplishes an elegant *sleight of hand*: while the movie itself provides a compelling critique of consumption, the child-focused marketing surrounding the film represents an attempt to reassure young audiences that they will not hurt the environment if they simply consume the "right" way. The incorporation of this problematic

precludes discussion of environmentally friendly alternatives like *reducing* consumption and *reusing* existing goods.

IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE SYMPTOMATIC READING

Analysis reveals that there are common ideological threads woven through these films. All three movies present real environmental issues as urgent and worthy of attention. This type of portrayal has the potential to underscore the serious nature of environmental degradation for young audiences and provide a call to change, as Mayumi et al. (2005) note. Unfortunately, while the problems presented in the films engage with “realism” (in sense that they correlate to ongoing environmental concerns), significant silences about viable solutions serve to undercut any serious message about environmental protection. Specifically, the films studiously avoid identifying individual sacrifice and change as the answer: in *WALL-E* the environment was saved by production of enlightened Apple products; in *The Lorax* people just needed to plant one tree after deposing one evil CEO; and in *Ice Age 2* all the animals needed to do to survive the effects of climate change was to move to a different neighborhood.

Accompanying these key omissions is *individualization*. As Ingram (2004) argues, the consequences of individualization are two-fold: it both obscures the complexity of environmental problems and reduces them to a simple cause-and-effect set of circumstances. The films attempt to reassure children that their role in environmental problems is negligible—that one person or entity will fix things for them, and that the American consumerist lifestyle is not only acceptable but necessary for a healthy environment. Thus, while all three films appear to adopt what Ingram (2004) terms radical environmentalism, their “environmental” messages are entrenched within a capitalist framework, reinforcing a mainstream, consumerist mindset. The Althusserian *problematic* is very prominent here, for it is clear that the films incorporate ecological disaster only to soothe viewers’ fears about the future and their role in it. Indeed, all three films provided soothing messages about the environment, which is partly due to the fact that “family films” target a wide range of ages, including children.

Simply put, while these commercial films purport to embrace an environmentalist perspective, they do so only to—as Ingram (2004, 14) puts it—“reproduce capitalist ideologies.” Seen from this perspective, Hollywood readily incorporates the mainstream environmental approach into its media artifacts because it fits with the pre-existing hypercommercialism that defines American culture. Whitley explains clearly how this works, noting that sustainability rhetoric in the “West” is “designed to accommodate relatively minor changes in outlook and lifestyle to the underlying norms of economic growth and productivity” (2008, 2).

The films in question may be relatively new, but they instantiate older and broader trends in the culture industry: in *How to Read Donald Duck*, Dorfman and Mattelart (1975, 36–37) incisively notes that Disney has always functioned as a “carrousel of consumption” where “the rosy ... fantasy of the bourgeoisie is realized to perfection” in a world where “money is the goal everyone strives for.” The findings from analysis of these recent films, then, are not particularly surprising, especially for a genre like family film, which is made to be easily digestible and non-challenging in order to “appeal equally to all consumer groups” (Brown 2012, 217).

Given these findings, it is important to consider their implications. The first relates to how environmental issues are defined by these texts: when Hollywood takes an issue that has the potential to provide serious critique of existing consumer culture and effectively removes the critique through commodification, it turns the environment into simply another product in the concentrated media marketplace. Commodifying the environment—and contemporary environmental problems—results in a clear subordination of environmental concerns to what McAllister (2007, 273) calls the “economic imperative.” Thus, while all of the films contain interesting and provocative messages about environmental issues, the commercial motive consistently serves to undercut these potentially transformative messages.

This economic subordination of the environment leads to another significance of these findings, which is a paradox: commercial media, playing an increasingly central role in children’s lives, are the very source that will *not* provide children with accurate and useful information about the environment that is crucial to their futures. The American media oligarchy effectively removes “alternative viewpoints” and enables “corporate media to promote dominant ideas and frame public discussion and debate” (Andersen and Gray 2007, 97). The lack of critical perspective about environmental issues is undergirded by an absence of discussion

about how we have gotten to this point. McChesney (2004, 165) argues that “as marketers intrude deeper into our children’s lives ... hypercommercialization goes mostly unmentioned in the media or political culture.” As a result, the general public is not often allowed “behind the curtain” to observe how the media industry works. Mayumi and colleagues claim that films play an important role in helping audiences make the connection between environmental concerns with overconsumption and “capitalist consumption patterns” (2005, 7). However, this research reveals that these “environmental” texts are the very sources that will not help to make those connections.

The third consideration to the above findings relates to identity and subjectivity. That Hollywood films address children in narrow ways and provide consumer-oriented solutions for environmental problems is particularly important as “media culture has become a dominant force of socialization, with media images and celebrities replacing families, schools, and churches as arbiters of taste, value, and thought” (Kellner 1995, 17). Without audience research, one cannot know how children are interpreting and responding to these media texts; however, it is possible to recognize that these media texts *invite* their young audiences into certain subject positions—those of consumers, not citizens. The Althusserian perspective that ideology is related to the construction of the audience as a particular *subject* provides one clue as to how this socialization occurs in a hypercommercial milieu: while these Hollywood films give superficial attention to the need for community and care for the environment, they “hail” their young audiences solely as consumers and not citizens, leaving little room for the construction of other potential subjectivities or identities.

Mammoth corporate media entities like Disney consider children’s culture as an opportunity for “not merely a new market for the accumulation of capital but a petri dish for producing new commodified subjects” (Giroux and Pollock 2010, 3). This is incredibly important, because young people are invited to approach the environment as self-interested consumers, a vantage point that fundamentally limits which solutions to environmental problems are considered viable. Speaking to the mutually exclusive categories of citizen–consumer, Giroux and Pollock (2010, 89) stress that corporate culture within the past decade has kindled the popular imagination with a discourse of reform that celebrates egotistic individualism, profits, and the culture of the market. Lost in this shift is the language of community, democracy, and public

interest, a shift that undermines claims for public purpose, public service, and public education.

FROZEN IN TIME: DISNEY'S GLOBAL BLOCKBUSTER

Although this book analyzes movies that address environmental problems directly, it is essential to consider Disney's surprise global hit *Frozen* in the context of the findings above. This recent blockbuster (produced by Peter Del Vecho) provides an excellent example of US media's global influence: grossing close to \$1.2 billion from worldwide box office (Lynskey 2014), it was released in 41 different languages (Keegan 2014) and was number one at the box office in Japan for almost three months (British Broadcasting Corporation 2014).

The film focuses on two sisters, Elsa and Anna. Elsa has a gift/curse: the "gift" is that she can create ice and snow from nothing for innocent fun between her and Anna; the "curse" is that, when she's anxious or angry, everything she touches freezes. The stress finally breaks her emotionally and she strikes out on her own to live a solitary life in an ice castle, but only after instantly entombing her country (likely Norway) in ice and snow in what appears to be a permanent winter. Anna ventures after her into the snowy wilderness to save her sister and her country from the cold.

In the cartoon, the cold is beautiful, pristine, and glittery. There are multiple scenes of bright white snowy mountainous landscapes, shimmering ice architecture, and icicles that hang from trees like Christmas lights. The cold, however, is also portrayed as being potentially deadly: although no one is shown dying, the film hints that if this cold snap goes on long enough, people will starve from not being able to grow enough food in the wintry landscape. In the end, Anna meets her true love, and her sister comes down to warm the land back to its seemingly natural and healthy state. At the end of the film the people rejoice in the warmth while Elsa plays with her icy power for their amusement.

The reason *Frozen* is included in this chapter is that it was impossible *not* to do so. Unlike the multitude of children's films that focus on environmental problems (I count nine Hollywood blockbusters thus far), here is a film that claims that the problem we need to worry about the most is that the world is too *cold*. This plotline seems even more unusual within the context of what is happening regarding climate change around the globe: in 2015, the USA Pacific Northwest experienced the

burning of 10 million acres of land as part of what one *Washington Post* article referred to as “mega fires” (even a rainforest caught on fire); in 2016, Rajasthan, India, experienced a record-breaking heatwave of 124 degrees Fahrenheit (the year before that thousands died during another heatwave); in July and August 2015, many European countries suffered from an unprecedentedly long heatwave; in the same year, California entered its fourth year of extreme drought.

Viewed from this perspective, *Frozen*—based on Hans Christian Andersen’s “Snow Queen” fairy tale—seems like an odd, unabashedly anachronistic text entirely removed from our current global environmental reality. The online rumor mill states that Disney had considered this story for many decades, but only recently decided to make the film (and only loosely base it on the original story).¹² From a psychological vantage point, perhaps it is a soothing idea that the world may become too cold and wet instead of too arid and hot. Given that the film never alludes to realistic environmental issues at all, it is impossible to tell, but given the current widespread knowledge—and scientific acceptance—of climate change, the timing and message of the movie actually seem more rather than less suspect. This suspicion seems somewhat supported by an article from the *Washington Post* that chronicled the recent efforts by a US special representative to the Arctic region to convince Disney that the beloved *Frozen* characters could be used to educate children about the devastating effects of climate change on the Arctic. The representative—Admiral Robert Papp—is described in the article as being bewildered at a Disney executive’s unwillingness to engage with environmental issues:

“I said, you’ve taught an entire generation about the Arctic,” Papp said, relaying his conversation with the Disney exec. “Unfortunately, the Arctic that you’ve taught them about is a fantasy kingdom in Norway where everything is nice. What we really need to do is educate the American youth about the plight of the polar bear, about the thawing tundra, about Alaskan villages that run the risk of falling into the sea because of the lack of sea ice protecting their shores.”

Papp described the executive as perplexed at the idea that Princesses Elsa and Anna, Olaf the snowman, and Sven the reindeer would star in PSAs [public service announcements] making dire warnings about the rapidly warming Arctic. The executive told him, “Admiral, you might not

understand, here at Disney it's in our culture to tell stories that project optimism and have happy endings". (Itkowitz 2015)

Due to its trademark desire for "happily ever after," then, *Frozen* distinguishes itself in the amount that it chooses to *omit* when it comes to climate change rather than what it chooses to *include*. But perhaps it is more accurate to say that *Frozen* rests at the opposite end of the spectrum of the other films chosen for analysis in this chapter in terms of its denial that there is a problem at all—an omission that itself becomes one of the most powerful lacunae from an ideological standpoint. Why fix a problem that does not exist? Perhaps Disney intends to address climate change in its sequel (set for late 2019), but it does not seem likely. Regardless, all four films in this chapter are similar in that they can be seen as an attempt to soothe the younger audience regarding ecological damage, and all are in some sort of denial about either the cause of the problem or its manifestation. Intriguingly, however, *Frozen* may engage with the Althusserian *problematic* more closely than *WALL-E*, *The Lorax*, or *Ice Age* because its central message appears to be "Problem? What problem?"—and leaves it, uneasily, at that.

CONCLUSION

Like major environmental problems like climate change, deforestation, and pollution, US media formations underscore their importance by ignoring international borders. Although the subject matter of this research is Hollywood film, it is obvious (even from an examination of *Frozen*'s massive global success alone) that the reach of the American culture industry goes well beyond the borders of the USA. This is especially true when it comes to the cross-cultural vehicle that is animation, as several other scholars (Brown 2012; Cavalier 2011) have observed. Hollywood as a global industry dominates not only the cultural landscape of the USA, but also the media culture of other countries (Miller et al. 2004), making a clear case for considering the implications of cultural imperialism.

As awareness of the urgency of international environmental problems continues to rise, the culture industry continues to make the environment a central focus; at the same time, however, it does a serious disservice to young audiences by undercutting any meaningful messages about sustainable change and deflecting attention away from personal

responsibility and towards increased consumption. Giroux and Pollock (2010) argue that it is essential to secure

young people's right to learn and think deeply about the effects of their actions within the complex network of human and animal life on this planet ... A critical education that explores the complexity of self and society is no guarantee that a person will live ethically, but it is the only way to equip youth with compelling reasons for why they should choose not to taint their innocence by inadvertently colluding in processes that further environmental destruction. (88)

Unfortunately, the commercial media giants are targeting children more and more, and thus are "linking the supposed pleasures of consumption with those of entertainment" (Grant 2007, 259). McChesney (2008, 20) cautions that "if we learn nothing else from the political economy of media it is that commercialism comes at a very high price and with massive externalities." The externalities, in this case, relate to massive environmental damage as the cost of doing business with the child audience.

NOTES

1. Brown (2012) himself notes that the designator "family film" is a "vague and unsatisfactory label to describe such a diverse, pluralistic body of films," but it is the only term available to use to describe this generic form.
2. Pixar and Disney's *Wall-E* provides a clear example of a film that straddles two genres. In terms of themes of space exploration as well as its decidedly dystopian focus, the film has clear ties to science fiction; in terms of the characters and the medium of animation, the film also can be clearly linked to family films. *Wall-E* was categorized in this book as family film because that is how it was marketed (to children).
3. Brown (2012) specifically points to a Supreme Court case whereby Hollywood film was seen to be a for-profit venture, and thus could be censored. The self-censorship by the industry means that many filmmakers were eager to please the constraints placed by the early Hays Code that eventually grew into the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) so that their films could still reach a wide audience.
4. Wells (2003) provides similar attribution of the success of animation to Disney, who drove the animation market in the USA.
5. A short opinion piece in an online *University Wire* (2015) article suggests as much: that animation should be considered as a technologic form—a

medium—on which diverse forms on content exist. In his impressive tome *The World History of Animation*, Cavalier (2011) treats animation as a visual art form upon which many types of content (and many different genres) can exist.

6. Giroux and Pollock (2010), in the update to *Mickey Mouse Monopoly*, makes a clear case for visual media as a form of education, but of largely the wrong kind: animated films (but especially those produced by Disney) appear to identify children more as self-interested consumers than community-serving citizens.
7. Bell (2012) notes that Hasbro is planning at least five more movies based on its games, including Candy Land, Ouija, and Monopoly. Brown (2012) describes DreamWorks' *Transformers* series as "the most brazenly 'kidult'-oriented franchise in the history of popular cinema. It started life as a successful toy range produced by Hasbro ... Hasbro then struck a distribution deal with DreamWorks for a motion picture based on the toy line" (200). Later, Brown notes, Hasbro CEO congratulated director Michael Bay for making a very "toyetic" film. Schuker (2009) agrees, noting that "no recent project has been more toyetic than 'Transformers.'"
 8. One can add the subject of fantasy to the criticism of family films as well, because, as Brown (2012) notes, "a richly detailed fictional world affords almost limitless opportunities for merchandise and other ancillary revenues" (195).
 9. In 2013, Murdoch split his media monopoly into 20th Century Fox and News Corp, but still maintains control over both.
10. *Wall-E* also won Best Original Screenplay (Academy Awards), Best Film (American Film Institute), and Best Animated Film at the Golden Globes, among other accolades.
11. It is actually unclear whether Shelby Forthright even was the President of the United States or whether the office of the presidency had been subsumed by a corporate entity. The films hints that this may be the case, even while it film appears to represent the USA.
12. In the original fairy tale, an evil sprite tries to create mischief by taking a magical mirror (that makes everyone look bad in some way) from the Snow Queen up to the top of the sky, but it breaks, sending shards of misfortune down on everyone for years to come.

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