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# Eco-Heroes and Eco-Villains: An Archetypal Analysis of Environmental Film, 1950–2010

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Archetypes are characters recognizable by media consumers that operate at a subconscious level and often elicit strong emotional responses. Popular Hollywood films addressing issues of the environment offer hero and villain figures that demonstrate strong archetypal characteristics. Surrounding the intricate characters, many of these films also present a complexity of environmental messages. This study examines 44 Hollywood films with environmental themes from 1950–2010 and uses a neo-archetypal approach to identify heroes and villains within the narrative. Based on process-relational media models, the outcomes of this study have implications relevant to audience consumption, environmental message interpretation and corporate public awareness.

## Neo-Archetypal Theory and Media Models

Jung (1968) describes archetypes as “forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as individual products of unconscious origin.” Classic archetypal figures include Hero, Shadow, Jester, and more. Though this original perspective is rooted in psychoanalytic theory, archetypes are still relevant in society today and especially abundant in mass media. Mark and Pearson (2001) call archetypes “imprints hardwired into our psyches that influence characters we love in art, literature, great religions of the world and

contemporary films” (p. 11). Archetypes influence how people relate to stories, and Mark and Pearson discuss at length general familiarity and applicability of these figures to connect with consumers. Further, Faber and Mayer (2009) compile traditional and contemporary work on archetypes to develop what they have named neo-archetypal theory, which arose out of the need to recognize the relevance of archetypal research over many years while taking a more empirical approach to the way audiences perceive and scholars conceptualize archetypes.

Neo-archetypal theory consists of five components. First, archetypes are generic story characters possessing an array of recognizable characteristics that manifest in key figures within a narrative. Second, archetypes are mental models, organized much like schemas, that represent characteristics and human qualities that people recognize in their own personalities and the personalities of

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others. Third, archetypes often elicit emotional responses based on previous life experiences with the personality features portrayed through that archetype; the recognition of archetypes happens without necessary, voluntary processing. The unconscious nature of archetypes means that they are recognized without the consumer having to knowingly identify the archetype. Lastly, neo-archetypal theory purports that archetypes are easily learned through cultural exposure. Using neo-archetypal theory, Faber and Mayer (2009) conducted large-scale experiments providing evidence for recognition of 13 classic archetypes in contemporary film, music, and art. Though this study was directed toward understanding the psychological basis for archetypal resonance, it has wide reaching and important implications for media consumers and messages targeted to audiences. This article applies the neo-archetypal model to examine archetypal presences in popular American, environmentally themed films spanning six decades. Through close reading of the films, this approach identifies protagonists and antagonists and explores potential patterns in the narrative structure. In addition, discussing the neo-archetypal model, this inquiry includes a close reading of the films grounded in socialization theories of communication and provides implications for behavioral change related to environmental messages.

## Mediated Depictions of Environmental Issues

Many Americans rely heavily on the media for information about the environment (Roth, 1992; NEETF, 2005). Although much attention has been paid to environmental content of news media, few studies have addressed environmental messages in fictional and non-news entertainment media. Overlooking these genres gives an inaccurate picture of how environmental issues appear in the media. A content analysis of environmental content in nonnews entertainment and fictional television programs found a dearth of environmental top-

ics (McComas, Shanahan, & Butler, 2001), but no studies have comprehensively addressed the content of environmental messages in popular film.

Changing environmental behaviors is rarely the intended purpose of popular Hollywood films. It is possible, however, that they produce behavioral and attitudinal change as an unintended by-product. Studies suggest that mass media are a major source of scientific and environmental information for the general public (Nelkin, 1987; Wilson, 1996). Some have suggested that film can be an effective tool for raising environmental knowledge and awareness (Ivakhiv, 2008) and even mobilize viewers to action (Krajnc, Wartel, & Jacobs, 2006). Morss (2005) suggests that science fiction films allow viewers to sort out feelings about science and technology and also help audiences consider values, a concept that scientific channels are less apt to address. For example, one intention of the creators of *The Day After Tomorrow* was to affect public opinion about climate change and become one of the many voices in the debate (Snyder, 2004). Lowe et al. (2006) found that *The Day After Tomorrow* did indeed raise awareness of climate change as well as increase motivation to act on that knowledge. It lacked, however, specific information on what people could do to affect change. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1980) suggest that audiences learn about dominant worldviews through the media, and cultivation framework suggests that media shape our understanding of the environment through patterns of representation in film, television, and other forms of popular media. Over time and repeated exposures to similar messages, normative views about global climate change can be shaped. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 2001) suggests that mass media, including film, is one of the elements that shapes our ideas about the world around us. Using these foundation media theories as foundational support for deeper analyses bolsters a reasonable assumption that audiences are apt to be affected through environmental film messages.

Though environmental film is still largely undefined as a specific genre in Hollywood, there has been a steady rise in films with environmental themes over the last several decades. Ingram (2000) points to the increase in mainstream environmentalism as one factor in Hollywood's growing interest in environmental issues. Film and other media are tackling these topics as general discourse about global climate change, excessive consumption, sustainability, and other concerns are brought to the forefront in the public sphere. Therefore, not only does this arena of research offer new scholarly connections but also raises questions of significance for critical, public social science. As Brinkmann (2012) offers, film is a medium that invites qualitative interpretation and yields "analyses of specific cultural processes as well as more universal philosophizing" (p. 135).

Combining neo-archetypal theory with environmental frames allows qualitative interpretation and pattern matching that examines mediated communication around environmental issues. Neo-archetypal theory offers an explanation of the built-in, cultural schemas that audiences implicitly bring to consumption behaviors. This study addresses media content by looking at archetypes of hero and villain characters portrayed in popular U.S. environmentally themed films and uncover patterns or trends regarding the narratives of these characters. From the consumer's perspective, how are environmental conflicts portrayed in film narratives? Who is battling whom?

## Methodology and Limitations

The sample set of U.S. environmentally themed, nondocumentary films was created by identifying films listed in the Environmental Communication Network's Filmography of Nature and Environmental Movies (Meisner, n.d.) and crosschecking with Box Office Mojo's genre collection (Environmentalist, n.d.), the Internet Movie Database's Movie Keyword Analyzer (Environment Titles, n.d.), and Turner Classic Movie database (n.d.) (<http://www.tcm.com/tcmdb/index.html>).

Because this study is interested in narrative structure of Hollywood films and hero and villain characters contained within, documentary films are excluded. From the resulting list of 70 films, the top 10 grossing for each decade were selected (besides the 1950s and 1960s, which only yielded two films each). The final sample includes 44 films, listed in the Appendix.

The two researchers conducted a close viewing of each film to identify archetypes of primary and secondary protagonists and antagonists. As close reading allows for a more interpretive framework with which to approach specific texts, this method was chosen for its affordance of very sensitive engagement with the subject matter. Though this looks at media content and makes assumptions about media consumption processes, it is neither a content analysis nor a measurement of media effects. This study is limited to looking specifically at archetypes portrayed in the films sampled.

This study is guided by Framing Theory per Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) to conceptualize the use of myths as a framing technique to make stories more memorable and vivid. The 13 archetypes used for typology are based on Jung's original work, were further developed by Campbell (1949) and are now widely accepted by contemporary archetypal theorists as a standard foundational model for organization. Vogler (1998) presents one of the first and arguably most complete contemporary analyses and in-depth treatment of Hollywood films using an application of classical archetypes and mythic structure, and he provides support for both the prevalence of the most common archetypes and the usefulness of applying close reading to this type of study.

## Results and Discussion

The following section includes description of findings of patterns identified in character/archetype relationships, narrative structure, environmental issue, and genre. Because of the

interpretive methodology used, many specific examples are evoked as well as an overarching discussion illustrating common results across variables. Findings have been organized into three major categories highlighting the most prominent recurring themes.

### **Protagonist Hero Versus Ruler Villain**

The most prominent and culturally enduring archetype, Hero, represents courage, impetuosity, nobility, inspiration, and dragon slaying. Vogler (1998) explains that the Hero is the audience's gateway into the story; from the beginning we are "invited to identify with the Hero, to merge with him and see the world through his eyes" (p. 36). Pure Hero essence is exemplified in Commander Dwight Towers of *On the Beach* (1959). Unlike many protagonists from the sample films, Towers does not make any great transformation but is portrayed with great dignity and honor from the start. We see him risk his life for fellow soldiers and refuse advances of an intoxicated woman. As the truth of the world's fate becomes clear, *On the Beach* portrays a Hero coping with tragedy. 2008's *Quantum of Solace*, a recent addition to the Bond series, presents a similarly static Hero who transcends many contextual arrangements but fits into a reliable formulaic good versus evil narrative. Each Bond film neatly delineates the villain and therefore makes even clearer Bond's status as Hero.

In tandem with the Hero, one of the strongest themes found in the film sample is that the antagonists are likely portrayed through the Ruler archetype. According to the typology, the Ruler represents the qualities of power, control, leadership, officiousness, judgment, influence, stubbornness, and tyranny. This issue is most commonly framed through the narrative of pitting people against large, powerful corporations. There are several instances where the Ruler corporation causes environmental destruction, such as the nuclear power plant in *China Syndrome*, and also situations in which the Ruler corporation is at odds with citizens concerning public health

and resources, like *Wild River*'s representation of the Tennessee Valley Authority or *The Secret of NIMH*'s animated take on the National Institute of Mental Health. *Soylent Green* offers the ultimate deception narrative between the Soylent Corporation and the public when audiences realize that Soylent Green is people, while the all-encompassing Buy-N-Large (*Wall-E*) has commodified the very experience of life for the citizens of the Planet Axiom. Some examples in this category are based on real-life conflicts like *Erin Brockovich* with the Pacific Gas & Electric Company or *Karen Silkwood* with the Kerr-McGee plant. Unsurprisingly, the Ruler villain is also often exemplified through some form of government. Iniquitous and sometimes ambiguous Ruler governments surface to varying degrees in *Silent Running*, *Brazil*, *Avatar*, *Americathon*, *Pocahontas*, and *On the Beach*, while specific individuals, branches, or agencies shoulder some of the villainous blame in *Project X* (the Air Force), *The Simpsons Movie* (the EPA), and *The American President* (Senator Rumsen).

Films from the sample that do not fit the protagonist as Hero pattern are *Never Cry Wolf* and *Silent Running*, which have Magician or Caregiver archetypes, respectively representing protagonists who don't seem to have influence or power in the overall narrative or fight for the environment. Similarly, films that do not fit the villain as Ruler pattern have environmental issue as a minor theme, and the villain manifests through the Shadow archetype. Both of these cases make the ultimate battle less central or less specific to the narrative. The Shadow equates to violence, darkness, tragedy, rejection, awkwardness, and desperate emotion and is depicted through tortured, complicated characters in both *Twelve Monkeys* and *Apocalypse Now*. The Shadow represents the darkest aspects of humanity and is perhaps too uncomfortable for the average consumer of Hollywood films to confront as a main character, even one who is designed to be definitively unpleasant. Thus, the Ruler-villain pattern makes more sense, especially given the way conflicts regarding the environment are often framed.

Big business and the dominant power are commonly targeted as the cause of environmental destruction. Again, this theme comes out strongly in films like *A Civil Action* that point the finger at the evil corporation and not humans. When we watch movies, we don't want to feel blamed or guilty about our choices and ourselves.

In the other films not following the Ruler-villain pattern, an Everyman/woman is at the center of the antagonizing behavior. However, these films do not point to specific individuals and cause-effect environmental problems but rather are more generalized, such as over-consumption in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and even less specified environmental abuses in *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Further, the former are rather light hearted, and all three films are science fiction/fantasy oriented. Looking at these first two themes in conjunction, portrayals of the struggles regarding the environment tend to be between one strong Hero and a character(s) representing the Ruler. The battle to save the Earth is between true Hero and Ruler, most commonly the corporation. In this particular narrative of environmental salvation, the battle offers limited roles for the common person unless he or she possesses the transformative spirit required for true heroism.

### ***The Greater Good Versus Self-Serving Narratives***

Most eco-heroes in our sample seem focused on achieving a personal goal, and the environmental cause is a secondary or auxiliary result of accomplishing their self-serving narrative. This is clearly exemplified through Jake in *Avatar*. Though he eventually fights to stop the destruction of the Na'vi habitat, he does it because he has fallen in love with Neytiri and has grown to prefer his life with her to his previous one. Taylor in *Planet of the Apes* and Dirk in *Sahara* are also examples of protagonists who are more interested in advancing their own causes than the environmental theme of the film; in-

terestingly, both of these protagonists are read as Explorer and not Hero archetypes.

Those characters ultimately concerned with the greater good are generally dynamic characters, initially reluctant but later transformed into heroes with investments in the larger environmental issue. In *A Civil Action* Jan transforms from a Ruler type concerned with propagating his wealth through the system into a more heroic figure with a desire to expose those responsible for water contamination. A similar transformation occurs for Chuck Glover in *Wild River*. His original goal is carrying out his duty with the Tennessee Valley Authority by clearing the island of its residents before the dam floods the land. Initially, he is not concerned with the people who inhabit the island, only with getting his job done, but as Glover gets to know local residents and comes to see both sides of the issue, his Ruler personality gives way to the Hero who tries to find a solution to make everyone happy. *Americathon* offers a comparable change in protagonist Eric McMurkin, a television consultant hired to help with a national event. McMurkin steps out of his comfortable Everyman function to perform heroic duties in effort to discern the true villains and pay America's debt. This transformation narrative fits the neo-archetypal model that consumers are looking for characters with whom they identify. Humans are flawed, and as Vogler (1998) argues "flaws also give a character somewhere to go" (p. 40). Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that transformative eco-Heroes, even those who are initially reluctant, resonate with audiences more than a "pure" Hero who is less dynamic overall.

### ***Dystopia***

The self-serving narrative seems to be especially evident in films with a dystopic theme. Out of all the dystopic films in the sample, none of the protagonists are pure Heroes. Of the four instances where Hero is assigned as an archetype, it is a secondary archetype or indicative of a dynamic figure who transformed into an archetype. In the former category are

Max from *Mad Max* and Thorn of *Soylent Green*, both Outlaw Heroes. Logan from *Logan's Run* is an example of the latter category as he transforms from Ruler to Hero. The other protagonists from the themes of dystopia were typified as an Explorer, Outlaw, Everyman, or Caregiver. All of these men present a very solitary figure. In the dystopic category there are less secondary Eco-Heroes than any other genre, and the narratives all involve very little collaboration between the protagonist and other characters, which seems a rational thematic choice when dealing with dystopia.

In addition to the solitary protagonist characters and lack of Hero, there is also an absence of the Hero/Ruler dynamic that is discussed as a strong theme across many other film genres in the sample. This relationship seems to represent a more classic struggle between good and evil, which is not as straightforwardly portrayed in the films that present a theme of dystopia. As there is sometimes not a Hero archetype present, it is less spelled out for the viewer who is supposed to be the champion and who is supposed to be the villain. In several of these films, the villain is not necessarily a pure Ruler archetype either. *Mad Max*, *Blade Runner*, and *Waterworld* all provide Outlaw villains. Also, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Waterworld*, and *A Boy and His Dog* show the main characters behaving in ways that are certainly less than pure. This complex interaction between heroes and villains speaks to the overall premise of chaos and anarchy that is found in the films that present dystopia as the primary environmental issue. According to Faber and Mayer's (2009) work on archetype resonance and personality, these films would likely be more appealing to a certain type of consumer that showed a more affective reaction and stronger preferences for these themes.

## Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

In summary, there are three main conclusions for the current study. The first two conclusions take a reactive stance in dealing with environ-

mental issues. The themes uncovered here delineated specific patterns and trends regarding archetypes and environmental narratives in film. In general, the fight to save the earth is between the true hero and the ruler. From a potential social change standpoint, there are two issues with this trend. First, this narrative completely excludes the role of Everyman/woman as either the cause of or solution to the problem and instead points the finger at corporations and suggests that the problem is so large that only a (super) Hero can fight this battle. Second, according to Faber & Mayer (2009), this narrative pattern may exclude a segment of the movie viewing population with whom the Hero/Ruler archetypes do not resonate and who instead seek out Shadow/Outlaw characters. The third conclusion connects to the first two with a proactive stance and also relates back to the neo-archetypal model's suggestion that archetypes may be used to target messages to different personality types. Environmentally themed films may pose an opportunity to create pro-environmental messages that resonate with various audiences and help them see their role in solving environmental problems. The only three films in the sample that seem to accomplish this are the three that depict Everyman/woman as villain—*How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Star Trek IV*, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The overall message in all three, but most pronounced in *The Day...* and *Star Trek*, is that we have been given a wake-up call. We have the opportunity to change our behavior before it is too late.

Though the work presented here represents a limited (though representative in the sense of a Hollywood, environmentally themed) sample of films, it is only one component of a larger notion of prospective research. This is a media *content* study based on assumptions of media *processes* making assumptions about possible media effects. To study consumers of environmental film, Ivakhiv (2013) outlines the Process-Relational Model for Film Analyses, which provides a three-tier model through which audiences experience, interpret, and react to media. Here we have

dealt with the second tier, the narrative, but future work should also examine the other layers of experiencing environmental messages—the sound/image and the social relations experience. Future studies examining environmental attitudes and behaviors as “product placement” in films or measuring actual audience opinions would need to be conducted to address media effects issues. Results also support directions for further examination that include gender-related character portrayals, genre study (including demographically targeted films like those for children), more in-depth treatments of individual archetypes, and the possibility of contemporary archetypes or archetype combinations that are specific to environmental film. Further work could present both a potential method for understanding how environmental film archetypes resonate with audiences as well as a framework for crafting narratives around environmental messages that are ultimately more influential for behavioral change.

As Pearson (1991) argues, personal recognition and understanding of archetypes can influence personal awareness and success and, subsequently, create a richer overall human experience. Based on the empirical connections offered through Faber and Mayer's (2009) original study, socialization theories of communication, and the thought-provoking patterns revealed in the present study, there is reason to consider that this kind of positive transformation can also take place at the mass media level.

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## APPENDIX: COMPLETE SAMPLE OF FILMS

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*The American President* [Motion picture]. (1995). Warner Home Video.

*Americathon* [Motion picture]. (1979). Lorimar.

*Apocalypse Now* [Motion picture]. (1979). Zoetrope, Omni.

*Avatar* [Motion picture]. (2009). 20th Century Fox Film Corp.

*The Big Trees* [Motion picture]. (1952). Warner Bros.

*Blade Runner* [Motion picture]. (1982). Warner Home Video.

*A Boy and His Dog* [Motion picture]. (1975). First Run Features.

*Brazil* [Motion picture]. (1985). Embassy International Pictures.

*The China Syndrome* [Motion picture]. (1979). Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment.

*Chinatown* [Motion picture]. (1974). Paramount.

*A Civil Action* [Motion picture]. (1998). A & E Home Video.

*The Day After Tomorrow* [Motion picture]. (2004). 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* [Motion picture]. (2008). 20th Century Fox.

*The Emerald Forest* [Motion picture]. (1985). Embassy Home Entertainment.

*Erin Brockovich* [Motion picture]. (2000). Universal Studios.

*The Formula* [Motion picture]. (1980). Warner Home Video.

*Free Willy* [Motion picture]. (1993). Warner Home Video.

*Gorillas in the Mist* [Motion picture]. (1988). Universal Pictures.

*Happy Feet* [Motion picture]. (2006). Warner Home Video.

*How the Grinch Stole Christmas* [Motion picture on VHS]. (2000). Universal Pictures.

*Instinct* [Motion picture]. (1999). Touchstone Home Video.

*Logan's Run* [Motion picture]. (1976). Turner Entertainment.

*Mad Max* [Motion picture]. (1979). MGM Home Entertainment.

*The Medicine Man* [Motion picture]. (1992). Hollywood Pictures Home Entertainment.

*Mighty Joe Young* [Motion picture]. (1998). Walt Disney Home Video.

*Never Cry Wolf* [Motion picture]. (1983). Coronet/MTI Film & Video.

*On Deadly Ground* [Motion picture]. (1994). Warner Home Video.

*On the Beach* [Motion picture]. (1955). MGM Home Entertainment.

*Planet of the Apes* [Motion picture]. (1968). 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

*Pocahontas* [Motion picture]. (1995). Buena Vista Home Entertainment.

*Project X* [Motion picture]. (1987). CBS/Fox.

*Prophecy* [Motion picture]. (1979). Paramount Home Video.

*Quantum of Solace* [Motion picture]. (2008). Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

*Sahara* [Motion picture]. (2005). Paramount DVD.

*The Secret of NIMH* [Motion picture]. (1983). MGM/UA Entertainment Co.

*Silent Running* [Motion picture]. (1972). Universal.

*Silkwood* [Motion picture]. (1983). MGM.

*The Simpsons Movie* [Motion picture]. (2007). 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

*Soylent Green* [Motion picture]. (1973). Warner Bros.

*Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* [Motion picture]. (1986). Paramount Home Video.

*Twelve Monkeys* [Motion picture]. (1995). Universal Pictures.

*WALL-E* [Motion picture]. (2008). Walt Disney Home Entertainment.

*Waterworld* [Motion picture]. (1995). MCA Universal Home Video.