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"Nature in Disney Movies: Family Film between Mother Nature's Paradise and Human-Made Dystopia"

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1. Introduction

The Australian bushfires, the heatwave in Japan, the Amazon wildfires and Hurricane Dorian causing devastation on the Bahamas – these are only a few of the natural catastrophes that have dominated the news broadcast during the last year[1]. With constantly rising temperatures, even Central Europe cannot escape the changing climate and its long-term effects. Campaigns to preserve the environment and stop climate change go back as far as the 1950s, when "theories of a man-made greenhouse-gas effect, an idea first proposed in the 1890s" (White 395) were seriously debated by politicians for the first time. And while nations all over the globe have passed laws to help the environment, increasing CO_2 emissions are still furthering the climate crisis. However, some of the most effective changes to help the environment, for example the growing demand for cage-free eggs, organic farming and cruelty-free make-up, have been consumer-driven initiatives. Due to the shift in purchasing behavior, the industries responded by further developing these branches and changing their production methods to match consumer interests. This indicates that, while law alterations and government initiatives are necessary to help preserve the environment, consumers are also able to affect the way that we treat nature and how the future of our planet is going to look. For this reason, many books and documentations are aimed at informing people about ways to help the environment, for example by avoiding food wastage or by buying less items wrapped in single-use plastic. However, while many of these medias succeed in educating the public on certain issues, they fail to motivate people to take action.

One medium on which little research has been done in connection with environmental issues are family films and animation movies in particular. The following thesis aims to contribute to this topic by investigating different ways in which animation films depict nature and how the connection between nature and humans is established. Due to Disney's leading role in the development of animation films and their long-standing history of producing family films since 1937, all three analyzed films have been made by Disney or Disney/Pixar.

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[1] Parts of the introduction have been used in the project proposal for this thesis, as part of the MA Seminar (Literature /Cultural Studies – Final Module) SS2020.

The second chapter will focus on the theoretical framework of Ecocriticism and its historic development. Due to its comparatively short history and its wide field of applicable topics, Ecocriticism lacks a homogenous form of analysis. Because of this, the first chapter will also address the strand of Ecocriticism that is best suited to use in this thesis. Following this, subchapter 2.2. will give a brief description of the genre of family film and how movies of this kind communicate with a demographically diverse audience. In this context, the influence of Disney will be discussed, as well as giving a short summary of the development of the Disney company to a global entertainment magnate, in order to showcase the cultural influence that the movies can develop.

The next three chapters will analyze one film each, while paying special attention to a related aspect of ecocriticism. Chapter 3 investigates anthropomorphism in *Finding Nemo* (2003) as one of the most commonly used strategies in family film to evoke empathy with animals and to project human intent on animals. It will also analyze the implications popular movies can have on academic research conducted on related topics, such as the increased academic interest in clownfish after the release of *Finding Nemo*. Chapter 4 will pay close attention to the personification of nature in *Moana* (2016) and the anthropocentrism encoded in the movie. In order to do so, the chapter is divided into four subchapters which will investigate the semblance of ecological balance on Motunui, the Ocean as a character, Maui in a mythological context and as an analogy of academic growth, as well as analyzing Te Fiti and Te Kā as embodiments of nature. Chapter 5 is centered around *WALL-E* (2008) and the nostalgia for a simplified past and a harmonious relationship with nature. It gives an insight into the post-apocalyptic environment created and describes the relationship between robots and humans in terms of their connection to nature. All three movies were chosen due to their fairly recent release date and because each film focuses on a different approach to depict the environment.

Ultimately, the thesis is interested in the strategies employed in order to communicate proenvironmental issues to the audience, both on a cognitive and an emotional level. Can difficult topics be addressed in movies without having to make them the focal point of the story and, if so, how are ecocritical aspects introduced in the movies, if they are not directly mentioned?

2. Theoretic Background Information

In order to answer the thesis' research question, the following three subchapters will introduce the main theoretic frameworks: Ecocriticism, family film and a brief dive into the history of Disney. The historic background provided should help explain the origins of ecocriticism and its applications, while the focus on family film is provided in order to give an indication of the audience and the parameters of the genre.

2.1 Ecocriticism

If stripped down to its barest essence, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xix) in the same way as feminist theory views the connection between literature, language and gender or Marxist criticism investigates texts depending on their depictions of class and production. Building on this seemingly simple statement, ecocriticism is applicable to a huge variety of topics and texts. According to Lawrence Buell (Emerging Trends: 88f.), ecocriticism was first established as an independent field within literary studies in the early 1990s, with two emerging prominent foci: British romanticist poetry and American nature writing. Before the field was defined in the 1990ies, a number of singular papers concerning the environment in literature were published, but they remained outliers until Frederick O.Waage edited *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources* in 1985 in the hopes of raising awareness for this emerging trend within literary studies (Glotfelty xvii). This publication created and opened the gates for a slowly growing number of books, essays, conferences and, eventually, journals based entirely on environmental literary studies.

The timing of the emerging field was not a coincidence. The United States suffered from a historic heat wave and resulting drought in 1980, the horrific disaster in Chernobyl occurred in 1986, the destruction of the rainforests became a topic of public interest throughout the 1980ies and even the republican US president George W. Bush acknowledged the growing need for environmental protection by calling the 90ies the "era for clean air" (Landsberg). International organizations like the Worldwatch Institute warned about the threats of greenhouse effects and the need to take measures before irreparable damage could be done to the environment (Landsberg). Unsurprisingly, the

growing public awareness of issues such as global warming and deforestation inspired scholars to pay closer attention to the interplay of humanity and nature in fictional texts as well. And though the spectrum of possible questions to investigate is immense and varied, Glotfelty summarizes that:

> all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it.[…] As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

According to this definition, ecocriticism is concerned with everything that affects humans and that is affected by them. This includes other living beings like animals as well as plant life, the weather and larger ecosystems, but ecocriticism is also concerned with the lack of nature in urban settings.

Whereas the first wave of ecocriticism was concerned with preserving nature, the more recent second wave is interest in activism and has gained political undertones (Buell: Emerging Trends 96). This happened, in part, due to the contact with postcolonial studies and the emerging focus on marginalized groups but is also due to the growing importance of environmental justice in "high and vernacular culture" (Buell: Emerging Trends 97). Another development in ecocritical studies is the inclusion of green-film-criticism and movies in general. Similarly, to how literary ecocriticism first focused on genres that had nature as the clear focal point of their narratives, namely the aforementioned romantic nature poetry and American nonfiction writing, eco-cinema's lens also broadened to include both Hollywood spectacles as well as nonfiction nature documentaries.

The definitions used so far may create the impression that every text can be seen as "environmental", since every text will to some extend at least mention nature. Buell (Environmental Imagination 7-8) introduces a helpful list of four criteria to see to which degree a fictional text may be considered to have an environmental orientation:

> (1) The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history; (2)The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; (3) Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; (4) Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.

While a text does not necessarily have to fulfill any of the mentioned criteria, the named parameters help to understand what ecocritical readings are interested in. They showcase that ecocriticism is not only concerned with humans or nature on their own, but in the interplay between the two and their constantly changing relationship. (2) also indicates that ecocritical readings should not be seen from humanities standpoint alone, but that texts should also be read from nature's point of view, in order to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the text.

Another hallmark of ecocriticism is its close proximity to natural sciences. Numerous articles combine readings of texts with biology, geology and geoscience, helping to draw interdisciplinary connections between literature and science. Ecocriticism also carries an active component in that it is "committed to effecting change by analyzing the function […] of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents that contribute to material practices in material worlds." (Estok 16f.). In other words, the understanding gained through analyzing how texts construct nature and how it is perceived and understood contributes towards bringing about active changes to preserve the environment.

This becomes especially transparent when looking at green cinema and documentaries, which Willoquet-Maricondi describes as "aim[ing] to have an impact on audience's environmental values and behavior, and thus to inspire viewers to take personal and political action" (xii). Many of the movies trying to convey ecological messages are fairly blunt about their message, trying to shock the audience into action. Examples would be big Hollywood disaster films, such as *2012* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) or *Snowpiercer* (2013). Similarly, documentaries try to educate audiences in the hopes of influencing their behavior, popular examples being *The 11th Hour* (2007) or *Before the Flood* (2016). However, Mannix (1992) argues that few people will take action simply because they are told to do so. Instead, he proposes three different appeals based on Aristotle: (1) the ethical, (2) rational and (3) emotional appeal, in an attempt to deconstruct the rhetorical strategies employed in order to communicate a specific message. Though this approach is not new, it provides a solid groundwork for basic analysis of strategies employed to further an environmental agenda.

In regard to understanding the basic motivation of ecocriticism, it should be mentioned that the quantity of different research areas within the field partly stems from a basic division caused by the perception of the field, with the two main aspects being environmentalism and deep ecology. The former are people who attempt to "maintain or improve their standard of living [..] and who do not welcome radical change" (Garrard 21) while concerning themselves with green initiatives and potentially donating to environment-based charities. Deep ecology, on the other hand, is based on the belief that human and non-human life have intrinsic value, which does not depend on the usefulness it has for society (Garrard 23). This belief leads to a shift from a "human-centered to a nature-centered system of values [as] the core of the radicalism attributed to deep ecology" (Garrard 24). A sub-category of ecocriticism that will be mentioned again later is ecofeminism, which concerns itself with topics of gender and domination.

As indicated by this very brief overview about the topic of ecocriticism, the approach is too broad and too "methodically and theoretically eclectic" (Rosendale xv), in order to be fully explained in a feasible scope within this thesis. Instead, this chapter's purpose was to sufficiently introduce the topic to later delve further into specific elements of ecocriticism depending on the primary texts' core themes. However, the central goal of employing ecocriticism in analyzing literature or film remains the same – understanding the depicted interplay of human and non-human life. Ecocriticism also tries to contribute to the current ecological crisis by giving an indication of which depictions or strategies may affect people in proactive ways:

> Thus, it is not that representations directly shape nature but that they shape our perception of nature, perceptions turn in turn to inform and pattern our actions in relation to nature; our actions, in turn, shape nature by preserving ecosystems or by despoiling them." (Willoquet-Maricondi 7)

The thesis will return to this notion when analyzing the primary texts and comment on the strategies employed to shape the audience's views and potentially their opinions of the depicted environment.

2.2. Family Film

The following chapter provides an introduction to the genre of family film and the requirements that a movie for a multi-demographic audience must fulfill. Firstly, there

needs to be a distinction made between the historic family film and the Hollywood family film. Historic family film is considered as such "when it represents images, elaborated by one of the members, regarding family happenings, behaviors, and all objects that might help constitute the family history" (Odin qtd.in Peixoto113). Films that fall into this category are private, not fictional and usually do not aim to be of any artistic value. Hollywood family film on the other hand is commercially interested and artificially produced instead of depicting real-life situations. This thesis is interested in the latter of the two definitions, but for the sake of readability will henceforth refer to Hollywood family film simply as family film.

Family film as defined by Brown (2010) is a movie that may be enjoyed by anyone, from children to grandparents. This includes but is not limited to animated films. As such, they must appeal to as big an audience as possible (Brown: Family Audience 7). At the beginning, the term 'family film' referred more to the lack of adult content, rather than an active appeal to younger audiences. It also did not address "the probable audience base, but [referred] to the composition of the movie itself, which invites an emotionally and intellectually unsophisticated audience response." (Brown: Family Audience 16). This, however, must not mean that the movies themselves are unsophisticated. Instead, family films do not feature overly complicated narrative structures, in favor of appealing to audiences on an emotional level.

Other definitions of family film refer to the casting of child performers without taking the content of the movies into account (Wojcik-Andrews), or use the term synonymously with children's entertainment (Kapur). Booker (2010), on the other hand, does not give an in-depth definition of family film, but he does limit the genre to movies that do not feature heavy or dark topics. For this thesis, I prefer Brown's (Hollywood Family Film 12 f.) non-textual markers to determine whether a movie can be labeled as a family film because they allow for movies with difficult topics while simultaneously taking PG ratings into account and thus not including movies with sexual contents or explicit violence. They also interconnect with marketing, showing that there are parameters determined by the industry that should feature into the classification of movies. Moreover, the textual criteria of what is considered 'child-appropriate' is heavily dependent on the social norms at the time of publication, while non-textual markers tend to be less affected by shifts in interpretation.

The first marker focuses on the elaborate marketing and distribution strategies, more specifically on the costly effort to communicate the target audience and children-friendliness of a film (Brown: Hollywood Family Film 12f.). Most family films invest a lot of money into early previews, posters and other forms of advertising in order to generate as much excitement as possible in order to guarantee bringing audiences into the cinemas. The second marker is based on the classification of the film (Brown: Hollywood Family Film 13). Most family films aim for a G or PG rating, because a higher rating immediately shrinks the possible target audience and topics that would increase the rating are not appropriate for children. Marker three mentions the critical responses to the movie and where they are published (Brown: Hollywood Family Film 13). Most family films are mentioned in general-interest publications instead of specialized magazines. The fourth marker addresses merchandising (Brown: Hollywood Family Film 13). Licensable properties have become one of the most lucrative sources of revenue for the film industry, especially because the production costs of big blockbusters have increased dramatically over the last twenty years. Toys, games and apparel appeal to younger demographics and allow audiences to maintain a feeling of connection to the property after having watched the movie. The final marker concerns television broadcasting and the time slots when family films are aired (Brown: Hollywood Family Film 13). Movies suitable for children are usually broadcast during daytime and have their first TV screening close to national holidays in order to promote watching it as a family. However, with streaming platforms gaining momentum, this marker may be adapted slightly by adding that family films are viewable while having child protective settings enabled.

In conclusion, movies that can be considered family films are restricted both in the topics that they may show, namely non-violent content, as well as in their style of narrative, favoring linear, simple plot structures over complicated stories with multiple plotlines. They are however not restricted in whether they are live-action or animated, nor does it limit the sub-genre choice much, with family film sub-genres ranging from fantasy to sci-fi and romance, to name only a few. Lastly, just because children are one of the demographic audiences targeted in family films does not mean that the quality of the movies may be lacking. Family films are held to high standards and need to provide entertainment and artistic value in order to please young and old audiences.

2.3 The Walt Disney Company

When talking about family film, it is near impossible to not at least mention the Walt Disney Company and their movies. All three movies chosen for this thesis are Disney or Disney/Pixar films due to their societal relevance and their outstanding popularity. The Disney brand is a global entertainment giant, beloved by millions. However, this adoration and childhood nostalgia should be taken with a grain of salt. In order to provide a more nuanced depiction of Disney films and the decisions made by the company, the following chapter will give a brief overview of Disney's history and the problematic aspects of the Walt Disney Company.

There are numerous documentaries about the life of Walter Elias Disney, for example *Walt Before Mickey* (2015) or *As Dreamers Do: The Amazing Life of Walt Disney* (2014) - even *Saving Mr. Banks* (2013), to some extent. All of them establish the same cornerstones of Walt's life: He was born in 1901 and worked as an illustrator early on, before moving to California alongside his brother Roy Disney in 1923, where they established the Disney Brothers Studio with the name of the studio changing three years later to Walt Disney Studio. Together, they began working on cartoons and later series of short films and skits, such as the *Alice Comedies (*1923-1927), *Silly Symphony* (1929-1939) and *Steamboat Willie* (1928), before beginning their work on feature-length animated movies. In 1937, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* premiered and launched the long line of full-length feature films that is continuing until today. The first entirely live-action film *Treasure Island* premiered in 1950, and the first theme park, Disneyland in Anaheim, opened in 1955. Eleven years later, in 1966, Walt died, and his brother Roy took over the company for the next five years.

Though the company faced some financial troubles, they soon branched out and founded the film studio Touchstone, as well as a record label and the TV networks Disney Channel and ABC Studios along with its "226 affiliated stations" (Giroux and Pollack 2). The company also opened additional theme parks and hotels in Florida, Paris, Tokyo and Hong Kong. In recent years, Disney has acquired ESPN, Hollywood Pictures, Miramax Films, Lucasfilm, Marvel Studios, Pixar Animation, 20th Century Fox, Blue Sky Studios, National Geographic and the streaming service Hulu, accumulating revenue of $69.57

billion in 2019 (The Walt Disney Company Reports). Over 300 Disney shops are currently operating worldwide, and the streaming platform Disney+ was launched in late 2019.

On their website, Disney's mission statement mentions their desire to "entertain, inform and inspire people […] through the power of unparalleled storytelling, reflecting the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies that make ours the world's premier entertainment company." (The Walt Disney Company: About Us). The website also elaborates on the company's goal to establish environmental sustainability on all of their properties by investing in renewable electricity, conserving fuel, reducing waste and protecting nature (The Walt Disney Company: Social Responsibility). While all listed goals are admirable, Disney and its founder have not always been seen in a purely positive light.

As can be expected from one of the largest entertainment companies in the world with an almost hundred-year long history, Disney faced a number of scandals and allegations over the years. Famously, the creator of Mickey Mouse, Ub Iwerks, left the Disney Corporation due to a lack of crediting him for his work. Walt Disney himself was rumored to have relations with Nazis or to at least be heavily antisemitic and anticommunist. He was also known for his megalomaniac, tyrannical work style, having to control everything, though this side of the founding father of Disney is rarely depicted in the company media. Instead, he preferred to be seen as a benevolent father figure and creative visionary.

In recent years, many older Disney movies have been criticized for their outdated views and portrayals. *Song of the South* (1946) is among the most famous examples due to its racist depiction of African Americans and the harmful stereotypes employed in the film. Though Disney has not released the film on DVD, VHS recordings and the soundtrack were distributed and the *Song of the South*-themed ride "Splash Mountain" is still operating in three different Disney parks. Nowhere on any of the rides does Disney acknowledge the problematic history of the property.

In more recent years, Disney has been called out for its plagiarism in the case of *The Lion King* (1994) and several short movies, for anti-feminist depictions of women in their princess films and for ethnic and racial stereotyping in *Aladdin* (1992), *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *Peter Pan* (1953) and *Dumbo* (1941). And even the recent movie *Moana*

(2016), which will be analyzed in detail later, was criticized heavily for its depiction of Polynesian culture. Scholars have spoken out both in favor of the film and its collaborative approach to showcasing oceanic myths (Tamaira, Moana; Beyond Paradise), as well as disapproving of the circumstances surrounding the making of the film and the exploration of Polynesian mythology (Yoshinaga). Though this will be commented on again later, it should be mentioned at this point that these issues are not a central point of this thesis. The Disney Company is doubtlessly guilty of many transgressions and I will not pretend that their movies are without flaws. However, due to the restrictions in length, the thesis is unable to delve into this topic further, though it would undoubtedly provide an excellent starting point for future research projects.

To summarize, the Disney Company has grown from a small independent animation studio to a gigantic media conglomerate. Though its history and some of their movies are problematic and should not be left uncommented, Disney has become a staple of childhood nostalgia around the globe, gaining more and more cultural significance with each generation growing up with their films. As such, the company behind the analyzed movies must be taken into consideration when investigating the possible environmental repercussions of movies that aim to transport ecological messages.

3. Anthropomorphism in Finding Nemo

Among the most popular protagonists of children's media are anthropomorphic animals, such as fairytale villain The Big Bad Wolf, Babe and Paddington Bear to name three out of hundreds of possible examples. Animated movies have utilized this concept as well, in movies such as *Lady and the Tramp* (1955), *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961), *Aristocats* (1970) and *Zootopia* (2016). Two of Disney's first films, *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1942), featured eponymous animal protagonists, with the former receiving a recent live-action remake, while the latter enjoyed enough popularity to warrant a direct-to-video sequel. Since the 40ies, the popularity has not subsided and anthropomorphic characters, heroes and sidekicks alike, still play important roles in animation movies. The following chapter will examine the concept of anthropomorphism closer and analyze how it is employed in *Finding Nemo* (2003), paying close attention to the implications brought about by this humanization of animals.

3.1. Theoretic Explanation of Anthropomorphism

The term 'anthropomorphism' was first used in the context of religion and referred to gods taking human form and showcasing human attributes. Only later did it come to also include other non-human beings such as animals or objects. Three different kinds of anthropomorphism can be identified: (1) when non-human beings take on the form of a human, (2) when non-humans take on qualities usually attributed to humans and (3) when non-humans are depicted as acting with purpose or out of their own volition while not possessing the capability (Tyler 14). These three aspects of anthropomorphism can occur simultaneously or independently from one another.

While the topic may not sound controversial at first, scientists have debated the benefits or detriments of anthropomorphic views of animals for a long time. An example of the potential problematic aspects of anthropomorphism is presented in an anecdote retold by Tyler (16f), in which a horse was believed to be able to solve mathematical exercises and tell the time. After much research was done on the horse, it turned out that it was instead able to read its owner's body language well enough to stop tapping its hoof in reply once the correct answer was reached. The discovered lack of human-like cognitive ability was seen as a loss instead of celebrating the horse's impressive ability to read people's behavior. This example illustrates why some scientists are wary of putting too much focus on finding human-like qualities in animals rather than celebrating the animals for their own unique abilities. On the other hand, a study has shown that prolonged contact with meat animals and anthropomorphizing them weakens the desire to consume meat by "generating moral (guilt) feelings in meat consumers" (Wang & Basso 164). Similarly, Daston and Mitman (6) mention the importance of fabricated empathy for anthropomorphized animals in campaigns to save wildlife or to fight for animal rights, because it is easier to feel empathy for someone who is similar to humans instead of an unthinking animal.

What can be seen in either case is that anthropomorphism, at its core is anthropocentric. It implies a separation between humans and animals, as well as featuring an undertone of human superiority over non-human entities (Tyler 23f.). Thus, particularly smart animals are attributed human qualities, while primitive humans are associated with

animalistic behavior. In part, it can be argued that this lack of appreciation for the uniqueness of animals stems from the recent societal separation of humans and animals. Very few people still come into contact with animals in their daily lives, aside from domesticated pets (Adams 47). Instead, when thinking about animals, we think of cultural referents, for example, when imagining a bear, Paddington, Winnie the Pooh or Yogi Bear might come to mind. Even a bear in captivity at a zoo does not equal having nature as a referent, but instead is presenting the animal through an anthropocentric lens. This is particularly visible when zoos attempt to market themselves as saviors of nature due to their breeding programs instead of admitting to the inhumane conditions they subjugate their animals to, as was the case with Sea World.

Adams (51-57) names a few of the developments that prompted this divide between humans and animals, which occurred between Modern and Postmodern Times. Among them are the shift from "Farms Owned by Individuals [to] Factory Farms Owned by Corporations" (Adams 54) and the machination of nonhuman farm animals while machines took on animalesque roles. At the same time, the rise of veganism, fake meat and faux furs allowed for an even larger separation between humans and animals, in which animal products were substituted with man-made alternatives (Adams 58f). This trend is not limited to animals but can be seen in our connection to wilderness and nature in general. Fewer and fewer people actually come into contact with untamed nature and instead accept carefully groomed gardens or parks as a viable substitute for woods. Bartlett (2008) adds that nature is no longer synonymous with awe or the sublime, but instead is now perceived only for its resources and as a place of scientific interest. This change in perception prompts less empathy and thus less motivation to help proenvironmental organizations.

When considering the translation of anthropomorphism to actual proenvironmental behavior, Tam's (2015) psychological study shows, that "when individuals perceive nature in a humanlike form, they automatically infer the presence of a humanlike mind. Therefore, it is actually mind attribution that drives the proenvironmental effects." (Tam 93). Though the study is unable to find a mechanic that influences every participant equally, it comes to the conclusion that the empathy that is generated through the attribution of human-like qualities in anthropomorphism leads to an observable change in proenvironmental opinions.

In conclusion, anthropomorphism is an anthropocentric concept, attributing human-like form, characteristics or motivation to animals, objects or spiritual targets. Psychological studies have shown that anthropomorphism can influence behaviors in order to create more proenvironmental attitudes or to decrease the desire to eat meat products. Because society has distanced itself from nature since the industrialization, new ways to connect with nature need to be established to create empathy for nature and animals. The following chapter will analyze how this empathy through anthropomorphism is attempted in the animation film *Finding Nemo* (2003).

3.2. How Anthropomorphism creates Empathy in *Finding Nemo*

Before analyzing the use of anthropomorphism to create empathy, the concept of empathy should be explained first. Many different schools of thought have taken an interest in empathy and have attempted to understand how it works. Among them are philosophy, psychology and art criticism, each with a different approach and different goals. Because it would be too extensive for this thesis to cover all the varying definitions, I will instead focus on the framework established by Maibom (2020) and utilize her terminology of 'affective empathy', 'emotional contagion', 'perspective taking' and 'sympathy'.

Maibom's general definition of empathy states that "[it] is an attitude towards others of taking them in, of being open to their emotions and thoughts, and of being interested in understanding them. Empathy is essentially about the other but in a way that is closely entangled with the personal." (Maibom 1). In order to feel empathy, we try to take their perspective, either by watching them, listening to them or hearing about them. This can include identifying with them and projecting personal emotions onto others, but identification is not essential to creating emphatic feelings for characters (Harold 344). The other person's emotions affect us, either by making us feel something in reaction to their emotions (affective empathy) or by evoking the same emotion in us (emotional contagion). Affective empathy and emotional contagion can be similar states, for example when watching a sad scene and feeling both empathetic for the character and becoming sad ourselves, but they do not have to be. An example for affective empathy without emotional contagion would be to watch a character being sad because they were cheated

on, but rather than becoming sad as well, the audience might start to feel angry on their behalf. In contrast, "sympathy reflects an overall attitude of 'caring' towards the other person." (Maibom 11) and is more concerned with the overarching positive hopes for another person or character.

Whether or not we are actually able to feel empathy for fictional characters or not has been wildly discussed in academic literature (f.e. Scruton 1974, Walton 1990 or Feagin 1988). For the sake of this thesis, I am operating under the assumption that the emotions created by works of fiction are real or at least close enough to authentic emotions to influence audience's values and beliefs. Also, because this thesis does not focus on measuring people's empathy via psychological testing, the following analysis only claims to describe the ways in which *Finding Nemo* attempts to create empathy, not if said measures actually prove successful. Similarly, the following chapter proposes how potential empathy through anthropomorphism may lead to proenvironmental attitudes. However, without actual psychological studies, such a claim cannot be proven with absolute certainty – it can only be suspected or hoped for.

3.3.1. Marlin – Empathy for the Depressed Father

The following chapter will pay close attention to the clownfish Marlin and how his journey creates empathy and curates proenvironmental attitudes with audiences. When we first encounter Marlin and his wife Coral, they talk about their new anemone home, which is situated at the very front of the reef and features a full ocean view, with no other corals in front of them. An analogy can be found to the classic young suburban couple expecting their first children. Marlin explains to Coral how difficult it was to procure their anemone because other clownfish had their eyes on the property as well. Coral indulges Marlin's bragging and agrees that the neighborhood is great, at which point we see fish playing the role of typical suburban neighbors. Some of them are eating seaweed as if they were mowing the lawn, others are rocking seashells with eggs in them to mimic mothers with strollers, while we hear children laughing as small fish swim across the screen.

This initial scene creates a relatable image for most adults. Marlin and Coral are the typical nervous first-time parents who settle into their new suburban lifestyle and worry about their children's wellbeing. The anthropomorphic nature of their goals and their living

situation helps to encourage empathy where there might be less if the clownfish couple was seen in a naturalistic coral reef. Similarly, their faces are anthropomorphic in that they have forward facing eyes, teeth and human-like facial expressions. Throughout the film, the fish also use fins as humans would use hands, to lift things or to hold onto others. To strengthen the image of a typical father, Marlin is also given creases on his forehead to simulate worry lines and bags under his eyes to indicate sleepless nights, most likely because he worries about his future children.

While the setting and faces may be anthropomorphic, Marlin and Coral's parental attention is based on biologic facts. While most fish tend to care little about their eggs once they are laid and fertilized, Clownfish remain attentive and protective of their offspring. Clownfish are monogamous, with the male being the main caretakers before the eggs hatch (DeAngelis and Rhodes 2016). Their protective nature even extends to eggs that are not their own, with bachelor clownfish caring for eggs if they come across them (Yates 2017). Therefore, Marlin's worry about the eggs and Coral's self-sacrifice for the sake of her offspring is not entirely fictional but is based on the behavior of real clownfish. The anthropomorphic look of the characters and the verbalization of their fears adds to create empathy with the audience and facilitate interest in the species and their extraordinary behavior.

As the first scene progresses, the reef is attacked by a barracuda. While all other fish so far were anthropomorphic, the barracuda's appearance is adapted to fit the style of the movie but not to make it more approachable. Its eyes are further sideways than those of other characters, which adds to its animalistic and predatory look. Similarly, instead of giving the barracuda a voice to speak, it hisses and roars before it attacks, not showing any signs of intelligence or the ability to speak. The sense of danger emanating from it is heightened by the sudden lack of sound, where before there was gentle music and sound effects signifying waves and moving water. Even the colors are muted, as the scene focuses on the barracuda swimming in the ocean, rather than on the fish in front of the bright coral reef. Once the barracuda attacks the shots are cut in quicker succession and the music adds to the adrenalin generated by the worry audiences feel for Coral.

Through the early anthropomorphism, the building of empathy for the characters' worries and potentially even identification with the first-time parents, the shock of the predator's

attack becomes more than a simple event in the circle of life, in which clownfish fall prey to bigger fish. The suburban idyll and the bright colors create a sense of safety that is destroyed once an outsider attacks. However, because of the contrasted lack of anthropomorphism of the barracuda, there is a clear difference between the reef fish and the predator. The change in color, sound and editing indicates that this is an exceptional situation which demands the audience's attention. Where we might usually be less emotionally affected by these events because they are viewed as natural, the anthropomorphic nature of the main characters forces the audience to feel affective empathy for Marlin or even emotional contagion when watching his grief as he realizes that his wife and most of his children are gone.

As the movie continues, Marlin has become a single parent to his son, Nemo. Because of what happened before, Marlin is overly anxious for Nemo's well-being and annoys his son with numerous safety precautions. In the same way that humans teach their children to cross the street, Marlin makes sure that Nemo waits for the green light to continue at a fish crossing and reminds him to brush the anemone before he leaves his house, which is most likely a reference to children having to brush their teeth in the morning. On their way to 'school', numerous fish are introduced in the background that show interesting behaviors. For example, when a female mouthbreeder fish releases her children from her mouth, she relates to a mother bringing her children to school with a minivan, while the nervous octopus releases ink because he got scared, which references young children peeing themselves out of fear. The following scene shows many such examples, where animalistic behavior is anthropomorphized to evoke a familiar situation, namely that of parents dropping off their children for the first day of school, while utilizing different fish kind's unique abilities. For children, it is a familiar situation, and they can identify with Nemo who finds his father's behavior embarrassing, while parents may remember their own nervousness and relate to Marlin's need to protect his son.

In this scene, *Finding Nemo* attempts to combine explicit with implicit knowledge. On the one hand, it presents different kinds of fish and their unique abilities, like the aforementioned octopus who can release ink as a defense mechanism, without explicitly explaining what the abilities are and how they use them. Through their anthropomorphic behavior, children can infer meaning to their actions and interpret why they do certain things without someone having to explain it to them. On the other hand, the teacher, Mr.

Ray, also teaches his class about aspects of the ocean, such as the zones of the open sea, by singing a song, conveying explicit scientific knowledge. This taxonomy "is not insisted upon as a higher form of knowledge, but left dangling as a kind of background jingle that simply co-exists with the looser nomenclature of the 'drop-off zone' and with the vivid sense perceptions that shape the drama of ordinary experience." (Whitley 132). Together, the different kinds of knowledge on fish and the ocean conveyed throughout the film can fit the requirements of different audiences, in that younger children who have little to no knowledge about maritime matters learn basic things, such as fish laying eggs to procreate, while older children or adults may learn about the layers of the ocean or pick up on the hidden information, such as the clownfish's protective nature and monogamous relationships. In informing all levels of audiences on oceanic issues, proenvironmental attitudes may be strengthened because audiences understand the ocean better and thus care more about it after watching the film.

The first time the movie depicts humans is about fifteen minutes into the film. Nemo and his school friends see a boat over the drop-off and dare each other to get closer to it. The scene is reminiscent of the arrival of the barracuda, in that there is a sense of danger coming from the object floating outside of the reef. The sudden arrival of the divers is accompanied by a dramatic change in music, from an unobtrusive soundtrack consisting of mainly soft sounding wind instruments to metallic horn orchestration. The industrial-sounding arrangement that accompanies the divers' arrival enhances the sense of danger and of them being something unnatural. In comparison to the fish, they lack eyes as their diving goggles obscure their faces and make them look even more ominous than their dark forms already suggest. Because the anthropomorphized fish were established as the main characters and there was no sign of human interference before this scene, the arrival of humans is threatening, rather than familiar. The focus on allowing audiences to emphasize with the fish makes it difficult to shift back to our usual perspective as humans and alienates the audience from the human divers on screen.

Marlin's emotions and his desperation to get back his son, even if it means fighting against a much larger enemy, is infectious. Albert Brooks, Marlin's voice actor, gives a great performance by switching between quiet prayers and shouts for help, allowing us to follow Marlin's train of thought as he tries to follow the boat that carries his son away from him. Close-ups of Marlin's face act as another guide to communicate his feelings to the

audience and creates empathy for his struggle. Although most audience members most likely will never have been in a similar situation, the scene speaks to parents and their fear of loosing a child. The music becomes less intense and the instilled panic becomes less as the boat leaves, which is communicated through longer shots taking the place of the frantic editing throughout the kidnapping scene. Also, the location changes while Marlin is chasing after the boat until he is left in the middle of the ocean, without any landmarks around to indicate his location, symbolizing Marlin's lack of direction or knowledge of how to find his son.

Marlin's journey continues and begins to transform from a journey to find his son to a journey of self-discovery and self-improvement. He meets Dory, a forgetful surgeonfish, and together they make their way to Sydney. On this journey, they meet sharks, jellyfish, turtles and whales, and the movie continues to teach audiences about the animals by combining information on them with anthropomorphic characteristics. For example, three sharks have formed an Alcoholics Anonymous-esque group where they pledge not to eat fish. However, when one of them smells blood in the water, he turns ravenously hungry and tries to kill Marlin and Dory. Here, the film combines something human, namely the AA meetings, with a fitting animalistic instinct, the ability to smell blood from far away, in order to create a character that is both informative and teaches children something about sharks, as well as using it as a trait to give the character more personality. Similarly, the movie later introduces the turtle Crush, who has a very hands-off approach to parenting, which is a stark contrast to Marlin's paranoid parenting. This is a clever wink to the way in which turtles lay their eggs and then leave them buried in the sand on beaches from, where the hatchlings need to find their own way to the sea. As with the knowledge about the reef conveyed at the beginning of the film, the movie continues to be both entertaining and educational as Marlin and Dory find their way to Sydney.

Marlin continues to change throughout the film. He starts as a hopeful, slightly cocky husband and father-to-be and emerges as a more caring, optimistic father and friend with a new outlook on life and parenting. This change becomes visible after Marlin and Nemo are reunited and Nemo is convinced that he can save Dory from being trapped in a fishing net. The anxious father first doubts his son's ability to help, but ultimately believes in him and encourages the other fish to help as well. In this penultimate scene, the movie revisits themes from the boat scene at the beginning, such as Nemo's deformed fin and Marlin's

need to keep his son safe. However, throughout the journey, Marlin learned not to doubt his son, and the framing of the scene, the music and the character growth evoke empathy and pride for Marlin in the audience, mirroring the pride that the father feels for his son.

In conclusion, Marlin's journey is both a physical and an emotional journey. In terms of empathy, Marlin becomes the character that adult audiences would identify with most, and parents watching the movie with their children would find their own fears mirrored in the anxious clownfish. The anthropomorphic nature of the character and the many references to problems encountered in the human world makes it possible to feel empathy for the character, shifting allegiances from the humans in the film to the clownfish. This in turn strengthens the proenvironmental message of the film. Because the movie follows Marlin on his journey, he can be recognized as a character with agency and the ability to change and improve instead of being viewed as one fish in an ocean filled with millions of other fish. Also, viewing the reef as Marlin and Nemo's home gives the audience a sense of how important reefs are to fish and creates an understanding for the place they hold in the ecosystem. Together, this might evoke or strengthen proenvironmental attitudes by shifting perspective to that of creatures living and depending on the reef rather than seeing it as a random collection of corals that are of little consequence to human lives.

3.3.2 Nemo's Journey as a Heist Movie

Nemo's journey truly begins once he is separated from his father and awakes in the dentist's tank. The overarching narrative of Nemo's solo storyline is reminiscent of heist movies, such as the *Oceans 11* franchise or *The Killing* (1956). The fish in the aquarium are trying to break out and make their way to the ocean, with Gill acting as their leader. His character design features scars and a mutilated fin, which hints at him having been in fights and potentially having had a rough past. Throughout the movie, he acts as the mastermind and orchestrates the plan for freeing them from the tank, becoming a mentor-like figure for Nemo.

The other fish in the aquarium perpetuate a number of archetypical stereotypes. Jacques, the langoustine, is an eccentric foreigner, gourmand and speaks with a French accent, while Bloat is a good-humored pufferfish, who scares easily. Gurgle is the perpetually

scared, pessimistic royal gamma fish, and the starfish Peach acts as the mother of the group and their lookout. Deb and Bubbles are two minor characters who provide additional comic relief. Together the 'Tank Gang' consists of a leader, a sweet natured second-in-command, a motherly figure, a foreigner, a pessimist and two comic-relief characters, which matches group constellations of other heist movies such as *Oceans 11* (2001) or *Mission: Impossible* (1996). This connection to heist films provides Nemo's storyline with a familiar structure and helps audiences to orient themselves, as well as helping to solidify the sympathies for Nemo. One of the main features of heist movies is the "apparent sympathy for the criminals in the narrative" (Rayner 75) and the relatability of their goals, which in this case is the escape out of the fish tank and a return to the ocean. Both the structure of the side-plot and the sympathy gained for Nemo throughout the first twenty minutes of the movie work towards guaranteeing that the empathy remains with the anthropomorphic characters instead of conceding it to the human characters introduced in this arc.

In comparison to Marlin, who rarely interacts with humans throughout the movie, Nemo spends most of the film in close contact to the human world and is able to observe their alien behavior. When Nemo arrives in the tank, the artificial nature of everything around him, particularly the plastic tiki statues in the aquarium, frighten him. He tries to escape but ends up bumping against the glass walls. While Nemo finds himself in a strange world, unsure of the potential dangers of this new environment, audiences would recognize the dentist's office and understand that he poses no threat to the fish. However, the movie employs numerous strategies to keep the empathy on the fish characters instead of supporting an empathic viewing of the human characters.

For example, the choice of the dentist's office as the location for the fish tank links Nemo's fear to that of many audience members, as dentist visits are often linked to anxiety. This may influence audiences and subconsciously make them feel less comfortable in the new location. Also, when the dentist first appears, he tells one of his patients that he 'saved' Nemo from the reef, which is in stark contrast to the events witnessed in the film. This incident emphasizes that, while humans may feel superior about matters concerning animals, this notion may be misguided and ill informed.

The movie also employs filmic rhetoric that highlights the humans as threats, such as jump scares when the dentist seems to appear out of nowhere, as well as dramatic music changes when Darla, the dentist's niece, appears. Alongside the limited and overwhelmingly negative information about humans that is passed on to Nemo, the picture that is painted about humans marks them as dangerous and antagonistic. This creates an interesting juxtaposition when considering that in a heist movie, the dentist would take the place of a prison guard or a violent antagonist. However, in heist or jailbreak films, the audience can clearly separate themselves from the guards and root for the protagonists. In *Finding Nemo,* the anthropomorphizing of the captured fish forces the audience into the juxtaposition of either siding with the human characters instead of empathizing with the protagonist whose emotional struggle they watched throughout the film, or to keep their initial emotional attachments to Nemo and Marlin and in turn blame the humans for their action and the hurt they inflict on the nature around them.

While the dentist and Darla are certainly the most imminent threats to Nemo, the confrontation scene between Darla and the fish ends up being more comedic than emotionally impactful due to the slap stick approach to the scene. As Marlin arrives, carried in the beak of a pelican, Nemo pretends to play dead in order to escape the child. Quickly, the tank gang involves themselves in the extraction mission and ultimately manages to flush Nemo down a basin while the dentist knocks himself out and Darla is doused in water from the broken sink. Thus, the penultimate encounter with humans in the film shows the animals' superior intelligence, which they employed to trick their captors who did not attribute them any agency, making it easy for the fish to fool them.

Throughout the movie, but especially during Nemo's scenes, humans are antagonists, either actively by catching fish and holding them prisoner, or passively by leaving objects behind and being careless with the ocean as can be seen by the war-time bombs surrounding the sharks' shipwreck. In either case, they are depicted as ignorant to the needs and agency of the animals around them. Nemo's storyline confronts the audience with their own humanness, forcing them to admit their own ignorance regarding the nature around them by guiding them towards seeing the situation from a pet's perspective and thus awaking empathy for animals. It directly contrasts the anthropomorphic agency of fish and their relatable emotions to the actual humans who lack relatable motivations but share a physical form with the audiences.

3.3. The Nemo – Effect and the Film's Proenvironmental Position

The following chapter will sum up the film's environmental topics that have not been addressed so far, as well as explain the 'Nemo-Effect', which has prevailed as an anecdotal myth. After *Finding Nemo* was released in 2003, many sources claimed that the movie had failed in its attempt to spread proenvironmental messages and was instead hurting clownfish, with headlines such as "Losing Nemo and Dory: How Finding Nemo Almost Doomed the Clownfish – And How *Finding Dory* Could Decimate the Regal Blue Tang Population, Too" (Scrine) announcing the imminent danger to the species. This correlation between children seeing animals on screen and subsequently wanting the same animal as a pet for themselves was termed the 'Nemo-Effect'. The BBC, CNN and other broadcasting services reported on the matter and warned about the negative consequences of acquiring an exotic fish without being able to care for them properly. However, a recent article found that there was little truth to the allegation. According to a study conducted by Militz and Foale (2015), there was less than a two percent increase in sales of clownfish after the film's release, with numbers dropping again after a few weeks. The study also shows that after the movie's release, academic publication numbers on clownfish increased rapidly, indicating a growing scholarly interest in the species brought about by the rising public interest on the matter. This claim is further supported by a recent study by Veríssmo, Anderson and Tlusty (2020), which discovers that the effect of watching movies with animal protagonists concerns mainly the audiences' information-seeking instead of their consumer behavior (908).

Extrapolating from these studies, it can be argued that the movie succeeds in not only informing audiences on important maritime matters as mentioned in the previous chapter, but also in raising interest in researching independently after watching the movie. And although the study was primarily interested in research requests concerning the species of the protagonists, it can be assumed that other topics addressed in the movie may garner similar interest, such as the sunken bombs at the sharks' ship or the life expectancy of turtles. "The theme of knowledge, indeed, becomes overt from an early stage" (Whitley 130) and the movie keeps reintroducing the need to learn about other species as something positive throughout the movie - be that by showcasing Marlin's

growing joy in the world as he opens up to experiences and new people or by highlighting the disadvantage that humans have by remaining ignorant to others' individual needs.

Previously, humanity's role in the movie has been described in more detail in terms of character interaction, but not in terms of how they frame the setting of the film. On multiple occasions, *Finding Nemo* shows the negative impact humanity has on the ocean and its inhabitants, which is highlighted most in the color contrast between the reef and the harbor. When the movie starts, the setting is an untouched biodiverse ecosystem and the colors are bright and varied, with both the characters and their surroundings showcasing a colorful rainbow of corals and scales, as can be seen in Figure 1. However, the more human influence a location has, the duller the colors become, which can be first seen when the sharks take Marlin and Dory to their boat. The floating bombs and the rusted ship itself are saturated, with dark greens and blues being the dominant colors, while Marlin's orange and Dory's blue coloration make them stand out against the stark background. Even more glaring is the contrast in one of the final scenes of the movie, in which Marlin leaves Sydney harbor because he is convinced of his son's death. The colors here are desaturated and dark, mimicking both the mood of the scene and of suffering nature around human habitats (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: The Great Barrier Reef at the beginning of *Finding Nemo*

Figure 2: Sydney Harbor in *Finding Nemo*

The protagonists do not understand why humans act the way they do, and the movie gives the them little agency or room to explain themselves. Instead they appear as thoughtless and ignorant beings that shape the world around them and provide obstacles which the heroes must overcome to achieve their goals. The characters that audiences are supposed to identify with are the anthropomorphized fish, whose journey the movie follows. The anthropomorphism is needed to allow for humans to sympathize with the animal characters instead of the human characters. McIver Lopes (125) explains that "[a] person cannot have much empathic skill unless she can have or represent emotions—in particular, the emotions of the object of her empathic response. She must also be able to have beliefs or imaginings about the object's situation or the object's own perspective on his situation." This notion is further supported by Kheel (227) who states that "caring for other-than-human animals can only flourish with the aid of empathy. Empathy, in turn, can be seen as the culmination of many small acts of attention." These "small acts of attention" refer to moments where the audience can recognize the anthropomorphic characters as individuals and begin to feel empathy for their particular situations. Thus, it is the anthropomorphisms turns the many fish characters into individuals. By giving them personality, human-like facial expression, language and agency, they allow the audience to develop empathy for the fish and their situation. The less the movie wants audiences

to empathize with certain characters, the fewer of these traits they are given, as can be seen in the lack of human expression and language in the barracuda and the divers.

The chapter has shown that the proenvironmental attitude of the movie shows mainly in two interconnected strategies: communicating knowledge and empathy. First, the movie teaches audiences facts about coral reefs, fish and the ocean as an eco-system. Through both the active encouragement of learning as a positive, fun experience and by hiding knowledge in character depictions, such as the clownfish's parenting strategies, especially younger children may be motivated to learn more about the characters they have come to care about, and by gaining knowledge about them, they may also come to care more about environmental issues that endanger the real-life animals and ecosystems. The tendency to gather information after watching animal-focused movies has been highlighted by the research done by Veríssmo, Anderson and Tlusty (2020) and is a good indication that Disney/Pixar's strategy to nurture scientific interest in younger audiences may prove successful.

The second strategy used to cultivate proenvironmental attitudes in audiences is the focus on empathizing with the anthropomorphized animal characters, particularly with Marlin and Nemo. The movie follows their emotional journey and uses color and music to indicate the emotion of the characters, as well as using similar structures and character stereotypes to the genre of heist movies, which provides audiences with additional clues as to who the sympathetic characters are supposed to be. By watching the harm done to the clownfish and the environment at large by humans, the audience may be spurred to do further research or at least rethink their attitude towards the ocean, exotic pet fish or coral reefs.

4. Moana – A Tale of Responsibility

Where *Finding Nemo* tells the story of animals as victims of human ignorance but only tangentially dealt with humans themselves, *Moana* follows a human girl tasked with fixing the environmental issues threatening her village, caused by the demi-god Maui. The following chapter will explain how *Moana* tasks its audience with taking action against ecological problems outside their responsibility, by analyzing the movie's four main components. The first chapter will focus on the island of Motunui and its idea of

establishing balance between humans and nature, while the second chapter takes a closer look at the Ocean as a sentient entity and its role in *Moana's* Coming-of-age story. An in-depth analysis of Maui as a mythical figure and as a personification of industrialization will be given in chapter 3, while the final subchapter will deal with the dualism of Te Fiti and Te Kā and their roles in depicting nature as a sentient entity.

4.1. Motunui – Humanity and Nature in Balance

Motunui, Moana's home island, serves as the first location of the movie. The community is based on the island, and everything they wear, eat and utilize otherwise is grown locally. Their meals seem to consist mainly of plants and fish, pathways are made from stone, and the houses and boats are built out of wood and other natural materials. The first full song of the movie directly addresses their sustainable way of living:

> Consider the coconut (the what?)
> Consider its tree
> We use each part of the coconut
> That's all we need
>
> We make our nets from the fibers
> The water is sweet inside
> We use the leaves to build fires
> We cook up the meat inside

(*Where You Are* 24-32)

The song explains how every part of the locally-grown coconuts are being utilized as food, fishing gear or heating material, guaranteeing that as little waste as possible is produced.

This is in agreement with the definition of sustainability as "meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission 43). The sustainable life-style of the villagers is also reflected in the long time they have been on the island, as indicated by the stones placed on the mountain by each reigning chief compared with the relatively small area used for cultivating plants and building structures. When Moana and her father Chief Tui walk around the island, it becomes evident that only a small part of the island is inhabited, while the rest is left wild and untouched. Furthermore, aside from replanting a few coconut trees, no growth or further construction is shown in the movie, indicating that the number

of villagers remains steady and there is no need to harm the vegetation for additional structures.

Another insistance of showcasing the natural balance on Motunui focuses on the factors of propagation, preservation and death in order to retain balance (Holland 3). Propagation and growth are indicated by the amount of children seen on the island, as well as by Moana herself, who grows from toddler to teenager over the course of the movie and symbolizes the renewal and future of the village. Preservation takes place as the island is being cared for by the inhabitants, the fishing grounds are being rotated in order to allow the fish to repopulate, and new trees are planted whenever old ones are chopped down. Death is shown twice in the movie, once when Sina, Moana's mother, talks about Tui's dead best friend, and later when Grandmother Tala passes away, presumably from old age, as no visible injuries or diseases are provided as explanation. Together, the three factors create a balance which allows for new children to be born, without overloading the ecosystem they are a part of.

This depicted balance stands in stark contrast to the current growth predictions for the next century on Earth. Termed 'Anthropocene', the current geological time is shaped by humans and their desire to expand and utilize whatever resources are available, which has led to:

> "global climate change, acidifying oceans, shifting global cycles of carbon, nitrogen, and other elements, forests and other natural habitats transformed into farms and cities, widespread pollution, radioactive fallout, plastic accumulation, the course of rivers altered, mass extinction of species, human transport and introduction of species around the world." (Ellis 2 f.)

Along with these changes, prospects predict that by 2100 the world population will have grown to 10 Billion people around the world (United Nation Population Funds), which could lead to food shortages and even faster drainage of natural supplies.

When comparing Motunui to the current real-life situation, it can be argued that the fictional community is more concerned with maintaining the natural balance and living in harmony with nature, while today's society is out of touch with it:

> Our alienation from nature has been accelerated by the technological advances that have made possible the rapid decimation of living systems through resource extraction and

> ecosystem decline. The unsustainable mining of coal, oil, and natural gas and the overharvesting of fish, trees, and wildlife have created a disconnect between human society and its life support systems. We treat nature as an unlimited treasure trove of resources for the taking rather than as part of the web of life to which we all belong. Although we have a strong desire to belong, we devalue the ecosystem services such as clean air, clean water, healthy soils, and biodiversity that make life possible. (Edwards 24)

Motunui is not guilty of any of the crimes against nature that Edwards describes, seeing as they take care not to overtax their support system but rotate crops and fishing grounds to give nature time to recover before taking more resources.

Though it would be oversimplified to accuse the movie of wanting to advertise for an all-natural life style as lived by people 3,000 years ago, I propose that the satisfaction seen in the life lived in close touch with nature may hint at the gained quality coming from prolonged time spent in nature. The music is an upbeat mixture of gentle orchestration and nature sounds such as waves and rain sounds, while the employed color palette is composed of vibrant greens, blues and pinks. The scene expressions mirror the characters' generally good moods, and there is no fighting among the characters in the initial scenes of the movie. Everything about the beginning of the movie speaks of a happy, healthy and sustainable life that can be found by taking only as much as is needed, harvesting and fishing only to sustain, but not to grow and expand.

4.2. The Ocean and Moana as a Coming-of-Age Story

The following chapter will discuss *Moana*'s depiction of the ocean and the careful balance between the ocean as a place of danger and as life giver. It will also address the anthropomorphic nature of the Ocean as Moana's guide throughout the movie.

The ocean has always been awe-inspiring to humans, forcing us to come to terms with the dichotomy of the bottomless, unknowable, rough seas in contrast to the lovely beaches that invite sailors, surfers and families to play. In *Moana*, the characters' opinions vary heavily from person to person, depending on their experiences with the sea. Chief Tui sees the ocean as a danger and something to be avoided at all costs ever since his best friend drowned when they were adolescents. Moana, however, views it as a place brimming with possibility and adventure, an opinion that is supported by her grandmother, who believes that she will return to the ocean after her death, adding a spiritual

connotation to the sea. This spiritual link between humans and oceans can be found in nearly every major religion, whether it be the inclusion of water-based deities like Neptune, Poseidon, Sobek, Njord and Nāmaka or stories taking place around water like Noah's ark in Christian belief. We are also tied together by science and origin due to humans having evolved from creatures living in the ocean, being made out of approximately 60% water and spending the first nine months of our existence by floating in amniotic fluid (Brayton 7).

Aside from the scientific and spiritual ties between humans and the ocean, *Moana* depicts the ocean foremost as an ally and a place of opportunity. In one of the earliest scenes, Moana helps a baby turtle make its way to the ocean and protects it from bird attacks, for which the Ocean rewards the toddler with a shell. The ocean begins to part, and accompanying sound effects indicate that some form of sentience has moved through the waves.It begins to interact with Moana, opening a path into the ocean for her, gifting her with shells and even playing with her hair to make her laugh. Before returning her to the beach, the Ocean also offers her a green stone, which is later revealed to be the Heart of Te Fiti. This hints at the active role that the Ocean plays in Moana's later adventure, when she ventures out onto the open sea to look for Maui. Even though the Ocean has no facial expressions, the scene reveals that it possesses some form of consciousness and agency.

This is not a Disney invention, but rather an ingrained tendency to ascribe "agency to the sea […] The "fury" of the sea has become a commonplace – it is called the "angry" sea, the "hungry" sea, the "punishing" sea […]." (Patton, Preface), which indicates that a certain level of anthropomorphizing of the ocean has become commonplace in modern culture and is recognizable to audiences watching the movie. In an interview, director Ron Clements describes the Ocean as having emotions, a plan and a goal, which it plans to achieve through its chosen one – Moana (FilmIsNow). In a later part of the movie, Maui reveals the Ocean's goal to be humanity's return to seafaring and exploration, as it always enjoyed having people discover new islands. This further indicates that the Ocean's agency is closely tied to humans and that it aspires towards a closer link between humans and nature.

On multiple occasions throughout the movie, the Ocean helps Moana on her journey, mainly by guiding her to the correct locations or returning her to the boat when she falls off, or is thrown off by Maui. It also makes sure that Maui does not leave the boat, but instead stays to teach Moana how to sail. In the end, the Ocean assists Moana in returning Te Fiti's Heart by clearing a path to the goddess, but it never proactively interferes with Moana's choices. When the heroine almost decides to abandon her quest, it accepts her decision and does not force her to continue on her path, showcasing that the Ocean in *Moana* is an enabler and guide, but not a decision-making force, aside from choosing Moana as its champion. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the Ocean because it maintains the protagonist's ability of making choices and pushing the plot forward.

However, the movie makes a clear distinction between the Ocean in its conscious, helping form and the ocean as a place of possible danger. Multiple scenes show how lethal it can be to underestimate the power of the sea and to think one's own intelligence superior to the ocean. This is particularly visible in Chief Tui's backstory, which shows his best friend drowning as the two young men decide to sail out during a storm, similarly to how Moana sails into bad weather when looking for Maui later on in the movie. In this, the film makes a clear statement about not trivializing the ocean, potentially to stop children from viewing the ocean as a friend and causing potentially fatal accidents by swimming out too far or believing in a benevolent sea.

The ocean also serves as the stage for Moana's coming-of-age story. Before she embarks on her journey, she is learning how to take on the responsibilities of a chief by advising people, aiding them and providing encouragement. However, her father still has the final say, as can be seen during their disagreement regarding fishing outside of the reef. It is only when Moana makes the decision to leave Motunui and to venture out onto the open sea that her journey of self-growth and into adulthood truly begins, and when she returns to the island at the end of her adventure, she has matured into an adult and is given the freedom to make her own choices and to lead her people into a new age of voyaging. Many texts have utilized the ocean as a similar platform for character growth because:

> "[the]ocean is deeply yet obscurely involved in human existence contributing to the stuff of the human body, changing the course of individual and family lives, providing a reservoir

of metaphorical material from which to gorge meaning, and frequently taking or transforming characters' lives." (Brayton 5)

Brayton (5) adds that there is a "kinship between humanity and the ocean", which can be seen in Grandma Tala's storyline. During every scene she is in, she is by the water, either dancing or talking to Moana, seemingly drawing energy from the sea and enjoying its mischievous chaotic nature. The only scene that shows her away from the ocean is her death scene, in which she is brought to the big house and declared near death. The recurring character placement indicates the aforementioned kinship between Tala and the sea and echoes the water's healing properties found in various legends. Once Tala dies, her spirit returns to the ocean in the form of a glowing manta ray, solidifying her connection to the ocean and showcasing that her soul has always been linked to the sea and has returned 'home' after her death. As such, it could be argued that Tala and the ocean are kindred spirits, both urging Moana onwards in her journey, yet not taking any decisions out of her hand. Equally, both are advocating for growth and a return to voyaging, while Tui advocates against it.

In conclusion, the ocean in *Moana* is a dangerous place, but also one of great power and potential for change. It serves as a source of vitality for Grandmother Tala and as a stage for Moana's coming-of-age-story. In addition, "[t]he ocean surely remains a resource – of millions of tons of food, of oil, and perhaps of the development of wind energy – and at the same time is also a receptable, absorbing our carbon dioxide, our unexploded warheads, our sewage." (Patton, Preface). Thus, the people of Motunui depend on the ocean for food and material while also fearing the potential dangers looming within. However, the overarching image painted here is one of opportunity. It tells of the adventures and possibilities waiting outside Moana's reach, and it acts as a lightly anthropomorphic guide, which, though expressionless, can communicate emotions and agency through actions and body language, like cocking its head in question. Ultimately, the ocean is a place of balance. It gives and takes life, creates opportunity but does not make choices, and links the souls of the dead ancestors to future generations of voyagers.

4.3. Maui as Prometheus and Harbinger of Economic Growth

The following chapter is centered on the character of Maui and his role in the movie. The first subchapter will give an introduction to the mythological figure, while the second part will delve further into the analysis of the movie character.

4.3.1. The Mythological Maui

The character of Maui is based on the demi-god Maui, also known as Maui-of-a-thousand-tricks, found in Polynesian mythology. Many of the stories Maui tells throughout the movie are related to actual myths. For example, during Maui's solo "You're Welcome", he lists lifting the sky as one of his achievements, which is a reference to a story in which Maui holds up the sky above Kauiki and stops the clouds from touching the ground (Beckwith 230). Another famous story about Maui is referenced in the lyric "Oh, Also I lassoed the sun" (You're Welcome), which hints at a legend in which Maui slows the sun's travel across the sky. Other legends credit Maui with pulling up the islands of Hawaii with his magic fishhook and learning the secret of how to make fire, subsequently teaching it to humanity. Though he is often depicted as a trickster, he is also a hero and a leader, helping the people and being revered for the advancements he brings to the humans.

Both in character and action, Maui is similar to the Greek hero Prometheus, as both were not gods themselves but found a way to join the rank of the gods while remaining connected to their human origins. Also, both heroes use their privileged position to help humans by using deceit and trickery in order to reach their goal. In the movie, Maui uses his cunning and his magical hook to steal the Heart of Te Fiti to grant humans the power to create life, while Prometheus brings humans fire to keep them warm and save them from starvation. Prometheus is punished by the gods by chaining him to a rock where a bird is sent each day to eat his liver, while Maui is banished to a small, desolate island without any means of escaping. In the movie, Maui's self-image is very promethean in that he views himself as a hero who is unfairly punished for wanting to help others, though, as the movie shows, he is misguided in his actions.

Because Maui is such an intricate part of Polynesian mythology, his characterization was heavily scrutinized and criticized. The character was labeled as 'obese', 'buffoonish', or 'ugly' as well as 'inaccurate' or 'inauthentic'." (Hereniko quot. in Tamaira, Moana 224). Especially the depiction of Maui as overweight was debated due to the preexisting hurtful ethnic stereotype of Polynesian people as obese. Also, in a movie which prides itself on the mostly historically accurate depiction of Polynesian culture and nature, it has been noted that Maui's clothing is the only one that is not based on tradition. Instead the demi god is shown in a skirt made out of banana leaves, similarly to what Timon in *The Lion King* (1994) wore as a joke or as most stereotypical depictions of hula dancers depict. The sudden addition of the cliché creates a confusing image when placed next to the historically mostly accurate garments worn by all other characters in the movie.

Though the movie includes many of the main characteristics of the mythological figure of Maui and even drops a number of Easter eggs for people who are more familiar with the stories around the trickster god, many audience members still took issue with the depiction. Especially because Maui is such a central figure in Polynesian mythology, many critiques focused on the Disneyfication and colonialization of the character. This protectiveness is in part due to the growing influence of American culture and progressing globalization, which has caused many traditions of indigenous cultures and languages to get lost in time. Gutierrez (20f.) explains that, especially when it comes to children, media based on heritage is important because:

> Children's literature frequently draws from traditional, or long-established and frequently retold, tales that show the intersection between a nation's and the world's social values. This is because traditional materials serve an important function by introducing young readers to their social heritage and passing on collectively shared experiences, knowledge, references, and precepts.

By westernizing Maui and using him as a character in *Moana*, the shared knowledge may become distorted and a disneyfied version of Maui might enter the discourse. However, it should also be mentioned that by broadcasting elements of Polynesian mythology and history around the world, interest on the matter may be generated, which may lead to more research being done and in turn more funding being available to initiatives dedicated to keeping cultural practices alive.

Though the thesis has opened up the debate on the topic because it is integral to the reception of the movie, I would argue that the matter is too far-reaching for the scope of this thesis to explore it more thoroughly. As a European white woman, I am hesitant to presume to understand all the layers that this issue is constructed out of, which is why I have only given a brief introduction on the topic in order to provide context for the following analysis of the character, but will not elaborate on the matter any further.

4.3.2. Maui and the Desire for Expansion

Maui's role seems ambiguous at the beginning of the movie. When Grandmother Tala first tells his story, he is listed among the greedy creatures of the sea who want to steal Te Fiti's Heart for their own gains. Even his physical depiction and the way his surroundings are portrayed is more akin to that of an animated villain than a hero, as can be seen in Figure 3, with the dark background in stark contrast to the eerie green glow which illuminates Maui's smirking face. Even more so, underlighting, a technique where the light source is positioned beneath the character's face, is utilized to make him appear even more menacing. This kind of lighting is most frequently used in horror films to create shadows on the face and make the monsters or villains seem bigger and scarier than they already are. In combination with Tala's apprehension as she tells Maui's story, the first encounter with the trickster god creates a contrast between the marketing of the

Figure 3: Maui steals Te Fiti's Heart

movie and cultural knowledge about Maui, which tell the audience that Maui is supposed to be one of the protagonists and a good character, against the narration and the filming techniques, which paint the picture of a sleezy thief who came to enrich himself and is of a similar standing as the other sea monsters.

Over the course of the movie, Maui slowly develops away from an antagonist who actively tries to stop the hero from reaching her goals to a more sympathetic anti-hero. His only song, "You're Welcome", is oddly similar to the 'villain song' of the movie, "Shiny", sung by the gigantic crab Tamatoa. Both songs praise themselves and their achievements, while Moana's songs evolve around her people and her wanting to be free. In their confrontation with Tamatoa, Maui willingly endangers Moana by using her as bait, and he frequently tries to run from his problems, quite unlike most Disney protagonists, who tend to run headfirst into danger. Even at the very end of the movie, when facing Te Kā for the first time, he flees after almost losing his fishhook, abandoning Moana on her boat. His change of heart happens off-screen so we never quite learn what prompted his return and whether his reasons for helping Moana are selfish or selfless. However, the movie provides the character with a moment of quiet vulnerability when showing how he was left behind by his family, wondering if they loved him and thus answering the question of why humans' adoration and belonging are so important to him. His role as demi-god prohibits him from belonging fully to either the gods who raised him or the humans who birthed and worship him, which is made clear at the end when Maui flies by the voyaging boats but never engages with anyone except for Moana. Together, this culminates in a multilayered character, driven by a want to belong and prove himself while being misguided in his methods and selfish until he finds someone to fight for.

When looking at the character from an ecocritical point of view, there is another layer that can be extrapolated from analyzing his ambitions and the way he attempts to reach his goals. As Moana confronts him about the trouble he caused for the humans, he explains that his wish was to give them the power to create life without depending on the help of gods. However, rather than working hard to help them prosper, he decides to steal an unrenewable resource in order to cheat the system. In terms of ecocritical concepts, this is reminiscent of how Hubbert (113) describes the industrialization in America:

> [I]t is useful for us to reflect that the two-hundred-year period from 1776 to 1976 marks the emergence of an entirely new phase in human history. This is the period during which our industrial civilization has arisen and developed. It is also the period during which there has

occurred a transition from a social state whose material and energy requirements were satisfied mainly from renewable resources to our present state that is overwhelmingly dependent upon nonrenewable resources. In 1776 our material requirements for food, housing, clothing, and industrial equipment were principally satisfied by renewable vegetable and animal products.

In this scenario, life on Motunui represents the time period before 1776, in which civilization was able to use mainly renewable materials and energy, with non-renewable resources, such as sand or metal only being used in small enough quantities to barely scratch the surface of their naturally occurring reservoirs. Moana's village, as mentioned in a previous chapter, embraces a sustainable living style, taking only as much as it needs and not striving for growth or personal gain. Maui, however, offers them growth through exploiting the powers within the Heart of Te Fiti.

Though it can be argued that Maui was ignorant to the worth of the Heart, he nonetheless took it without permission or any consideration for Te Fiti herself, viewing the theft as an achievement instead of a crime. The character's inability to predict consequences mirrors the history of human invention in many ways, in that humanity often invents materials or machines without considering how to dispose of them later. An example for this is the construction of nuclear reactors for the sake of gaining energy without first finding a way to safely store or destroy the radioactive waste now polluting soil and water. Similarly, during the industrial revolution, the air around the newly built factories became polluted due to the unfiltered toxic gases released by the use of coal. Even today, scientists are working on creating Artificial Intelligence without first considering the ethical implications or potential repercussions of such a potentially dangerous scientific breakthrough. Maui mirrors this tendency of putting innovation before considering consequences by taking Te Fiti's Heart without thinking his actions through first, thus hurting the environment.

Even more so, Maui also represents the wish for economic growth and the tendency to strive for something better rather than being grateful for what is already available. According to Strauss (22) "Economic growth is the bottom line. It is what is expected and what is desired. […] If an economy is not growing, there is something wrong." This idea shows itself in Maui's idea to bestow the ability of creating life onto the people of Motunui, even though they never asked for it. He assumes that growth and expansion are desirable, and by giving Motunui the ability to do so beyond their natural capabilities, he would gain fame and gratitude. He does not consider the environment or Te Fiti in his

actions and acts in order to further his own selfish ambition, which the movie underlines by making his solo song about himself and by having him leave once the fight against Te Kā proves to be threatening to his own health and belongings.

Instead of Maui, who thinks of himself as the hero and savior of the story, it is Moana who steps up to make the difficult choices and risks her life for the survival of her people. It is also her who realizes that the only way to end the conflict and stop the blight from spreading further is to make peace with Te Kā /Te Fiti rather than fighting against her. Not too subtly, the movie tells the parable of a young girl, who fights for the environment in order to secure the safety of future generations, even though her father as well as the self-proclaimed hero and perpetrator of the environmental issues are trying to stop her. This has become a recurrent picture also outside of fictional storytelling, with young environmental activists like Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier, Bruno Rodriguez and Mari Copeny fighting against establishments and older generations who try to silence their efforts or belittle them due to their age.

It is the next generation, the ones too young to be responsible for the environmental crisis, who are now fighting on the front lines to save their future, just as Moana is fighting for Motunui and against the blight even though she is not responsible for the problem. For the first time, it has come into question whether the next generation's life will be better than the last generation's or worse (Edwards 15). And while the ones responsible, Maui in terms of *Moana*, are unwilling to take responsibility and the parental generation, like Chief Tui, are too set in their ways to change, Moana is the one brave enough to look for unconventional or daring options to save the environment and improve the situation for the next generation.

In comparison to the Maui of mythology, the movie version of the character is less concerned with helping people or other deities and instead is a selfish has-been hero who worries about himself before considering the safety of others. Where the mythological character is a trickster god who frequently plays pranks, the movie version is almost sinister at times, both because of the filming techniques like underlighting or sinister music and because of his imposing physicality. It could be argued that inventing a god would have been equally as viable for the film from a storytelling point of view. After all, Te Fiti and Te Kā are only loosely based on Polynesian deities. However, by using a well-known

demi-god more ties to Polynesian culture are established, which gives the movie more cultural weight and creates a stronger illusion of cultural authenticity.

In conclusion, Maui begins the movie as an antagonistic force and slowly becomes an anti-hero as he realizes the error of his ways and recognizes that his actions have hurt the environment and the people he was hoping to help. His hope for growth and progress beyond what the natural resources were able to provide caused environmental problems, and it is Moana who comes to save both him and her island. Maui represents an unwillingness to take responsibility for well-intended but harmful actions, which is explained by his desire for belonging due to his status as a demi-god, unable to belong fully to either gods or humans.

4.4. Te Fiti and Te Kā – Nature Personified

Whereas Maui is loosely based on a Polynesian demi-god, Te Fiti and Te Kā do not have a direct mythological equivalent. Pele, the goddess of fire and volcanoes, might be the most similar to Te Kā due to her quick temper and the destruction she is able to cause when volcanoes erupt and lava begins to flow. Lono is the most similar to Te Fiti, as he was worshipped as a god of fertility and agriculture, bringing rain and edible plants to humans. Though Polynesian mythology is an almost unexplored treasure trove of stories, Disney decided to tell a new story, focusing on Moana as the protagonist and utilizing the made-up deity Te Kā as the main villain of the story.

Te Fiti and Te Kā both personify an aspect of nature, with Te Fiti representing the classic imagery of Mother Nature while Te Kā is the more volatile, destructive earth. Te Fiti follows the long tradition of depicting nature as female and mother, both able to give life and nurture it. Stereotypically, women are seen as closer to nature, while men are perceived as personification of culture because they lack the ability to birth offspring, meaning that they have the opportunity and freedom to create artificial life by making objects (Ortner 75). This also connects to the divide between the social spheres in that men have more freedom in the public sphere whereas many societies push women into the private sphere, where they are responsible for cooking, looking after the home and raising children (Ortner 78). Negative associations brought about by the connection of women to nature are that women are voiceless, passive, obedient, obstinate and there

solely to please men, just as nature is seen as passive and defenceless to the greed and destruction brought about by humanity (Roach 38).

In the movie, Te Fiti is depicted as a beautiful young woman made out of vines and flowers. It is her who creates the islands from the ocean and who gives life to the humans and plants. Grandmother Tala explains it as "[Te Fiti's] Heart held the greatest power ever known. It could create life itself. And Te Fiti shared it with the world." (*Moana* 00:01:00 – 00:01:14). The image of unending love for her creations is similar to that of a mother who would do anything for the children she birthed and who looks after them, even if they are unaware of her love and guidance. Te Fiti is the epitome of a fairy tale mother, providing her children with everything they need to live and be happy, while asking for nothing in return. As mentioned above, she initially seems like a passive and voiceless character whose sole purpose is to create life and vanish quietly once that is no longer required of her.

The character design supports this reading of the character as mother nature further by giving her numerous markers of femininity. For example, from her head, vines and plants grow down, giving the impression that she has long, almost dreadlock-like hair, which can be seen as a symbol of fertility and status. Similarly, she is adorned by a flower crown and many delicate flowers grow all over her body, linking her to the image of the young flower girl. Other markers of femininity are the long eyelashes, the delicate hands, high cheekbones and thick lips. She is also wearing a dress, which hints at breasts and hips underneath the loose-fitting gown. Her entire form consists of soft lines and curves, with no hard angles disturbing the image of the motherly nature deity.

Figure 4: Te Fiti after her transformation

Te Fiti does not speak at all in the movie, but instead communicates through facial expressions and hand gestures, invoking the previously mentioned negative stereotype of the silent woman and nature. Throughout the movie, she is the epitome of motherhood and nature, as she creates life, cares for it and repairs it after it was broken. She even forgives Maui and gifts him a new hook after his old one breaks in the fight with Te Kā. This communicates that nature is forgiving and that it is able to heal even from the gravest of injuries. *Moana* creates a personification of nature that is warm, caring and forgiving, allowing humans to make mistakes, and still allowing them back into her good graces once they have done penance.

Te Kā, on the other hand, represents the destructive powers of nature. Grandmother Tala first calls her a "demon of fire and earth" instead of a goddess, as she does Te Fiti. Where Te Fiti embodies the maternal Earth, Te Kā is a woman scorned, angry and raging and thus is connected to a long history of negative female imagery, for example Eve's curiosity causing the expulsion from paradise or Lilith's betrayal of Adam. Women who do not fit the mould of the docile mother and wife have frequently been discriminated against throughout history, with the witch-hunting being perhaps the most prominent example of a period in which women were forced to comply with patriarchal rules or be prosecuted. But even a hundred years ago, women were accused of having less abilities to determine justice than men due to their supposed underdeveloped super-egos, causing them to be more emotional than rational (Freud in Roach 82). And even Disney has a history of

wicked female villains, beginning at their very first animation movie, *Snow White* (1937). Since then, characters like Ursula, Maleficent, Yzma, Cruella and The Queen of Hearts have continued the tradition of devious, plotting women in animation films.

However, Lesage (422) argues that

> [i]n melodrama and film noir, as well as in pornography, women's anger is most commonly depicted through displacement onto images of female insanity or perversity, often onto a grotesque, fearful parody of lesbianism. These displacements allow reference to and masking of individual women's rage, and that masked rage is rarely collectively expressed by women or even fully felt. We have relatively few expressions of women's authentic rage even in women's art.

When considering this closer, it becomes evident that female villains in animation films are rarely angry, with most of them falling into the scheming category of ne'er-do-wells, and few of them ever engage in physical fights, preferring to send henchmen or to transform themselves by using magic in order to best their enemies. As such, Te Kā is a rare depiction of unfiltered, justified, visceral anger at having been robbed and wronged. Te Kā at the beginning is written off as one of the sea monsters coming to steal Te Fiti's Heart, but over the course of the movie, it is revealed that it is instead Te Fiti who took on a new form in order to get revenge on Maui and retrieve the stone.

Like the depiction of women, who are often sorted into the extreme opposites of "virginal saints or whores" (Roach 113), nature is often shown as either a lush green paradise or as a dystopian wasteland, while very little attention is paid to stagnating nature or to women who are neither symbols of purity or sin. *Moana* copies this dichotomy in that there is no transition from Te Fiti to Te Kā, as we see Te Kā attacking Maui a few seconds after he stole the Heart. As soon as the stone is lost, Te Fiti stops creating life and begins to destroy, first in the attempt of hurting Maui and later in sending out the blight to drain the life from the islands.

This is mirrored in the character design of Te Kā, both in terms of shapes and colours. Where Te Fiti is adorned by a myriad of femininity symbols, Te Kā is almost genderless in that she has no eyes nor hair, no overly visible muscles to signal masculinity and only a very light rounding at the chest to indicate breasts. Similarly to the nature goddess, Te Kā does not speak words, but instead shrieks when injured and roars at Moana as she approaches. The combination of red, black and yellow indicates aggression and the fire

or lava emanating from the inside marks Te Kā as a physical threat, highlighted by a music score, which becomes more suspenseful whenever the character appears on screen. In addition, because the scenes featuring Te Kā are always confrontational, the suspenseful music, quicker editing and darker colour palette create a scene expression that highlights the anxious characters' emotions even more, making Te Kā seem like an even bigger threat. Even the weather is adapted in accordance to the scene expression, by showing clear blue skies whenever Te Fiti is seen, while Te Kā is always portrayed in front of a dark background and a sky filled with clouds and ashes, highlighting that nature as a whole is suffering when Te Fiti is in pain.

Figure 5: Te Kā attacking Maui

The movie waits until its climax to reveal the plot twist of Te Fiti and Te Kā being the same entity, at which point Moana realizes that fighting is futile and only confrontation and apologizing will solve the dispute and save her island. The central metaphor is laid out beautifully in these final moments of the film, as Moana makes amends for Maui's wrongdoings, returns what was taken to Te Fiti and brings about peace without fighting. Nature is willing to forgive humanity and in time, the plants regain their vitality, saving the people of Motunui from starvation. At the heart of the movie lies the simple idea that in order to heal nature, we need to first admit that we did something wrong and show our willingness to change and to stop exploiting nature beyond the limit of renewable resources. Only then may we hope for a future where we do not have to worry about the next generation's survival.

Moana, a girl who carries none of the blame for the damage done to nature herself, is willing to fight an oppressive system of male authority figures in order to make amends with nature and to apologize for the damages done to Mother Nature in the past. Nature regains its ability to procreate, and her rage is tempered by Moana's willingness to sacrifice herself in order to return the Heart to Te Fiti. Edwards (3) addresses the current environmental crisis by stating that, "[w]e are the leaders we have been waiting for. Instead of looking for 'heroes' to solve the problems we face at the local, national, and global levels, we must look at our own gifts and talents and take the leap to gather our friends and neighbours and take action on issues important to us." This call for action is precisely what *Moana* exemplifies. Moana could have ignored the issues or repeatedly attempted to push for support from her father and village, but instead she took matters into her own hands and found a solution to the environmental problem when no one else was willing to act.

In bringing this chapter to a close, it can be said that *Moana* depicts nature as a loving mother who provides everything needed for a happy life as long as resources are used wisely and not wasted. However, when nature is hurt by overusing unrenewable resources and taking too much or not thinking consequences of actions through, nature fights back and mutates from a loving life-giver to a raging avenger of destruction who drains the life previously given from the islands in hope of retribution. Only admittance of guilt and proactive behaviour to restore the environment can help to heal nature and guarantee food and resources for the next generation. By acting independently, Moana is quick enough to save her island utopia before the crisis escalates beyond repair, choosing the balance symbolized by the ocean over Maui's drive for economic growth founded in limited resources and exploitation of nature.

5. WALL-E – Sentimental Past and Apocalyptic Future

In contrast to *Moana*'s reconciliation with nature, *WALL-E* shows the results of an escalated crisis and the subsequent environmental catastrophe. In this movie, nature is eradicated and almost forgotten, leaving a world made out of metal behind and pushing robots into the role of the protagonists while humans slowly turn into machines. The

following chapter will first investigate the depiction of the environment after the onset of an environmental catastrophe, then take a closer look at the role of the robots and humans in the movie, and lastly show how glorification of nature and nostalgia are used in the film to evoke protectiveness for our current environment.

5.1. Depiction of the Post-Apocalyptic Environment on Earth

While *Finding Nemo* was set in and around contemporary Australia and *Moana* referenced Polynesian culture, *WALL-E* is set in an imaginary future. Because audiences would have fewer points of reference to orientate themselves in the fictional world, the movie spends most of its first fifteen minutes on establishing the world and circumstances surrounding the events taking place. The most glaring difference between the depicted earth and our earth is the complete lack of nature and color, visible both in the initial depiction of planet Earth, as well as in the following slow zooming into more detailed landscapes. Clearly, something terrible must have happened between our current world and the version shown in the movie to eradicate nature so thoroughly.

The word 'apocalypse', according to the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to "a disaster resulting in drastic, irreversible damage to human society or the environment, esp. on a global scale; a cataclysm" (OED: apocalypse). Though the term initially was historically to the Book of Revelation in the bible and the inevitable end of the world brought about by a divine power, the term has now gained a secondary secular meaning, referring to a fictional world-changing scenario such as a zombie apocalypse. One of the defining features of disaster movies, games or books is the focus on the individual living in a world that is either ending/changing during the story or who is living in a post-apocalyptic world and has to deal with the consequences of the events that took place before the story begins (Weber xii). Popular examples for the genre include YA sensations such as *The Maze Runner* (2009) trilogy by James Dashner or *The Hunger Games* (2008) series by Suzanne Collins, as well as video games like *The Last of Us* (2013) or *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). Movies and TV shows range from *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) to *Snowpiercer* (2013) or *The Walking Dead* (2010).

Though WALL-E is a very different protagonist in comparison to Katniss or Aloy, he fulfills the same role: allowing the audience to experience the new reality through his eyes. The

movie starts with a long, almost continuous tracking shot, moving from orbit into a bird's eye point of view of WALL-E. This as well as the next few shots are all establishing shots that give the audience time to understand the parameters of the film by showing the same location from different angles. WALL-E himself is also shown in pieces, as he is first filmed from the top, then by moving through an unmoving scene, followed by detail shots of his hands, torso and back. Just like with the new environment, the audience experiences the protagonist shot by shot before fully understanding what he is.

While getting to know WALL-E, the audience also gets acquainted with the new version of Earth. The movie follows the protagonist through a ghostly caricature of what we expect a city to look like. Skyscrapers fill the skyline, but instead of normal buildings, they are made entirely out of garbage blocks, turning them from functional structures to useless imitations of a by-gone society, as can be seen in Figure 6. Both the drab color palette and the eerie music add to the feeling of uneasiness that accompanies the beginning of the film. The colors used predominately in the first half of the movie are almost exclusively orange, brown and grey. There are no blues and greens except for the plant, and white is only introduced once EVE joins the movie. The lack in variety makes the landscape feel dead and repetitive, adding to the image of a deserted wasteland and thus an unhabitable place. The music changes from an old song in the beginning to slow harp music once the credits are shown. Aside from the reduced orchestration and a few choice sound effects, there is no pronounced sound, as WALL-E does not speak before meeting EVE, and even then, his vocabulary is very limited.

Figure 6: The World of *Wall-E*

Together, the music and color palette create the image of a deserted landscape, which is further highlighted by the long establishing shots. Where most of the time establishing shots are utilized to show new locations before introducing more close-ups to focus on the characters, *WALL-E* keeps returning to establishing and long shots to indicate the emptiness of Earth, with WALL-E being the only moving entity on screen. The unmoving background ironically mirrors the way nature is usually filmed, creating both a sense of tranquility in stillness and an uneasiness due to a lack of people. The established tableau is also reminiscent of horror movies in which the protagonist explores a space that they should not be in before finding a dangerous secret and being forced to run. Similarly, the early scenes of the movie create the sense of something being wrong, and the strange new Earth, which is clearly different from the audience's Earth, tells of a terrible event without ever explaining what exactly happened. Before WALL-E and EVE return to the spaceship, it could even be assumed that humanity has stopped to exist altogether.

Returning to the terminology of 'apocalypse', it is evident that an apocalyptic event has taken place, in the sense that irreversible damage has been done to the environment and to humanity. Plants, animals and natural water sources seem to have been eradicated, with the only given hint as to a potential cause being that toxicity levels have risen too high (*WALL-E* 01:08:17). Possible reasons for rising environmental toxicity include (but are not limited to) chemical pesticides which might contaminate the soil and water, as well as heavy metals which can have harmful effects on animals, humans, and the environment. These are just two possible causes for the origins of the environmental apocalypse depicted in *WALL-E*. What can be clearly seen, however, is that humans did not take enough action to save the environment, instead deciding to shoot their trash into the atmosphere, in hopes of getting rid of it. When this precaution proved fruitless, humanity decided to abandon Earth on a spaceship owned by the fictional megacorporation Buy-N-Large, hoping that nature would eventually restore itself and plants would grow once more. From this, it could be argued that the society viewed nature as a near-immortal entity, able to recover from any harm done to it.

The movie leaves some of the potential horrific implications unaddressed, most likely due to the younger target demographic. Though no direct information is given, it can be assumed that more people were alive on Earth than were able to fit on the spaceship,

which would indicate that either there are more humans traversing the galaxy, or that parts of humanity, most likely the part that could not afford to travel on the Axiom, Buy-N-Large's spaceship, was left behind and slowly died due to the hot weather or the lack of food, water or breathable air. Should this be the case, the people who succumbed to the new uninhabitable place would have been either incorporated into the trash piles built by WALL-E or would have simply decomposed in the 700 years between the last humans leaving Earth and the beginning of the movie, since human bones can decompose within a century if left in wet climates (Business Insider 2019).

Questions like these are left unanswered by the movie, possibly to spur on the audience's imagination. Similarly to the *Maze Runner* book series and most other post-apocalyptic entertainment media, *WALL-E* allows the audience to form their own suspicions and questions by showing instead of telling. Though later in the movie a bit of exposition is provided in the form of video clips, most of the movie is masterful at showing the audience what it wants to communicate. Tiny bits of history are provided by showing that Buy-N-Large was a megacorporation that seemed to rule every aspect of daily life, ranging from gas stations to burger restaurants, indicating that one company achieved the capitalistic dream of establishing monopolistic control over multiple different markets. A quick shot even shows that the newspaper is called 'Buy-N-Large Times', with the headlines mentioning that the CEO of BNL seems to also be the political leader, able to declare a global emergency (WALL-E 00:04:04). By hinting at consumerism and corporatocracy having plunged Earth into this environmental apocalypse, the movie criticizes the current neglect for global warming and other environmental issues in favor of escapism and consumer culture.

Whether nature is defined as beautiful, vast landscapes, as it was in romantic pastorals (Garrard 48), or whether nature is used as a hedge term for any vegetation and natural ecosystem, humanity in *WALL-E* has killed all of it. The environment is dead, life is gone, and all that is left are the remnants of a broken society who ran away rather than facing the problems they had caused without even bothering to shut down the robots they left behind on Earth. WALL-E's initial drive through the city is used to show the audience what happened 700 years ago, establishing a society that feels achingly familiar to contemporary audiences, due to the depicted exaggerations not being entirely outlandish when imagining our own future. Life in all forms is absent, indicating that neither growth

nor reproduction are possible. The only sentient being left is an artificial robot, who was tasked with cleaning up after humanity.

5.2. WALL-E and EVE as the Human Protagonists

WALL-E, an acronym for Waste Allocation Load-Lifter: Earth Class, is a small robot, presumably the last functioning one left on the planet, who goes about his day by compressing waste into small blocks and building structures out of them. When Morton (86) awards the movie with the alternate subtitle "cuteness saves the planet", this is mostly due to WALL-E's unique character design, which combines utility with just enough anthropomorphic design to make him the protagonist of the movie. The robot is built up from a main body, a cube that functions as a press for the trash he picks up and compresses into blocks, as well as two arms and two large camera's acting as eyes. Because WALL-E does not have a humanoid face to communicate emotions, the eyes and the limited range of potential body language is used to express his feelings. An example of this is when he sees something interesting and the lenses in his eyes grow bigger, indicating that he is paying close attention. WALL-E also breathes in and out in frustration or adoration while watching over EVE, even though as a robot, he does not need to breath, indicating that the visible exhaling was put there solely to communicate the robot's feeling to the audience.

Though WALL-E does not talk, he makes sounds in response to events and learns to say EVE's name. Jee et al. analyzed the "sound design for emotion and intention expression of socially interactive robots" (199) and came to the conclusion that "intonation, pitch, and timbre are the dominant musical parameters for the robot characters to express" (205) themselves, with timbre being the defining feature for the robot's character. WALL-E's trills and shrieks indicate fear, while the intonation he uses for EVE's name indicates his affection for her. Together with the slightly anthropomorphized body language, the sound effects attempt to balance out the lack of language, which would otherwise make WALL-E difficult to sympathize with. WALL-E's attempts to communicate with other robots on the spaceship also make it easier for the audience to see him as an individual, as a behavioral study recently found out that humans are more likely to perceive robots as social-like if they interact with other robots (Fraune et al. 2020). The study, "Computers

in Human Behaviour", shows that if social robots interact with other robots instead of just with humans, it will increase the social-like perception of the former.

EVE is depicted in a similar way, communicating through only a few words such as 'directive' and 'classified'. In comparison to WALL-E, her design is sleek and almost cold, lacking the big eyes and clunky exterior that make the other robot marketable. Though robots have no need for a biological sex or an assigned gender, EVE is designed to look female, which can be seen by her name and her voice. WALL-E, on the other hand, is designed to present him as a male character according to his voice and the pronouns used in the promotional material of the movie. When the two robots begin to develop a romantic relationship, it can thus be considered a heteronormative connection between a male and a female robot. The relevance of this observation for this thesis lies in the suggested humanness of the characters and the familiarity with heteronormative that the characterization presupposes.

Though WALL-E and EVE are robots, the movie sees the world through their eyes rather than taking the perspective of the humans onboard the spaceship. It is also the two robots who find and save the only remaining seedling and keep it save from other robots who wish to keep its existence a secret. Thus, the movie explores the connection between the artificial life forms of the robots and the last remaining connection to nature, finding that they gain more value and interest in it, even though they lack the evolutionary connection or the necessity for it that humans might feel for it. This leaves either a scientific interest or an ideological value of the plant as a reason for WALL-E and EVE to risk their lives for the plant.

The audience experiences the world through the eyes of the robots and primarily identify with them instead of the human characters. WALL-E visually fits into the world that he is cleaning up, matching its color scheme and finding purpose in cleaning up Earth, even joy in discovering the random objects he collects. Both EVE and WALL-E have developed characters, agency and drives, making them the protagonists of the movie. Through their eyes, the audience experiences the wonder of discovering plant life and sees that it is something worth protecting and treasuring.

5.3. Humanity as Robots

Where robots take on the role of the human protagonists, the actual humans depicted in the film look like children and act like machines. The movie shows humans to have evolved over the last 700 years to fit their new environment on the Axiom, in that their anatomy has changed due to prolonged sitting and a lack of exercise. They are obese and seem to lack trained muscles, as they can no longer walk by themselves, get up from the floor or even move into a sitting position without using their electronic chairs. Similarly, they no longer eat solid foods but gain all their nourishment through drinks, such as a cupcake in a cup or breakfast that is served in differently colored cups. This is most likely due to food sources on board of a spaceship being sparse, resulting in them eating mostly artificially flavored sustenance, which is no longer based on actual plants or animals. Also, the only water that can be seen throughout the movie is the pool in the middle of the sun deck. The men do not have beards, either due to being shaved each day or because they are no longer able to grow facial hair, though in either case, the round and beardless faces add even more to the child-like physical appearance of the humans in *WALL-E*. Similarly, to the Eloi in H.G. Wells' novel *The Time Machine* (1895), these mutated humans do not have to concern themselves with satisfying their base desires, but instead can live a naïve but goalless life.

This development continues in their seeming lack of agency and personality. The humans sit in hovering chairs, staring at screens all day, with no detectable personalities to separate them from one another. Their uniforms and similar body shapes transform the individual humans into a near sex- and genderless mass of people, moving on conveyor belts, unaware of their surroundings. Though they can be heard talking to people, they seem to have no agency or goal, with robots taking over all menial jobs and functions on the spaceship. They are even trusted with raising and educating the children, which evokes the image of humans being produced like machines in factories, making them just as artificial, if not more so, than the robots in the movie.

Alongside their infantile abilities and looks, the humans in WALL-E also share children's innocence in that they are not directly responsible for the destruction of Earth, seeing as the past ten generations of humanity have never set foot on the planet but spent their entire lives on the space ship. This allows the viewers to identify with the humans in the

movie without having to also share the blame for the damage caused to the environment. The humans onboard the Axiom are victims of crimes that past generations have committed, rendering them innocent and sympathetic instead of forcing audiences to develop resentment against the depicted humans.

WALL-E chose not only to depict humans as animations, but to also incorporate filmed real-life videos of actors for commercials on Earth or in the information videos left for the captain. Using video interjections in animated movies is fairly uncommon, though its opposite, using animated interjections in live-action movies, has a long-standing tradition in Disney movies, such as *Marry Poppins* (1964), *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* (1971) or *Enchanted* (2007). While animated episodes or characters in live-action movies can be used for a humoristic moment, they can also be employed to evoke feelings of sentimentality or to expand the range and depth of a specific scene (Honess Roe 284). I propose that the embedded real life clips are utilized in a similar fashion, initially creating a humorous effect but later linking the movie closer to the real world and forcing audiences to connect the issues encountered on screen to the ones they encounter in their lives.

Especially when comparing the robots and humans in the movie, it becomes evident that humanity seems to have outlived its usefulness by perfecting robots and giving them the ability to repair themselves and create new robots. While the machines clean up Earth, monitor for surviving plant life, maintain and even commandeer the spaceship most of the time, humans vegetate and wait for a promised future that will never arrive. Humanity has lost all its connection to nature, both to the wilderness on Earth by eradicating it and to their own nature by supplementing it for cheap entertainment and a promise of endless holidays. Together with their knowledge of nature and history, humanity also traded their individuality and bodily functions for luxury, while robots have slowly gained personality and individual agency by being left to their own devices, indicating that their artificial origin is less important than their will to affect change.

5.4. Nostalgic Glorification of Nature

When looking at the humans on board the spaceship, it could be argued that their return to Earth is unnecessary. Though their initial goal was to stay in space until the planet is

hospitable again and return to Earth eventually, the living situation on the spaceship far outshines the hardship and danger waiting for them on the ground. Without any resources or knowledge, the question of why humans want to return to Earth at all should be answered. The most likely reason and the power behind the depiction of nature in *WALL-E* is nostalgia, a concept which Steward explains as:

> always [being] ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality. (Steward 23 qtd. in Ladino 6).

It is precisely this longing for a past that has never existed that drives Captain McCrea to return to Earth after watching a few clips played to him by the board computer. In a quick data search, he is shown clips of people sowing seeds on a field, of baskets full of fresh fruit and a bubbling stream of water. Later on, he watches videos from a dance event and learns about pizza. However, the data bank does not contain information on the negative sides of nature or human history, such as storms, pestilences or war. Because no firsthand witnesses are alive anymore, the Captain is forced to rely on the utopian videos in order to visualize the past. This constructed, imagined history creates a longing for a past that has never existed and thus the want continues, because no present could live up to the expectations.

Once the spaceship lands on Earth, the humans are faced with the harsh reality of a barren landscape full of metal and garbage left behind by their ancestors. However, together with the robots, they manage to drill down to find a water source and soon have a field of, presumably, vegetables growing. Here, it is clear to see that the movie is aimed for children and needed a happy end to satisfy its main target demographic. Were the movie more concerned with representing realistic ecological developments, it might show that the water below would still be too toxic to drink, while the one seedling would not be enough to sprout an entire field in such a short amount of time.

I would argue that *WALL-E*'s greatest shortcoming can be found here, at the end of the movie. "The film, instead of promoting a rethinking of the systems themselves, suggests that all environmental problems and solutions depend solely on individual decisions and actions." (Howey 55). Thus, the only consequential choice made in the movie is the

Captain making the decision to go back to Earth and to stand up against the evil robot autopilot. Afterwards, as soon as the autopilot is silenced, they face no more problems, because their true enemy was their own lack of individuality rather than the unhospitable planet they want to return to. In order to be able to give the movie a satisfying ending, the film must focus on the victory of the individuals and the fulfilling of small dreams, such as humans walking on Earth again or WALL-E and EVE holding hands, rather than investigating the futile attempts at rehabilitating the planet to an extent where it can provide nourishment and shelter for humanity again.

Though the problems the humans in *WALL-E* face seem outlandish to a modern audience, we are long past taking the first step into a potentially similar future. Wilderness and untouched nature are a thing of the past already, thanks to technology being able to look at the world from above and zoom into whatever spot of land is desired. Furthermore, due to human-made climate change, humanity is already influencing nature in a variety of ways, causing irreversible damage to habitats and endangering species around the globe (Wapner 6). Though nature has been defined in a plethora of different ways, as unknown wilderness, as a refuge from society, as a place of beauty, I would agree with Wapner (7) in that it is first and foremost an idea, more specifically an Other that humanity has evolved from, yet tries to distance ourselves from, whenever is inconvenient.

WALL-E offers yet another definition of nature, in that nature seems to be everything that is not artificially produced on the spaceship or by humans on Earth. And while the people on board the Axiom can be driven to places in their chairs and the Captain has the power to change the artificial sun however, he pleases, the plant is not under anyone's control. When it is transported, it loses a leaf, showcasing the natural decay of plant life. Nowhere else on the spaceship is decay ever addressed. The natural cycle of life and death as well as growth and development in general seems to be lost on the spaceship, which is why the plant becomes synonymous with hope and future for the humans. Though technology promised humanity a future, *WALL-E* presents a potential future in which progress has stopped and humanity is deteriorating into a state of helplessness, lacking individuality and ultimately moving towards a future devoid of any meaning. It is only once the plant arrives, accompanied by two robots perusing their own goals, that nostalgia triggers hope for an unreachable but brighter-looking future.

In conclusion, *WALL-E* sets out to present the audience with a complete lack of nature, showcased in the stillness of the unmoving landscape, the color scheme and the lack of music. Artificial life in form of robots has evolved to follow its own goals, by building their lives on the ruins of the forgotten human society, treasuring interesting-looking trinkets over useful or expensive items. The humans on board the spaceship have lost all connection to their own nature and even lost most of the knowledge connected to it, relying on technology to explain their own history to them. Though the videos shown to the Captain are nostalgic in nature, presenting idyllic, one-sided images of the past, they trigger hope and a desire to grow. Nature in the movie is no longer synonymous with huge rainforests, but is rather reduced to anything organic and not artificially produced from metal. Sadly, though the movie starts out with a very provocative idea, it does not propose any actual steps to help the environment, instead it celebrates the accomplishments of a few characters and establishes the regaining of individuality as the most important goal, from which natural environmental growth will follow.

6. Comparison of Ecocritical Strategies

When looking at Disney movies throughout the years, as in many movie genres, it can be seen how ecocritical values have begun to influence both the stories and the way they are told. While in early movies such as *Snow White* (1937) or *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), nature is shown either as inhabited by friendly woodland creatures or manipulated by an evil sorceress, later films became more sensitive to the topic of environmental representation. Movies like *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Tarzan* (1999) showcase humanity's lack of respect for nature while making sure to communicate that this is not a victimless crime, by giving Grandmother Willow and the gorillas a voice and personality.

Though every movie has its own unique depiction of nature, tendencies spanning multiple movies can be identified. As outlined in the chapter on *Finding Nemo*, anthropomorphism is commonly used in animation movies to help audiences identify with animal characters. This strategy was used as early as *Dumbo* (1941) and *Bambi* (1942), both of which showcase animals suffering at the hands of humans ignorant to the harm they were causing to the animals, and is still in use in more recent films such as *Zootopia* (2016) and *Frozen 2* (2019). *Finding Nemo* was chosen as a primary text for this thesis because it showcases the ignorance of the humans like few other movies. It addresses mainly the

ignorance of people who keep exotic animals as pets and a lack of willingness to teach children how to properly treat their pets. However, it also shows the pollution of the water near harbors, the danger of simply sinking weapons and boats that are no longer of use, and the damage that overfishing can cause to animals.

Moana, on the other hand, only features anthropomorphism of animals tangentially in the form of Moana's pets, Pua and Heihei. Instead, the movie focuses on giving Mother Nature a form of her own. Te Fiti represents an originally loving mother who lashes out after being hurt, retracting the gifts she had previously bestowed on humanity. The progress that Maui hopes to pass on to the humans is ill thought out and ends up hurting more than it helps, with Moana being forced to repair the damages caused by past generations.

WALL-E does not use anthropomorphism on natural beings, but instead employs it to make a robot the central figure of the movie by making him more relatable and equipping him with body language to make up for his lack of speech. The movie is bleaker than the others and showcases what havoc centuries of consumerism and ignoring environmental issues can wreak upon the planet. Ultimately, the movie ends on a positive note, showcasing that nature prevails if given a chance and that mistakes, no matter how big, can be fixed if someone is willing to step up and begin the process.

When comparing the three analyzed movies, a tendency for individuals to rise to the occasion and attempt to solve problems becomes evident. Nemo and Moana are both children, while the Captain and WALL-E both convey a childlike naivety which seems to clear them of any responsibility to step up and tackle the respective problems in front of them. However, throughout children's entertainment, there is a tendency to:

> Rather than using fantasy to empower children to think and act for themselves, I find that in children's 'edu-tainment' about ecological disaster we see instead adults telling children directly what they should think, say and do in the face of an urgent, real-world crisis, characteristically through narratives that absolve adults by declaring children guilty. (Canavan 87)

This argument proves true in *Moana*, where Chief Tui rather blames Moana for her selfishness than take her opinion into account. When looking at social media or watching the news, it certainly feels like this statement remains fitting even outside of

entertainment, where younger generations are forced to live in an environment that was neglected and exploited by older generations, yet it remains the responsibility of younger generations to fix the matter.

However, in order to make long term changes to the way humanity treats the environment, it is not enough to rely on green technological advancements, but instead "a whole revolution in sensibility and the value system that underpin our lives" (Bonnett quot. in Whitley 2) must take place. According to Roach (7), much of the environmental destruction occurs because of the growing separation between society and nature, brought about by the steadily increasing reliance on technology, the urbanization and the belief in human superiority. Wherever humans do decide to act and intervene on behalf of the environment, it is a precarious balance between making nature accessible for humans to interact with and develop positive associations towards it, and altering the ecosphere to the point of unrecognizability (Willoquet-Maricondi 13), turning encounters with nature from natural to cultural (Purdy 14). Holland (11) phrases the issue well, by explaining that "nature conservation [is] less a matter of protecting nature's balance from humanity's destructive power, and more a matter of preserving the destructive wildness of nature from humanly imposed stability and monotony".

This discussion begs the question of whether something as mundane as family films can influence a matter of such importance and scope as environmental issues. In order to answer this question, the thesis has initially established that family films forgo complex narrative structures and intellectual topics in order to appeal to audiences on an emotional level. Though the previous chapters have mentioned the emotional moments in the stories, be that Grandmother Tala's death or Marlin's desperation to find his son, the analysis of the underlying structures of the movies has also shown that family films are certainly capable of introducing complex ideas to their audience on multiple levels of accessibility. *Finding Nemo*, for example, conveys implicit knowledge about fish to younger audiences and explicit, more advanced knowledge to older audiences who might be more familiar with the topic, yet are still able to learn something new when listening to Mr. Ray's song about the different zones of the ocean.

While *Moana* and *WALL-E* are not as concerned with the transmission of factual knowledge, their emotional appeal may prove just as potent as *Finding Nemo's* strategy.

As established before, new ways of connecting with nature need to be introduced to raise awareness for an environment that needs our help, because the current strategies do not seem to be working:

> In recent years, we have become accustomed to seeing images of a dying planet, various exhibited in grisly poses of ecological depletion and circulated by all sectors of the image industry, often in spots reserved for the exploitation fare of genocidal atrocities. The clichés of the standard environmental image are known to us all: on the one hand, belching smokestacks, seabirds mired in petrochemical sludge, fish floating belly-up, traffic jams in Los Angeles and Mexico City, and clearcut forests; on the other hand, the redeeming repertoire of pastoral imagery, pristine, green, and unspoiled by human habitation, crowned by the ultimate global spectacle, the fragile, vulnerable ball of spaceship earth. (Ross 171)

As a society, we have become numb to the images of suffering animals and the requests for financial help from Greenpeace activists on the streets. Instead of protesting or changing our way of life in significant, bold ways, we put our hope in green technologies, blame past generations for their mistakes or believe in politicians who promise to bring about changes if elected. However, with climate change rapidly altering the weather and increasing the number of natural catastrophes like storms and forest fires, the time for waiting is drawing to a close. While the ecological crises in stories might often be metaphors, the current environmental crisis is literal and real (Canavan 86).

While Disney movies may not be able to mobilize an entire cinema audience to get up and plant trees or release their pets into the wild, stories have the ability to influence individual opinions and, in time, can bring about a shift in public opinion (Jones & McBeth 2010). They can help to develop empathy for beings who are different and to find value in the wilderness beyond our control. We need to realize that nature is our origin and necessary for our survival, but we cannot care without being taught to value and to empathize with nature. Though our growing dependency on technology might make such a connection seem obsolete, no high-resolution screen can compete with the lived experience of being in nature, even if it is a version of nature that has been adapted to fit human needs.

This thesis would not be complete without mentioning the Disney Company's influence on the analyzed movies. Disney and Pixar movies tell stories that align with the Disney believes and the worldviews shared by their base audience. They rarely venture outside

of social conventions and tend to follow the most popular opinions, as can be seen in the increase of female heroines, which coaligned with the rise of feminism, and the slow changes of their policies on including more diverse characters in their movies and TV shows in order to remain viable on the Chinese market. Disney movies are slow to express blame in order to avoid alienating any potential audiences, as can be seen in *WALL-E*, where neither the robots nor the humans are truly to blame for the environmental catastrophe that occurred in the past. Even *Moana* does not spend a large amount of time on establishing Maui's guilt in hurting Te Fiti, but rather moves on to humorous encounters with coconut creatures and giant singing crabs.

The divergence between the company's self-image and their actual operation becomes almost comedic when viewed in the context of *WALL-E*, where a megacorporation controls all entertainment and news outlets. Disney has acquired so many TV stations, recording labels, movie studios and radio stations over the last decade that the comparison to the fictional corporation Buy-N-Large seems almost inevitable. Similarly, the movie blames consumerism for the lack of interest in environmental issues, while Disney itself depends on consumerism to remain profitable. As mentioned in the introduction to family film as a genre, selling merchandise is one of its cornerstones and film studios depend on income from toys, souvenirs and memorabilia to increase their profit. The three analyzed movies are no exception to that rule. *Finding Nemo* has found its way into many of the Disney parks, inspiring a musical and a themed ride in the form of Crush's Coaster. Moana has been turned into every form of toy, from dolls to Lego sets, Halloween costumes and jewelry and even WALL-E has been immortalized as plushies and a Pop Vinyl Figure.

Whether or not the entertainment goliath is using environmental issues as a selling point or whether the choice of topics stems from actual concern for the planet is debatable, though I cannot imagine a way in which this question would be answered in full. However, cash cow or not, the results remain the same, namely that families around the globe came into contact with movies that reflect the current need to change our perception of nature. Though it may seem as if nature is no longer necessary for our survival, humanity still depends on the environment as more than an abstract concept.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to improve our understanding of how Disney animation films depict nature and establish a connection between the environment and humans. It can be argued that with the increased interest in environmental issues, the amount of movies discussing the topic has multiplied as well. All three analyzed movies employed different strategies to communicate proenvironmental contents, though all of them focused on the fates of individual characters to employ the concept of empathy.

Finding Nemo mostly relied on anthropomorphism, featuring an almost exclusively animal cast. By seeing the world and the suffering brought about by humans through the eyes of Marlin and Nemo, audiences are able to put themselves into their position and empathize with their emotions. This is further supported by the inclusion of references to familiar situations, such as young parents being anxious before the birth of their first child or the first day at school. The movie uniquely combined implicit knowledge about animals, for example their breeding behaviors, with characteristics displayed by the figures in the movie, as can be seen in Marlin and Crush's different parenting styles. By also offering explicit knowledge, the movie caters to different experience and age levels, making sure that grandchildren and grandparents can equally enjoy the film and potentially learn something from it. The aftermath of the movie has shown that by featuring clownfish in the movie, the interest of both laymen and academics has been sparked, leading to more research being done in the field. It can thus be argued that by including animals in family films and combining anthropomorphic goals and emotions with natural characteristics of the fish, greater interest in species can be generated, which may in turn lead to further action to establish habitats for endangered species or establishing protection for fragile ecosystems.

The research on *Moana* has suggested that the movie presents a concept for sustainable living, which can be achieved by taking only what is needed and relying on renewable materials. Humans and nature in *Moana* coexist harmoniously as long as humans do not take more than what can regrow nor work towards expanding their population beyond what the island can provide for. Maui disrupts this balance by introducing a nonrenewable source of energy in the form of the Heart of Te Fiti, which causes nature to fight back against the harm done to it. Nature is personified as both a nurturing mother and an

untamable fury, indicating the wildness and unpredictability of the environment. The proenvironmental goal of the movie is to showcase that nature is willing to forgive humanity as long as someone is willing to begin the healing process. Most importantly, the film shows that young people can make a difference in times of environmental crises and create a role model which might inspire young people to follow in Moana's footsteps and encourage them to speak up and act when faced with adversity. The ocean acts as the connecting bridge in the movie, providing Moana with the opportunity for growth and the stage to prove herself.

WALL-E depicts the worst-case scenario and presents audiences with a post-apocalyptic scenario in which the environment has been eradicated completely. Nature has been buried under rubble, water has turned toxic and humans have fled instead of dealing with the consequences of their actions. Away from nature, humanity deteriorated, mutating into obese creatures without discernable personalities or goals. In their stead, robots developed into individuals, more or less accidentally saving the humans by protecting the seemingly last plant on the planet. The rediscovered nature is glorified, and nostalgia features heavily into the humans' wish to return to Earth. One individual's choices are able to guarantee the survival of humanity, even though the actual steps of the process are not shown. Instead, the movie focuses on the emotional connection between WALL-E and EVE, which plays into the family film's genre limitations, which support movies that focus on emotions over intellectual topics. However, the movie heavily criticizes consumer culture, though it itself partakes in it by being a product of the Disney merchandise machination.

In highlighting the different ways in which nature is represented in the analyzed movies, as home, as a loving mother or as a nostalgic goal, we show a variety of approaches to establish a connection between audiences and nature. Though none of the films provide their viewers with a list of active steps towards helping the environment, the movies do showcase that nature needs our protection and that it is something that should be valued. Stories like these are needed in order to change the current societal indifference towards nature and will become more important to that end still. By painting nature in bright, beautiful colors and adding orchestration, the contrast to the desaturated, muted images of human-infested landscapes becomes evident and shows the damage that humans can cause to nature if they do not care what happens to the world around them.

Thus, ultimately, the thesis argues that through empathizing with the individuals in the movies and seeing them value and rebuild nature, similar shifts in opinions might be initiated and hopefully will lead to more stories that provide the next generation with paths to follow on the way to a more conscious relationship to nature, beyond viewing it as a resource for human profit. Because this thesis is based on theoretic analysis of direct observations, none of the proposed effects are based on statistical evidence or proof. However, the given analysis may inspire further research into ecocritical entertainment, perhaps in combination with behavioral psychology and education, in order to determine a way to help people to care more about the environment and recreate the link between humans and nature before it is permanently lost somewhere along the way.

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Zusammenfassung – Abstract

Ziel der vorliegenden Arbeit ist die eingehende Analyse der Verbindung zwischen Ecocriticism und Disney-Animationsfilmen. Als strukturelle Grundlage dient hierbei zunächst eine Übersicht über die historische Entwicklung sowie das von Ecocriticism betroffene Wirkungsfeld. Weiters werden die genretypischen Kriterien der Kategorie Familienfilm beschrieben. Familienfilme sollen möglichst viele unterschiedliche Demografien und Altersgruppen ansprechen und konzentrieren sich daher oft auf emotionale Geschichten, die für alle potenziellen Zuschauer verständlich sind. Die theoretische Einleitung wird von einem kurzen Einblick in die Vergangenheit der Disney-Company als Produzent von Familienfilmen abgerundet.

In den nachfolgenden drei Kapiteln wird jeweils ein Disney- oder Disney/Pixar-Film im Kontext eines passenden ökokritischen Konzepts analysiert. *Finding Nemo* dient als Beispiel für den Einsatz von Anthropomorphismus, um Empathie mit tierischen Charakteren zu wecken. Außerdem legt die wachsende Menge akademischer Recherche zu Clownfischen nahe, dass Filme über bestimmte Tiere sowohl wissenschaftliches als auch das Interesse der Allgemeinbevölkerung steigern kann. *Moana* fokussiert sich auf die Personifizierung der Natur in Form von Te Fiti und Te Kā, welche eingesetzt wird, um zu zeigen, dass Verbrechen an der Natur Konsequenzen haben. Maui fungiert im Film als Avatar des rücksichtslosen Fortschritts, während Moana ein Vorbild für junge Umweltaktivisten ist, indem sie sich gegen die etablierten Machtstrukturen stellt und der Natur auf eigene Faust hilft. *Wall-E*, der dritte analysierte Film, präsentiert eine postapokalyptische Welt, in der die Menschheit die Natur ausgerottet und sich von der Erde losgesagt hat. Das Kapitel unterstreicht die durch den Film geübte Kritik an Konsumdenken, Kapitalismus und Wegwerfkultur, zeigt aber auch jene Stellen auf, wo sich die Erzählung dem Genre Familienfilm beugen muss, um altersgerecht zu bleiben.

Zusammenfassend argumentiert die Arbeit, dass Familienfilme mit umweltpolitischen Inhalten zwar keine aktiven Schritte vorschlagen, um der Natur zu helfen, sie aber dennoch ökokritische Gesinnungen motivieren können. Dies wird durch die Darstellung von Tieren und Umwelt als Lebewesen mit über die menschlichen Bedürfnisse hinausgehendem intrinsischem Wert erreicht.