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4-1-2017

Unless Someone Like You Cares a Whole Awful Lot: Apocalypse as Children's Entertainment

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Accepted version. *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 2017): 81-104. DOI. © 2016 Liverpool University Press. Used with permission.

ABSTRACT: This article explores an unusual subset of children’s narrative, the apocalyptic environmentalist text, and argues that such texts perform the perverse ideological work of shifting blame for ecological crisis from its perpetrators (the parents’ generation) to its victims (the child who is now called upon to act). These texts transform the drama of innocence and experience that is paradigmatic of children’s narrative by destroying the child’s innocence through their very transmission, by informing them of a dire crisis they then become obliged to repair. The article’s primary examples are *Captain Planet*, *The Lorax*, *WALL-E* and *The Butter Battle Book*, only the last of which finds a way to clearly articulate crisis without also shifting blame.

PUBLISHED VERSION: “Unless Someone Like You Cares a Whole Awful Lot: Apocalypse as Children’s Entertainment.” *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Liverpool University Press, Vol. 10, No. 1, (Spring 2017), pp. 81-104.

**Unless Someone Like You Cares a Whole Awful Lot:
Apocalypse as Children’s Entertainment**

‘Everything dies someday. Better to die thinking that you’re going to miss a golden age, than to go out thinking that you had taken down your children’s chances with you. That you’d left your descendants with all kinds of toxic long-term debts. Now that would be depressing. As it is, we only have to feel bad for ourselves’.

– Kim Stanley Robinson, *Blue Mars*

If I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would plant a tree today.

– attributed to Martin Luther

Narratives intended for and about children typically possess a melancholic, even tragic register: the plot events that show the child’s crossings of various difficult thresholds and triumphs over adversity double as allegorical retellings of the one-way transition from innocence to experience, from childhood to adulthood. Even the happy endings for which such narratives are notorious typically culminate in a final point-of-no-return separation from the magical world that has previously been the locus of excitement and pleasure in the text, and from the parents or parental surrogates who inhabit and protect it, into a disenchanting world of responsibility, self-reliance and independence (and, usually alongside that, implicit or explicit entry into the world of heterosexual romance and eventual parenthood). Thus, Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (Clements and Musker US 1989) is permanently turned into a human and married to Prince Eric, leaving her father and the undersea world of magic behind forever; Mowgli in *The Jungle Book* (Reitherman US 1967) turns his back on Bagheera and Baloo to carry the unnamed girl’s baskets of water into the Man Village; Wendy of *Peter Pan* (Geronimi, Jackson and Luske US 1953) leaves behind the enchanted permanent childhood of Neverland and returns to a home that has already banned her from the nursery; Simba in *The Lion King* (Allers and Minkoff US 1994) returns from the lazy haze of life with Timon and Pumba in the Outlands to defeat his villainous uncle and assume his destined role as King of the Jungle, with Nala by his side as Queen; and on

and on.¹ As David Forgacs notes in his study of the Disney animated film as culture industry – a subset of the larger archive of children’s animated film that is paradigmatic of the tendencies that permeate the genre – this tragedy of separation is perhaps only loosely intuited by the child viewer but is utterly inescapable for the adult viewer (prototypically the child viewer’s parent or guardian, at least theoretically watching the film alongside them):

Each of these stories ends with the child, male or female, reaching a point of maturation and/or separation from parent and buddies, usually – though not always – by pairing with a young adult of the other sex. The danger which opens up in the middle of the story in the form of an actual or threatened separation from the natural parent is neutralized at the end. In stories which end with the passage of the hero or heroine from the world of childhood to that of adulthood, the trauma of the separation from the parent and/or buddies is softened by the fact that the parents/buddies accept and consent to it as part of growing up. For ultimately these are films not about childhood but about its loss. When adults and children watch them together, the films set deep mutual separation anxieties to work and yet offer a reassuring set of resolutions in fantasy of the pain of separation. (374)

While narratives that intertwine disenchantment, separation and loss with maturity, independence and power constitute the generic core of children’s film generally, in this article I take up a particular subset of children’s narratives that navigates these categories in a significantly different way: the *apocalyptic* children’s narrative. Such texts are marketed to children and parents not simply as entertainment – and, often, not at all as entertainment – but rather as a sort of proto-political instruction, even (to just admit it) propaganda. The structure of feeling produced by apocalyptic children’s narrative is thus significantly different from the catharsis produced in the hero’s-journey or fairy-tale child’s story. Apocalyptic children’s narratives destabilise the constitutional tension that usually structures children’s narrative between the loss of security and the gain of power through an intensification of negativity at both poles: they postulate a nightmare future for the child in which the loss is (1) not prospective but already fully realised; (2) totalised, eclipsing the ‘fantasy bribe’ (Berlant 7) or ‘Ponzi scheme’ (Edelman 4) of reproductive futurism and the promise of renewal; and (3) unbalanced by any sort of compensatory gain. The haunting UNLESS that marks the end of Dr Seuss’s *The Lorax* (US 1972) makes an impassioned demand upon its imagined child reader to (somehow) act to undo a future that is *already* ruined, at the same moment that the grammatical mood of the utterance subtly shifts from the realm of subjunctive possibility to a more starkly declarative final doom: ‘Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not’. We move, that is, from possibility (‘unless’) to finality (‘it’s not’).

¹ It is worth noting here that in the later direct-to-video sequels to such stories (*The Little Mermaid 2*, *The Jungle Book 2*, *Return to Neverland*, etc.) a compromise is typically reached in which either the original child or *their* child is able to exist in both the disenchanted world and the magical world simultaneously. I would suggest, following Cecire’s observations about the uneven distribution of innocence, that the return to innocence found in these quasi-canonical sequels may reflect an anticipated audience that is generally whiter and richer than the mainstream mass audience of the theatrical releases, and thereby coded ideologically as ‘more innocent’ – more ‘deserving’ of the privilege of prolonged innocence – than the generic child. It also likely suggests the extent to which Disney has found that the now-adult members of ‘Generation Disney’ have abiding nostalgia for these fantasies that can now, itself, be monetised.

What are we to make of this wide-ranging cultural phenomenon that perversely locates some of our most unflinchingly pessimistic imaginings of the future in material that is designed to be sold to young children, and then demands that these children themselves take up the call to prevent the bad future from coming to pass? Could this be a genuine attempt to mobilise the least advantaged, least powerful demographic as a force for resistance (and could a worse strategy for political organising be imaginable)? Is the idea that they will (somehow) move their *parents* to action, or perhaps even that their parents will be shamed by mere contact with such texts? Is this – thinking somewhat more darkly now – a quiet attempt to *reconcile* children to the unhappy necrofuture than seems, from the guilty perspective of adults, to be increasingly inevitable? Or even, perhaps, an attempt to psychically *stave off* adult recognition of this disaster by translating it to a fundamentally ‘unserious’ medium like children’s lit and comic books – thereby stripping themselves of guilt, rendering *the parents* ‘innocent’?

As Natalia Cecire has argued in her extended reading of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (Zeitlin US 2012), strategies of environmental(ist) representation are highly reliant on *innocence* ‘as a temporal structure as a form of absence ... causing [them] to make special claims on the figure of the child’. The time of innocence (‘nonculpable earliness or having-time’), Cecire goes on to note, is ‘countered’ in the texts by the temporality of *urgency* (‘in reality, we’re out of time’), making such texts a dialectic between ‘anticipation (not-yet) and foreclosure (already-over)’ (164). This is a particularly troubling feature of such texts, to say the least; they position children as paradoxically the agents ‘responsible’ for preventing their own disastrous future from coming to pass. Indeed, the innocence of the child is precisely what these films must *dismantle* in order to turn the child into an agent ostensibly capable of preventing the necrofuture that is already in motion. The drama of threshold and transformation into adult is thus enacted in a rather different mode than in the typical Disney-style growing-up fable; it is the very process of education *implicit in hearing the apocalyptic narrative itself* that shatters the child’s innocence, and thereby hails them instead (and immediately) as the responsible adult who is now called upon to act.

In their introduction to *Wild Things: Children’s Culture and Ecocriticism*, Sidney I. Dobrin and Kenneth B. Kidd unpack the notion of children’s innocence in a manner similar to Cecire, noting the way that innocence first connotes a sort of virtue (a Rosseauian ‘original virtue’, a ‘proximity to nature and consequent purity’) while at the same time also suggesting unformedness or unfinishedness: the child is ‘assumed to be devoid of content ... [with] no necessary connection to nature, no experience or understanding of it, so it’s our [read: grownups’] task to educate young people into nature appreciation and analysis’ (6). A third potential suggestion of innocence soon emerges: the child as *unwilling* pedagogical subject, who must be seduced into learning through ‘another dialectic endemic to children’s culture’: ‘instruction and entertainment’ (8). Thus (or so the argument goes) children ‘naturally’ love nature, and will naturally work to preserve it on behalf of the(ir own) future, but only if we tell them they have to, and even then only if we trick them into it.

In apocalyptic texts aimed at young children ranging across the 20th and 21st centuries – from Dr Seuss’s *The Lorax* (book 1971, US television 1972) and *The Butter Battle Book* (book 1984, US television 1989) to *Captain Planet and the Planeteers* (US 1990–2, 1993–6) to Pixar’s *WALL-E* (US 2008) to *The Lorax* again (Renauld and Balda US/France 2012), *Home* (Johnson US 2015), even Disney’s revisionist fairy-tale *Frozen* (Buck and Lee US 2013) – and a host of others besides – we therefore find children hailed simultaneously and paradoxically as the consumers of impending catastrophe *and* as the potential political force that must be called on to

prevent the disaster. The ‘you’ of *The Lorax* who must ‘care a whole awful lot’ is surely not, from any rational perspective, the actual child reader of the book or the child viewer of the film, who controls almost no aspect of her own surroundings, much less exerts any kind of society-wide political influence. Likewise, the incessant refrain of the animated *Captain Planet* series that ‘The power is yours!’ is on some level completely ridiculous; the child watcher of *Captain Planet* in the 1990s had essentially no power in this situation whatsoever (and, indeed, continues to have very little power today as a grown-up citizen-adult!). To the extent that these narratives are imagined to be activist texts intended to make some difference in the world, then, it seems clear that their aim has gone badly, badly awry. But on the level of ideological dream-work perhaps the texts are successful after all, insofar as they are able to eliminate (under the banner of ‘emergency’) the radical *innocence* of the very young (even the unborn) that makes the adult mismanagement of the environment such a horrific crime against the future. The translation of ecological catastrophe into children’s entertainment becomes, from this jaundiced perspective, a bizarrely prospective, highly cynical and brutally effective exercise in victim-blaming; the children who will actually inherit the ruined future that has been created by earlier generations are pre-emptively recast, absurdly, as the ones who somehow *should* have stopped the disaster from ever occurring in the first place. ‘Telling children to save the planet seemed utterly contradictory’, writes Donna Lee King, ‘yet everywhere I looked, the message was going to kids that their job is solve environmental crisis’ (2, qtd. in Dauer 261).²

I should be clear that I do not call here for some general return to an older sort of children’s story in which the child’s role is to simply stand by and wait for adult intervention in a crisis they are unable to fix themselves. The need for narratives that empower children to understand themselves as potential actors with agency and responsibility is clear. At the same time, a privileging of children’s agency that would lead us to conclude that children have agency or power that is commensurate with adults’ – or, indeed, an agency that could meaningfully intervene in a timely manner against the grinding but intensifying slow violence of the ecological crisis – seems deeply mistaken, to say the least. This is true at least partially because (unlike some of the other familiar narrative situations that populate children’s literature) the ecological crisis is emphatically not a metaphor. We can, perhaps, be confident that Voldemort will not return again, allowing us to revel in the ways Harry and Hermione gather allies and abilities to themselves in the name of their self-actualization – but the planet *really is* in crisis. All indications are that the future will be marked by disruption, devastation and widespread suffering caused by the acceleration of dire ecological crises that adults in the present recognize but refuse to respond to. What is good in children’s literature generally thus takes on a much more sinister charge in the context of necrofuturological speculation; the metaphorisation of the transition from innocence to experience that ordinarily structures children’s literature and provides it with its bittersweet and child-empowering pleasures breaks down in the face of ongoing and imminent ecological crises that will disrupt and endanger their actual adult lives.

In this regard I am approaching apocalyptic children’s literature with something of the same dialectical Janus-face with which Jack Zipes regards its cousin genres, folk tales and fairy tales, in his *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*. On the one

² For the purposes of this discussion I should note that I will not draw here the firm distinctions between material directed at very young children (Seuss), school-age children (*WALL-E*) or older children approaching or entering middle school (*Captain Planet*) that one might in another context. Instead, I call attention to the fact that the same ideological work of blame-shifting is being accomplished across all the texts regardless of the age of the child to which it is addressed.

hand, Zipes finds, such texts suggest the ‘utopian projections’ (8) of the folks who promulgate them, a subversive power that makes fairy tales dangerous and even potentially ‘harmful for children’ insofar as they ‘suggest ways to rebel against authoritarian and patriarchal rule in the family’ (16). On the other hand, fairy tales are also unhappy examples of the ‘instrumentalization of fantasy’, ‘used ultimately to impose *limitations* of the imagination on [both] the producers and the receivers’ of such texts (17). Children’s literature, that is to say, teaches children how to dream about the world and about themselves, both in the sense of making dreams possible and in the sense of delimiting what is actually dreamable at all. In a more typical children’s text, the interplay between these two tendencies can disrupt the otherwise limited horizon of the narrative’s didacticism, as well as dialectically produce unexpectedly utopian lines of flight away from the reality principle of the liberal status quo. But the urgency associated with ecological crisis often renders the eco-apocalyptic text much more morally rigid and inflexible, leaving the story with only one ‘correct’ interpretation.

I make here a general claim about the ethico-political orientation of eco-apocalyptic children’s entertainment, which I will develop through case studies selected from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. 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.

‘The power is yours’: *Captain Planet*

The ‘Two Futures’ time-travel episode of the 1990s children’s series *Captain Planet* will serve as an introductory consideration of this ideological formation (before I turn to the two Dr Seuss texts that will constitute my primary examples). In *Captain Planet* five ‘special young people’, each originating from a different continent, have been selected by Gaia (‘the spirit of the Earth’, voiced by Whoopi Goldberg) and each given a magical ring embodying one of the four traditional elements (earth, fire, wind, water) as well as a fifth element (heart). The teenagers are able to combat a large number of environmental problems and eco-villains using their rings, but when a problem is sufficiently dire they combine forces and summon Captain Planet (David Coburn), who (‘by your powers combined’) arrives as ecological consciousness personified in Superman-like form. Captain Planet’s highly derivative and formulaic superhero nature is in fact, as Susan Jaye Dauer has argued, part and parcel of its project of education, deploying ‘ecological fantasy to teach children about their responsibilities to the world, staking its claim to the didactic and giving its violence a moral purpose’ (255). The show was deliberately crafted and promoted with this activist agenda – and although the series is perhaps little-remembered today outside the late-Generation-X demographic cohort to which it was addressed,³ it still continues that work today in the form of the Captain Planet Foundation, founded by co-creator and producer Barbara Pyle with proceeds from the series. ‘Our children can inherit a legacy of wastefulness’, prophesies co-creator Ted Turner in the short quote emblazoned at the top of the ‘Our History’ web page of the CPF, ‘or an action plan that can save our planet. That is why we created *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*’.

The character with the ‘fire’ ring is the American: the fiery, red-headed, unpredictable Wheeler (Joey Dedio), who also serves as the point-of-view character and audience surrogate.

³ As this article went to press, it was announced that Leonardo DiCaprio’s production company was pursuing the rights to bring *Captain Planet* back as a film franchise.

Hot-headed, brash and arrogant, the seventeen-year-old Wheeler has the worst relationship with being a Planeteer of any of the five; he frequently resents the work, characteristically complaining about the difficulty of their task and usually advocating poorly thought-out shortcuts all but certain to backfire. In ‘Two Futures’ (18 May and 25 May 1991), the last episode on the season one DVDs and seemingly intended as the first season finale,⁴ Wheeler quits the Planeteers altogether, not just prospectively but *retroactively*: making use of a time machine built by one of the eco-villains, he travels back to the moment of his own recruitment and tells himself not to take the deal. (‘Someone else will pick up the slack’, he quips.) The result is, of course, disaster: without a fifth member to complete the Planeteers and allow them to summon Captain Planet, the group disbands altogether, leaving most of their good work uncompleted. Most crucially, without Wheeler there is no one to stop the eco-villains from successfully making use of their own time machine, as they enact a somewhat incoherent, Lex-Luthor-style scheme of going back to the 1950s (‘before anyone was paying attention to the environment’) and radically accelerating climate change so as to increase the value of currently ice-locked real-estate holdings they own in the Arctic Circle. When Wheeler, now freed from the responsibility of saving the world, uses the time machine to travel 35 years further into his own future (to that distant, far-off world of 2025) expecting to see ‘all the progress, the new inventions’, he instead discovers New York underwater and his aged Planeteer comrades embittered and hopeless, locked into pointless, tiny skirmishes at the margins of a now-ruined world. Naturally, having learned his lesson, Wheeler then goes back in time and prevents himself from interfering with his own history, thus restoring the status quo. The eco-villains wind up exiled to a now-ecotopian twenty-first century, forced to live as exhibits in ‘the museum of ancient pollution’ in a world that has eliminated not only pollution and waste but poverty and war as well. In this better future, the eco-villains are a historical curiosity. ‘Incredible!’ exclaims a next-generation Planeteer, a young girl from India, standing next to older versions of our beloved Planeteers. ‘How could such stupid, selfish people ever have had any influence?’

INSERT FIGURE ONE AROUND HERE

Captain Planet operates on a familiar dialectic between individuality and collectivity in which the power of the individual is combined (or ‘magnified’, as the ear-worm opening theme suggests) when working together (allegorically in the form of Captain Planet; more concretely in the periodic references to a ‘Planeteer movement’). But as the interior logic of the ‘Two Futures’ episode suggests, this threatens to collapse again into purely atomic individualism: once Captain Planet is summoned, the Planeteers are suddenly powerless again, and it is the (super)heroic individual alone who counts. The educational ‘tips’ that provide moral instruction at the end of the episode are likewise always about improving the minute, hyperlocal choics of individual consumers as somehow an adequate response to the immense scale of global ecological crisis, rather than advancing any sort of collective intervention against the structures of capitalism. A version of this same hyper-individualistic sense of personal responsibility can be found in the villains in the series as well: they pollute the world not because of the political-economic world-order from which they originate but because they are deranged psychopaths⁵ – because they are cancerous *deviations* from an otherwise beneficent communal order, that is, rather than because

⁴ A different episode, ‘Heat Wave’ (1 June 1991), actually aired as the original season one finale.

⁵ In addition to their superior resources and weapons, the *Captain Planet* villains also possess ‘the strange advantage of a lack of empathy’, as Dauer puts it (263).

they embody and participate in the capitalist social order's catastrophically destructive institutions. In this sense the villains are always also figures for the supposed power of a single individual to actually change the world – indeed with more effectivity and independence than the individual Planetegers can ever muster by themselves. The lyrics to the theme song that opens each episode (and which I can still recite word-for-word, over 25 years later) nicely foreground this incoherent messaging: after an opening paean to Captain Planet ('he's our hero, gonna take pollution down to zero'), a children's chorus of Planetegers announces 'we're the Planetegers / you can be one too / 'cause saving our planet is the thing to do' – but in the lyrics, the opposite of being a Planeteger is only 'looting and polluting', exceptional crimes committed by madmen, rather than the more general and inescapable complicity with capitalism that actually drives real-world ecological devastation. *Captain Planet*, despite its supposedly 'good' politics, should nevertheless be understood as an archetypally ideological text in the sense Robin Wood gives in his checklist of the typical ideological precepts of Hollywood-style film production, presenting the ecological crisis as fundamentally 'solvable within the existing system (which may need a bit of reform here and there but no *radical* change)' (80).

Captain Planet hereby gives us utopia and anti-utopia tangled together in a single text: a utopian vision of a better world that at the same time suggests better consumer choices on the level of the individual as the only existing option for change, which hails not adults but *its own young adult audience* as the relevant actor whose participation in ecological politics is both morally obligatory and minimally disruptive to the existing circulation of capital. And even that meagre call to action is plainly self-undermining: there is a sense in which *Captain Planet* presents to us not a utopia but a fantasy of a world where the individual choices of the virtuous are able to save the world because worthy individuals have been equipped by God with magic rings – a feature notably lacking in our own ongoing crises. Each half-hour episode thus ends, true to formula, with a particularly egregious example of what Wood calls 'that most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomena, the happy ending: often a mere "emergency exit" (Sirk's phrase) for the spectator, a barely plausible pretense that the problems the film has raised are now resolved' (80). As with other cartoons of the period (like, for instance, *Voltron* (US 1984–5)), the same sequence of dialogue over the same sequence of images is used episode after episode, ritualistically, as the Planetegers summon Captain Planet and resolve the crisis at the close of the half-hour, training the child-consumer of the series that crises end quickly, permanently, reliably and to their satisfaction, requiring little struggle or sustained, continuing effort. This is true from the pilot, 'A Hero for Earth' (15 Sep 1990), which sees Captain Planet use his powers to clean up a coastline oil spill (and afterwards the Planetegers use their rings to finish the job).⁶ In contrast to that spirit of maximally optimistic narrative closure, we might note that oil from the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* spill continues to contaminate Prince William Sound to this day.

Nor can even the happy magic-ring fantasy sustain itself for very long without falling apart under scrutiny; as with any superhero narrative, practical questions begin to weigh on the audience with prolonged exposure. Why not use the magic rings to generate free renewable energy, or demand the abolition of eco-destructive capitalist institutions, or destroy the corporate bad-doers and their toxic machinery directly Earth-First-style, or take over the world in order to

⁶ The pilot ends, notably, with an explicit demand that the child viewer take personal responsibility for the ecological catastrophes caused by adults. 'It doesn't seem fair!' Wheeler grumbles. 'We didn't make the mess, so why do we have to clean it up? We're not getting paid any money'. 'Because we care', he is admonished by Linka (Kath Soucie), the Planeteger from the U.S.S.R.

save it?⁷ Where indeed are governments and non-governmental actors of the world amid all this mindless, highly public destruction? Why not simply summon Captain Planet immediately, as the first recourse to crisis, or have Captain Planet summoned and ready to act *all* the time? Why not use the rings, or Planet, to solve other sorts of problems too? And why give these rings *to children*, of all people, in the first place? As Dauer notes, this last aspect of the *Captain Planet* fantasy quickly becomes morally obscene upon any sort of extended consideration:

Although qualities such as ‘playfulness, spontaneity, conceptual and behavioral flexibility, unique insight, and energy are more easily accessed and frequently expressed in childhood’, the exploitation of these qualities does not seem to be justified even by the good the teens do. The seemingly ‘child-centered social ethic’ of these cartoons ... may be good, but where is the acknowledgment of ‘children’s very real and different-than-adult needs for nurturance and protection’ (Kurth Schai 200)? Why should children have to sneak onto Blight and Plunder’s ship? Why should Gaia and Captain Planet, in loco parentis, be not only willing to allow these young people to go into danger, but downright emphatic and insistent about it? (263)

This perverse logic of child endangerment can perhaps be most directly seen within the one major exception to Captain Planet’s superhuman powers: his Kryptonite-style vulnerability to toxic waste. When Captain Planet is exposed to toxic waste, as occurs at the climax of ‘A Hero for Earth’, it becomes the children’s task to expose *themselves* to the waste as well to save him, despite having – if anything – increased vulnerability to toxins compared to adults (see Dauer 257 and 262–4). Indeed, as early as the second episode, ‘Rain of Terror’ (22 Sep 1990), the Planeteers encounter an enemy (Verminous Skumm, voiced by Maurice LaMarche) who not only stores toxic waste in ubiquitous unsecured barrels all over his facility (as does nearly everyone in the *Captain Planet* universe) but who deliberately and calculatedly uses it as a weapon directly against the bodies of the teenagers themselves.

INSERT FIGURE 2 AROUND HERE

The ritual that leads to the summoning of Captain Planet always begins with the leader of the Planeteers, Kwaze (LeVar Burton), announcing ‘This situation is more than we can handle’. In this way the series seems to attempt to acknowledge the limits of its logic of fantasy empowerment. But a sceptical viewer would surely counter that *the entire situation of ecological crisis* is more than children can or should be expected to handle – especially when within the logic of a series devoted to environmental activism adults themselves appear licensed to take zero responsibility whatsoever. As the internal logic of ‘Two Futures’ suggests, the Planeteers are beholden – condemned – to serve this ecological mission even if it is dangerous to them and even if they do not want to participate – and indeed in ‘Two Futures’ they become ultimately morally responsible (through the twisted time-travel logic of the episode) even for their own recruitment to the cause; the more-experienced Wheeler ‘chooses’, on behalf of his more innocent younger self, to be a Planeteer after all, thereby retrospectively accepting the unpleasant and dangerous work of saving the future that had previously been foisted on him without his

⁷ The proposition that Captain Planet could use his powers to take over the world and stop eco-destruction that way is, in satirical form, is the premise of the Don Cheadle series of ‘Funny or Die’ *Captain Planet* parodies from 2011.

volition or informed consent (and thereby absolving the adult ‘spirit of the Earth’ who had originally conscripted him as her child-soldier).⁸

‘You’re in charge’: *The Lorax*

A disgruntled and dyspeptic reading of *The Lorax* probably seems at this point inevitable. In the book version of the familiar Seuss fable, still widely used by parents and teachers in a variety of educational contexts (see Henderson), we are presented with a boy who wanders through the ruined, overgrown part of town (reminiscent of those parts of contemporary post-industrial US cities like Cleveland, Detroit, or my own Milwaukee that have been similarly abandoned) where the weed-like ‘Grickle-grass grows’ to ‘the street of the Lifted Lorax’ (n.p.).⁹ This is where the Once-ler lives, who will reveal to those who are willing to pay him ‘fifteen cents and a nail and the shell of a great-great-grandfather snail’ the story of how this once-pristine paradise was laid to waste by voracious capitalism (the Once-Ler’s own corporations). Interestingly, the original 1972 cartoon adaptation omits this early aspect of the tale; the Once-ler (Bob Holt) is already hungry for redemption in the cartoon version, rather than still greedily demanding payment even as the price for his own confession. (The 2012 adaptation, in contrast, restores this element, as part of an ill-considered redemption arc for the Once-ler (Ed Helms) that largely sidelines the Lorax (Danny DeVito) altogether, playing the latter primarily for laughs; while the 1972 version tracks the book very closely, the 2012 adaptation can be said only to be only very loosely inspired at best.)

The Once-ler discovered the valley ‘way back in the days when the grass was still green and the pond was still wet and the clouds were still clean and the songs of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space’. Back then, it was verdant, filled with ‘mile after mile’ of Truffula trees and all sorts of wonderful dancing anthropomorphic fauna. In the book, nostalgia for this lost past is marked by the sudden explosion of colour in the text, as opposed to the dark blue and gray tones that characterizes the ‘old Once-ler’ section; with: in the 1972 cartoon version, this effect is disrupted a bit by the odd early presence of a credits sequence with trumpet music that seems shockingly out of tone with the mood of the larger work (though otherwise the logic of sombreness and vividness matches the mood of the two periods with regard to both colouration and soundtrack). The 2012 adaptation, needless to say, is even more internally incoherent, structuring the entire work as a jaunty musical, even making the post-Lorax, post-catastrophe landscape bright orange, cartoony and fun, framing it in the opening number as a ‘paradise’.

The young Once-ler unloads his cart, cuts down the first tree and generates from its leaves a satirical all-purpose consumer good called a ‘Thneed’ (in which we can hear the echo of Veblen and John Kenneth Galbraith’s distinctions between genuine human needs and the false, manufactured needs of consumer capitalism – this is not a *need* but a *thneed*). Already the Lorax is there, horrified, begging him to stop, but primitive accumulation continues apace. The Once-ler builds a shop, then a factory, then a larger factory, assembling more and more preposterously wasteful science-fictional devices (like ‘his Super-Axe-Hacker which whacked off four Truffula Trees at one smacker’), selling more and more Thneeds and laying more and more waste to the environment of the Truffula valley, until finally the last tree is cut down and the industry collapses. The town that had sprung up on the back of this widespread ecological devastation

⁸ Late in the series we discover in Wheeler’s backstory that he had an alcoholic father and so was forced to be responsible for his own care from a young age, further extending the overall series’s logic of children inappropriately burdened with extreme responsibility.

⁹ Following citations of the book version of *The Lorax* will omit the (n.p.).

quickly withers and dies (again sounding a bit like Cleveland, Detroit and Milwaukee), and the Lorax, finally saying nothing, lifts himself up and flies away ‘through a hole in the smog’ after banishing the animals to seek a safe place to live somewhere else in the world (maybe). He leaves behind a single stone emblazoned only with the word ‘UNLESS’ – telling the child, as the title of this article quotes, that ‘Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not’. The child – whose face is now obscured, to bleed into the child reader of this book – is entrusted with the last Truffula seed and told ‘You’re in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds. And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs. Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care. Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air. Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends may come back’. Neither of the filmic adaptations is quite able to sustain the implied threat (‘*may come back*’) of the book’s ominous ending. After the UNLESS sequence, the 1972 version returns to the incongruous happy theme music over the credits, while in the 2012 version the once-miserly Once-ler, who is now grandfatherly and kindly, sporting a moustache in admiration of the Lorax, has redeemed himself in a madcap adventure against the more-villainous kleptocrat Aloysius O’Hare (Rob Riggle), and is even forgiven by a returning Lorax in the end (‘you done good, beanpole’, the Lorax says, before they embrace).

INSERT FIGURE 3 AROUND HERE

But even the book’s dark-fairy-tale approach to environmental themes, which at least superficially gestures away from pat resolution, is suggestive of the ideological failures of the environmental political movement writ large, which (as the preceding analysis of *Captain Planet* has already demonstrated) has chronically ensnared itself in liberal fantasies about personal enlightenment and consciousness raising, consumer choice, individual virtues and beautiful soulism rather than in fostering genuine mass movement or radical resistance. John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark have identified what they call the ‘enigma of consumption’ as ‘the notion that all economic decisions are driven by the demands of consumers, who then become responsible for the entire direction of the economy’ (Foster and Clark 117) and the consequent mystification of decisions made by other sorts of actors in the economy that accelerate ‘the treadmill of production’ (Foster *Ecology* 44). In fact, Foster and Clark maintain, consumers are fundamentally, hopelessly constrained by choices that have already been made at the level of production by the transnational corporate elite – and any personal consumer ‘choice’ is already determined by a system marked by deterioration, despoliation and waste, a framework against which the individual consumer has essentially no leverage. (You might attempt to recycle, but the ultimate recyclability of your consumer goods is beyond your choice and radically insufficient to the scale of the crisis even in the best of circumstances; choosing not to spend just means the bank will invest your money in some ruinous capitalist endeavour in order to pay you interest; deliberately guiding your investment towards only ecologically friendly products still keeps in you in the circuit of the treadmill of production and the lunatic fantasy of infinite growth on a finite planet anyway, even putting aside the fact that these products and services never turn out to be as environmentally friendly as advertised; going to live in the woods or under a bridge only means you are giving up and abandoning the natural world and all the animals to ecological collapse; and so on.) Moreover, this consumer environmentalist will typically lack even the knowledge necessary to make anything like a truly informed choice in the first place – as all the versions of *The Lorax* marvellously depict through the cultural amnesia

that permeates the unnamed city in which the unnamed narrator lives and pays to hear the Once-ler's tale, a story which no one else knows *despite the fact that it has utterly destroyed every aspect of their environment and ruined all of their lives*. This is perhaps the most interesting feature of the otherwise very poorly constructed 2012 adaptation of *The Lorax* – it plays up this denialism to the hilt through its depiction of the false utopia of consumption in Thneedville, whose citizen-consumers are so deluded they even sing a song praising Aloysius O'Hare, 'the man who found a way to sell air and became a zillionaire'.

The child-directed focus of *The Lorax*, while undoubtedly laudable in the abstract and quite moving on a personal level, becomes in this way the token of a melancholic, always-already-defeated environmental movement less concerned with demanding immediate structural action from elites than with feeling the right feelings as enlightened consumers – *caring*, not *doing*, 'a whole awful lot' about a planet the previous generation has already doomed. The *Lorax* fable short-circuits with its playing out of the disaster as having already happened, while being unable (like *Captain Planet* before it) to conceive of any sort of collective or class politics that might have saved (or might yet save) us, or even to begin to *name* the structures of domination and despoliation which might yet be opposed before the disaster has reached its apex. Instead it has only a single, *anti*-heroic individual, the Once-ler – who rants at the Lorax for his anti-progress attitude and calls him 'Dad', temporally aligning the stubborn, destructive Once-ler with the *child* reader, while the surly and unpleasant Lorax seems to present himself as an old-fashioned parent, if not grandparent¹⁰ – who makes history-defining bad choices when he might have made world-preserving good ones,¹¹ and whose redemptive act (planting a tree) is pathetically inadequate to the scale of the crisis he himself created. Like the list of undisruptive consumer suggestions that concludes Al Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* – recycle; change your lightbulbs; write your congressman; pray – or the list of environmentally friendly advice like 'turn off the water when brushing your teeth' that punctuate *Captain Planet* episodes or my daughter's reruns of *Sesame Street*, *The Lorax's* imaginative horizon delimits possible responses to environmental crisis to a wholly insufficient set of partial and particularized *non*-responses to the crisis that operate solely at the level of individual virtue. Even in fabulistic, allegorical terms, then – putting to one side from the very real and very concrete material crises the narrative evokes – *The Lorax* is unable to articulate any vision of genuine collective action beyond the disconnected and atomistic 'good ethics' of ecophilic consumer-citizens. A text like *The Lorax*, despite its surface-level activist orientation, is not just propagandising to the wrong audience; it is also training them to fight back in the wrong way, or, really, in the end, to not fight back at all.

Ambiguous endings in *WALL-E* and *The Butter Battle Book*

As with the already-discussed ability of children's literature to inspire and empower children, neither the power of children's media to form tight attachments to the environment nor the importance of teaching young people about responsible environmental practices can be denied. Undoubtedly many ecocritical writers and critics, myself included, have been shaped by the 'deeply formative' childhood experiences both directly with nature and with narratives (apocalyptic and otherwise) about nature (Dobrin and Kidd 5). Nonetheless, there is also undoubtedly something about the philosophical-political-pedagogical optimism that structures

¹⁰ 'I'll yell and I'll shout for the fine things on Earth that are on their way out'.

¹¹ As with *Captain Planet*, the internal logic of *The Lorax* suggests that 'one person can change the world', though once again the suggestion is that this sort of maximum effectivity is more at home with villainy than with virtue.

such texts that turns Berlantian and ‘cruel’, sour, over the passage of decades. One need only imagine a time-lapse montage of a young child sitting down to watch *The Lorax* in 1972, then sitting down with her own child to watch *Captain Planet* together in 1990, then sitting down with that child’s child to watch *WALL-E* in 2008, while outside their window their landscape withers in the heat and drought, and an uncontrolled wildfire rages in the distance, and somewhere else a hundred-year storm explodes with thunder, and thousand-year floodwaters gather, and the sea levels rise, and the last Brown Bar-Ba-Loot dies, and... Alas, in our time we have already come to know the answer to the question haunting the Once-ler’s sad UNLESS: *Nothing is going to get better. It’s not.*

‘Where the original folk tale was cultivated by a narrator and the audience to strengthen meaningful social bonds’, Zipes writes, ‘the narrative perspective of the mass-mediated fairy tale has endeavored to endow reality with a total meaning except that the totality sometimes assumes totalitarian shapes and hues because the narrative voice is no longer responsive to an active audience but seeks to manipulate it according to the vested interests of state and private industry’ (20). Thus, ‘the inevitable outcome of most mass-mediated fairy tales is a happy reaffirmation of the system that produces them’ (20-21) – even in the case of apocalyptic ecological narratives like *The Lorax*, which promises renewal at its close through the overawing and ultimately anti-political power inherent in feeling the right feelings and loving the right things, while mourning capitalism’s ongoing cataclysmic murder of the natural world appropriately and within the designated limits.

I have previously written about the ambiguous ending of *WALL-E* as a moment of potential utopian rupture in my introduction to *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction*, focusing there on the estrangement effect inherent in the imagistic, almost surreal closing montage that takes place under the credits. *WALL-E* depicts a childlike robot who has been left behind to clean up a mostly lifeless planet after humanity has abandoned the Earth due to extreme pollution and waste. *WALL-E*’s adventures ultimately bring him to the starship *Axiom*, where obese human survivors live alienated lives interacting only with machines, and over the course of the story reveals to the humans that Earth can be saved and their lives can be brought back into harmony with the circuit of nature again. The imagistic end credits then replicate the history of art from antiquity to impressionism to suggest a history that has started over and is better this time. ‘The paradox inherent in *WALL-E*’s visualization of ecotopia is clear’, I wrote:

It sidesteps the question of how the generally hopeless ecological situation the film depicts (a hyperbolic, super-exaggerated version of the very quagmire we find ourselves in) could ever actually get any better, finding recourse instead in a nostalgia that imagines this better future as a replication of the very path that led us into the disaster in the first place. But at the same time the bizarre cognitive estrangement of the montage – the historical juxtapositions, the anachronistic presence of robots at every stage, the culmination of history in a new permaculture that is shown to take its roots from van Gogh’s famous workboot – prevents this from being the merely nostalgic or bad utopian fantasy of a ‘return to nature’ that it might initially appear to be. (15–6)

But perhaps my longer analysis of children’s apocalyptic fantasy here has curdled even the ostensibly utopian possibility I originally saw in *WALL-E*’s cognitive estrangement; perhaps we might now be inclined to reject even this moment as mere sentimentalism that, in the end, still happily reaffirms the existing system’s capacity for revitalisation, reinvention and reform while offering no path to resist the forces that are even now destroying the environment and no vision of politics beyond pure affect.

Still, as one of the anonymous reviewers of this article reminded me in response to the pessimism above, *WALL-E* does stand apart from some of the other texts I have discussed in its more nuanced depiction of intergenerational responsibility, which sees even the adults on the *Axiom* as themselves the victims of previous generations of selfish adults who knowingly and deliberately betrayed *them*. The adults on the ship, after all, were once just children themselves, like us, like even the Once-Ler and Verminous Skumm; indeed, they largely remain children even as adults, as visually suggested by their sweet and cherubic appearance and as narratively suggested by their lack of accurate knowledge about the now-seven-hundred-years-old history that led the human species into the catastrophe that forced them to abandon the Earth. The climax of *WALL-E* sees the adults on the *Axiom* needing to pass through *their own* demystifying and upsetting transition from innocence to experience, recognizing their society as organized by disinformation and lies before revolting against the autopilot of the ship, a sinister artificial intelligence named AUTO who stands in for the autonomous self-reinforcing and self-protective tendencies of the destructive status quo. Perhaps the film's final union of newly empowered adults, finally seeing their political reality clearly for the first time, with childlike robots, who have reminded them how to love nature and called on them to take action communally in the name of a better future, does retain some worthy ecotopian glimmer after all.

INSERT FIGURE FOUR AROUND HERE

In *The Butter Battle Book*, Seuss takes an even more conflicted and, I believe, more appropriate tack, one that speaks more directly to the power of children's literature to (in Jack Zipes's terms) 'communicate and unify cultural products of fantasy necessary for developing a more humanistic society and for stimulating audiences to play an active role in determining the destiny of their lives' (19). The ending of *The Butter Battle Book* utterly refuses to make any promises, happy or otherwise. The basic framework of the story begins quite similarly to *The Lorax*: on 'the last day of summer, ten hours before fall', an old man (here, a soldier-grandfather rather than a disgraced and exiled robber-baron) brings his grandchild to the Wall separating the Yooks and the Zooks, narrating the story of his life as a soldier on the front line. The Yooks (our side) butter their bread with the butter side up; the Zooks (those rascals) butter their bread with the butter side down. (The cartoon plays the Cold War logic of this tableau up even more than the book, with a Reagan-impersonator in the role of the Yook president and a nationalistic pledge-of-allegiance parody in 'the bread-spreading rule that you learned back in bread-spreading school'.) As a young enlistee, the grandfather, armed with a tickler, patrols the wall to keep Zooks away, until the Zooks develop a slingshot that destroys his tickler. The grandfather comes back with an automated triple slingshot, which causes the Zooks to develop an anti-slingshot weapon, and so on until the Yooks finally invent a fantastic nuclear superweapon ('the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo') that will utterly destroy the other side ('and blast the Zooks clear to Sala-ma-goo'). The cartoon's treatment of this is even more visually striking (and more environmentally activist) than the book's: in a lengthy, nightmarish musical number we see the military-industrial development of the Big-Boy Boomeroo as both ecological and theological horror, as the souls of tortured ghosts are bound to the weapon in an underground laboratory that is dripping with toxic waste.

Now the framing device for the story is itself reframed. It turns out that the flashback has caught up to the present, and *this* is the day the grandfather has brought his grandchild to the wall; the grandchild ought to be hiding in the fallout shelters with the other Yooks, but why not

let him witness history and the final elimination of the hated Zooks and their perverted ways? But of course the Zooks have their own superweapon too, and the film concludes as the two old soldiers stare at each other on the wall, each wondering who will be the first to drop the weapon and kill everyone on the other side.

The Buttler Battle Book links the ecological crisis of nuclearity and nuclear war not to bad morals or to bad feelings but to a necropolitical structure, the state, which has maniacally produced a bulwarked network of paranoid, irresponsible governments, helmed by damaged and dishonest adults, who possess civilization-threatening superweapons pointed in every direction and who are morally perverse enough to actually use them in the name of a distinction that we immediately recognize as hardly worth the end of all life (butter-side-up or butter-side-down, state capitalism or state communism). Only then does the role of the child in *The Butter Battle Book* emerge: not as someone who might potentially intervene against this nightmare, but rather as the reason to *abolish* the nightmare. Under the child's shaming gaze, the grandfather's devotion to this pointless violence weakens.

'Grandpa!' I shouted. 'Be careful! Oh, gee! Who's going to drop it? Will you...? Or will he...?'

'Be patient', said Grandpa, 'We'll see. We will see'.

Here we have children offering up *not* their action but rather their shaming judgments, politicising not some supposed agency that they do not have but rather their very innocence and powerlessness, and their need for protection from the selfish, destructive choices of the very people who are nominally meant to protect them, their parents. And we find the parent-figure *still* unwilling to listen to or to change, even in the face of their child's abject, terrorized suffering.

INSERT FIGURE FIVE AROUND HERE

This time the cartoon adaptation is rather darker than the book original: in the cartoon there is a long, slow zoom-out from the two figures on either side of the wall, followed by a return to a close up of their shaking hands each clutching doomsday devices that are crackling with destructive potentiality. The cartoon then goes to a silent title card that reads 'The End', followed quickly by '(maybe)', followed by military parade music over the credits that can now only be read as utterly horrific, a deeply bitter laugh at the collective madness of national pride.

As Cecire notes, 'the structure of innocence means that there are people who don't know, and there are people who don't *get* to not know, and it is beyond the logic of innocence that agency lies' (178) – and as she rightly argues in the larger piece the uneven distribution (in William Gibson's sense) of innocence and slow violence along the lines of race, class, gender and nationality certainly cannot be ignored. But the ecological crisis is also in some real sense a genuinely universal one, despite its uneven distribution and impacts, both in time and space; as Hans Magnus Enzensberger sourly noted over forty years ago:

If ecology's hypotheses are valid, then capitalist societies have probably thrown away the chance of realizing Marx's project for the reconciliation of man and nature. The productive forces which bourgeois society has unleashed have been caught up with and overtaken by the destructive powers released at the same time. The highly industrialized countries of the west will not be alone in paying the price for the revolution that never

happened. The fight against want is an inheritance they leave to all mankind, even in those areas where mankind survives the catastrophe. (n.p.)

Indeed, it seems likely that the bourgeois society that produces these sorts of eco-apocalyptic stories, and their shared origin in consumer entertainments of the United States, overdetermines their inability to fully confront environmental crisis. It is little wonder that we see the society whose outsized waste has trashed the future producing texts that obscure and displace that guilt. Children, and animals, and the people and animals of the future yet unborn, represent radical innocents from the perspective of ecological politics; they are the collective victims of an incomprehensibly colossal and vicious intergenerational crime, just as inhabitants of the Global South will suffer greatly for the ecological devastation caused by the industrialized metropole without bearing any similar culpability. The most radical intervention of innocents in the fight over the future is precisely in their *lack* of agency or power, in their right to live uninterrupted and unpoisoned lives prior to any question of innocence, guilt, entitlement, agency or moral desert. What *The Butter Battle Book* ultimately seeks to ‘weaponise’ in anti-state environmental struggle is precisely that pointed sense of futurological guilt over the poisoned future that other examples of eco-apocalyptic children’s literature characteristically attempt to offload onto the children themselves, refusing that ideological salve in favour of re-aiming guilt at its only proper target. It is only in stories like *The Butter Battle Book*, I think, that apocalyptic children’s literature can be seen doing genuinely educative, and genuinely subversive, work: first, in returning to the young that properly dangerous fairy-tale notion that adults are often their enemies, not their allies; and secondly, and perhaps more importantly for this urgent moment of interlocking ecological crises, in exposing the cynicism of the generations of adults who sit down and read stories to their children about the madness of doing nothing while the future burns, demonstrating that they are guilty and that their children and grandchildren are watching and will someday stand in judgment.

My thanks to the anonymous reviewers of the original version of this article.

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