Ethics and post-evolution: The role of hyperreal adaptations in shaping popular cultural perceptions of animals

Huw Nolan

University of New England

Contributor details

Huw Nolan is an animal welfare scientist and ethologist with a transdisciplinary approach to anthrozoology. His research focuses on the behavioural physiological indicators of welfare in animals. He has gravitated towards the humanities realizing that watching TV is more enjoyable than analysing cortisol in dog faeces. Much of his research now examines the impact human imagination has on the real-world experiences of animals.

Huw Nolan – Google Scholar

E-mail: hnolan3@une.edu.au

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1712-8855

Jo Coghlan

University of New England

Jo Coghlan is an associate professor of social and philosophical inquiry at University of New England (Australia). Her research interests are in popular culture and material culture with an emphasis on food, royalty, film and television, political representations of women, fashion

studies and death studies. Her recent publications have appeared in the *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, *Media/Culture*, *the International Journal of James Bond Studies*, *Film, Fashion and Consumption* and has upcoming articles in *Clothing Cultures*. Her next book is the *Royals in Popular Culture* (Routledge), due in 2024 with Dr Lisa Hackett and Huw Nolan, and *The Cultural and Social History of the Swimsuit* (Reaktion Book), due out in 2025. Her ongoing research projects are on representations of pigs in popular culture, the social history of food, typologies of the Australian noir genre and researching the lost town of Yallourn in Victoria. Jo, Lisa and Huw are the founding members and lead researchers at UNE's Popular Culture Research Network, Australia's leading research network in popular culture.

Google Scholar profile

E-mail: jo.coghlan@une.edu.au

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6361-6713

Lisa J. Hackett

University of New England

Dr Lisa J. Hackett is a lecturer of sociology and criminology at the University of New England (Australia). Her research examines aviation, fashion, clothing and uniform in popular culture through a sociological and historical lens to expose the ways popular culture objects define identity and social roles. Her Ph.D. examined the ways that Australian women utilize 1950s style to fashion their identities. She is the co-founder (along with Dr Jo Coghlan and Huw Nolan) of PopCRN, the Popular Culture Research Network, which brings together scholars and researchers who share a fascination in the academic inquiry into all manners of mass phenomena. Her current research includes the study of the use of female Second World War pilot's uniforms in

propaganda, the history of air pageants and the British Royal Family in popular culture. She is on the editorial board of America's *Popular Culture Review* (Wiley).

Google Scholar profile

E-mail: lisa.hackett@une.edu.au

Abstract

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon (2012: 31) considers Darwinist claims that some animal stories survive more readily than others (2012: 31). Just as natural selection drives evolution, genetic selection and memetic cultural transmission drive the evolution, mutation and flourishing of adaptations in ever-changing narratives and technological environments. In the telling and retelling of stories, it invites a state of hyperreality, where copies of copies are believed to be real. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality describes a condition wherein the boundaries between reality and its simulated representations become indistinguishable. He states that '[i]t is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard 2020: 1). In a state of hyperreality, adaptations and representations can assume greater significance and authenticity than the actual reality they depict. Consequently, the simulated experiences and images are perceived as more real and authentic than the tangible reality from which they originate (Baudrillard 2020). The hyperreality of film adaptations has been explored through the telling of historical narratives, nation-building and authenticity (see Wallner 2003; Supanz 2011). Modern adaptations of historical events, especially when delivered through a contemporary lens, have the ability to reshape our understanding of the past (Elliott 2003:

177). Art and entertainment permeate our consciousness, moulding our identities. Consequently, we become a reflection of what we engage with, and in a dialectical process, we subsequently reshape the world according to our transformed selves. Thus, entertainment facilitates tangible changes in the real world. These are the key ideas examined in this article.

Keywords: animals, *animals-propre*, nature, hyperreality, ethics, evolution

Introduction: The power of popular culture

Film and television also have the potential to change attitudes and perceptions of nature. Many papers have examined how on-screen media can impact environmental mindsets (Clayton et al. 2017; Echeverri et al. 2018; Crowley et al. 2021). However, the real-world impacts largely rely on on-screen accuracy. In 1958, Disney released *White Wilderness* (dir. Algar). In this alleged nature documentary, lemmings were reported to commit suicide in droves, driven by instinct to cast themselves off a cliff. The truth of the documentary was manufactured, with lemmings herded and pushed off the cliff to create a compelling story (Schuchardt 2019). The myth of the suicidal lemming permeated the cultural consciousness and inspired countless games, stories and nature *facts* propagated through books of non-fiction (see for instance, Goodenough 1986: 87).

In Australia, the majority of adults believe the welfare of animals to be important (Nolan et al. 2022). However, when tested, few had a genuine understanding of fundamental Australian farming practices (Nolan et al. 2022). Understanding animals is essential for improving animal welfare. Scholars work rigorously to uncover how to keep animals healthy and understand their wants (Dawkins 2021). However, myths, misconceptions and societal expectations often clash with scientific literature, as sentimental and rhetorical practices push against the growing body of knowledge (Nolan et al. 2022). As an extreme example, Baudrillard believed, '[s]entimentality is

nothing but the infinitely degraded form of bestiality, the racist commiseration, in which we ridiculously cloak animals to the point of rendering them sentimental themselves' (2020: 130). Therefore, it is necessary to uncover 'what-goes-without-saying' (Barthes 1970: xix) so the *animals-propre* can be observed and nature can reveal itself to us.

This article is an evolutionary investigation of the virtual phylogenetic branch of the hyperreal animal which diverged from *animals-propre* many years ago. The article explores the narrative, memetic, morphological and fossil data to reconstruct the evolutionary relationships and lineages that led to myth-creation. This study aims to understand the adaptive changes, speciation events and ancestral traits that have shaped the current diversity and distribution of hyperreal species. The article traces three narrative speciation events: from animated films to hybrid live-action/CGI to nature documentaries, focusing on the myths of lions, dinosaurs and octopuses. Unlike Barthes, this analysis does not resent the naturalness of forgotten realities or propose a moral stance. To paraphrase Ian Malcolm, we are preoccupied with whether or not it could; we are not prepared to say that it should (Spielberg 1993).

'You are more than what you have become' – Mufasa*, The Lion King* (1994): Animation as a tool for education and myth-creation

Disney's *The Lion King* including the original version (Allers and Minkoff 1994), its 2011 3D re-release, the 2019 CGI version (Favreau), as well as theatrical versions, serve as a profound case study in the mythologization of animals through animation. Disney's portrayal of lions and African culture reveals how popular culture can shape and impact societal perceptions, educational narratives and ideas of nationhood, blurring the boundaries between reality and hyperreality. Films such as this transcend entertainment, embedding animals with complex human characteristics, emotions and social structures and locating this with global

consciousness. They are effective because animations captivate audiences. They are admired for their ability to entertain and educate without apparently posing any inherent harm. However, animations are also a powerful tool to disseminate ideologies and shape perceptions of corporeality and authenticity. Studies indicate that animations are not always neutral; they are often used to convey linguistic, social and political messages, thereby influencing societal beliefs to benefit specific groups, often the dominant hegemonic forces of society (see Dorfman and Mattelart 1971; Valleriani 2020). Historically, hand-drawn animations as well as and puppet shows have played a significant role in this regard (Halimah et al. 2020). Today, computer-generated animations are frequently utilized in educational contexts (Lolang et al. 2023). Educational messages delivered via anthropomorphized animals can increase engagement and education (Geerdts et al. 2016), but there is evidence to suggest that children cannot always distinguish between cartoon worlds and reality (Thompson and Zerbinos 1997).

Animations can subtly (and not so subtly) embed political and social ideologies, presenting complex narratives in an engaging format that is entertaining for children and thought-provoking for adults (Caraway and Caraway 2020). Notable examples are animations where political figures are represented as animals such as Orwell's *Animal Farm* (Halas and Batchelor 1954) or *Watership Down* (Rosen and Hubley 1978). Children might enjoy the characters without recognizing the underlying political commentary, which adults can enjoy, and researchers can analyse for their *Orwellian* themes (see Marstal 2022; Siahaan 2018). The use of lions as the royal species for *The Lion King* is uncontroversial, given their well-known reputation as 'King of the Jungle'. In any imaginary, African-based Zoo monarchy, placing another animal on the throne would prompt questions. Indeed, Mufasa and Simba are not Disney's first lion kings. The 1973 adaptation of *Robin Hood* (Reitherman 1973) presented King Richard I and Prince John as lions. An

unsurprising move, given King Richard I's real-life epithet the *Lionheart* (Bartlett 2018). However, the relationship between lions and kings could stretch back to, or beyond, Mesopotamia (Watanabe 2000). The naturalization of the lion myth seems so self-evident that it warrants investigation, particularly given the absence of the *lion-propre* in the myth. As Justin Cartwright states,

> Of course, the behaviour of lions may be the least interesting thing about them. In the way of symbols, lions are pretty near the top of the tree. But would anyone have followed Richard the Lionheart if they had known how similar lions' behaviour is to that of tomcats.
>
> (quoted in Baker 2001: 62)

The centuries-spanning myth of the lion has prompted its telling and retelling. The story of *The Lion King* has similarly been told, adapted and retold. In 2011, *The Lion King* was re-released in 3D. James Cameron, director of *Avatar* (2009) said of 3D films that '[w]hen you see a scene in 3D, that sense of reality is supercharged. The visual cortex is being cued, at a subliminal but pervasive level, that what is being seen is real' (Cameron cited in Cohen 2008: n.pag.). Despite the technological advancement of 3D cinema often being seen as a gimmick (Sweney 2013: n.pag.), there is some evidence to suggest that the 3D immersion improves engagement and empathy (Sideris 2010).

In 2019, Disney remade *The Lion King* (hereafter *The new Lion King*), adapting the story to be told using advances in CGI (Favreau 2019). *The new Lion King* occupies a unique hyperreality, often being described as part of Disney's suit of 'live action' remakes *sensu* (Saputra et al. 2023; Elmogahzy 2018), despite the absence of any life at all. The tagline on Disney+ for *The new Lion King* is 'Disney's *The Lion King* comes to life in a whole new way' (Disney+ 2024). *The new Lion King* is a state-of-the-art computer-generated world, blurring the boundaries between actuality and cinematic illusion, projected through our screens as third-order simulacra. *The new*

Lion King introduces an updated dimension of hyperrealism through combining cutting-edge CGI with entrenched cultural myths, demonstrating how contemporary technology can enhance discursive storytelling, fostering an immersive environment where audiences can interact with mythologized animals in a manner previously unattainable (Tamari 2024: 63). Scholarship of *The Lion King* films (1994, 2011, 2019) and stage productions has demonstrated hyperreal elements of the productions. For instance, Wickstrom (1999) argues that the stage production of *The Lion King* exemplifies the integration of theatrical performance with market strategies, which features simulated, globalized imagery that amalgamates various cultural elements. Theatrical representations are Afrophilic rather than authentic African representations and are then translated into a commercial product (Wickstrom 1999). When asked about the predominantly Black cast of *The new Lion King*, director Jon Favreau said:

> I looked at what changed from the original production to the stage show and they brought more authenticity and reality to the music, to the art direction, to the casting and I think we live in a small world now where people demand authenticity.
>
> (Francis 2019: n.pag.)

By building on the simulated African elements, Disney and Favreau construct a hyperreality that impacts perceptions in the real world. Bruner (2001) notes that the expected experience of tourists in African countries has been profoundly influenced by *The Lion King* and the Disney-constructed image of African culture. The imaginary, hyperreal Africa has been demonstrated to impact young students' perceptions, largely via animal-based cartoons (DeMulder 2008: 37).

The music similarly reinforces a hyperreal Africa particular at the beginning of the cinematic versions starting with a dawn chorus of animals, followed by the iconic Zulu 'Nants ingonyama bagithi Baba, Sithi uhm ingonyama'. The meaning of which, to most viewers, is little more than situating the story in an exotic land. Dorfman and Mattleart's early 1970s work on

Disney argues that similar uses of language, music, costume and the exotic are evident in their animations since inception and act to juxtapose the savageness of the exotic from the natural of the English-speaking west and its capitalist patriarchy (Dorfman and Mattlart 1971). Yet, aurally, the difference is quite specific, the 2019 version is sung by South Africans Brown Lindiwe Mkhise and Lebo M, replacing American Carmen Twillie and Lebo M's 1994 version (for the broader discussion, see Jordan 2015). Despite being very similar from a storyboard perspective, the opening sequence of *The new Lion King* is rendered with a hitherto unimaginable fidelity. It is likely that the awe-inspiring technological achievement intensified the narrative's emotion and drama as many audience members revisited the updated Pride Lands. However, the fantasy did not last long for many viewers. As Scherker notes, '[a]nd then they start talking. When the animals attempt to act like humans, something just feels […] off' (2019: n.pag.).

Visually *The Lion King* films reasonably highlight the biodiversity and tranquillity of the Pride Lands. Disney's adaptation of their cartoon to a visually realistic film highlights a key aspect of their storytelling approach: the importance lies not in the realistic depiction of the animals themselves, but in the human-like characteristics and emotions superimposed onto them. This is evident in Disney's use of supernormal stimuli and neotonized biomorphs – infantilized faces, large eyes, and cute features – which make the characters more relatable and endearing to audiences, particularly the young (Lawrence 1986; Gould 2008; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Schmidt 2019). In doing so, the focus shifts from the animals' true nature to the human traits they represent, reinforcing the idea that the *animals-propre* are not important. Evidence of this can be seen in the transfigured house staff in *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale and Wise 1991) as personalities and character are given to everyday household objects. Disney's subsidiary, Pixar, is famous for animating everything from living beings, humans (such as *The Incredibles* [Bird 2004]

and *Up* [Docter 2009]), animals (such as *Ratatouille* [Bird 2007] and *Finding Nemo* [Stanton 2003]) and monsters (such as *Monsters Inc.* [Docter 2001] and *Luca* [Casarosa 2021]) to objects such as toys as in *Toy Story* (Lasseter 1995), *Cars* (Lasseter 2006) and robots like *Wall-E* (Stanton 2008). Disney's ability to animate anything shortens the bidirectional distance between them. Just as objects become biomorphs, so too does the biological become objects.

The success of Disney's biomorphs is likely the result of an ongoing evolution-like feedback loop between animators and audiences (Ventrella 1995). The evolutionary leap into aesthetic realism abandons the stylized hand-drawn or physical aesthetic of its predecessors for a photorealistic portrayal that closely mimics the passable appearance of real animals. Although, this heightened realism might not captivate viewers in the same manner, it can amplify the mythological narrative, as the lifelike representations of animals compete with anthropomorphic expressions and behaviours. There is evidence to suggest that cartoon-like animals are better than realistic animals at engaging children and contributing to learning (Geerdts et al. 2016). By conflating real animals into visually and behavioural fantastical spaces, the effect is to shape and consolidate audience's perceptions of a hyperreality. Audiences could mistakenly consider the world of *The new Lion King* as real. In both its original and modern incarnations, *The Lion King* serves to create and weave animals into the fabric of mythologies, tropes and human-derived stereotypes. Whether animated by traditional means, puppetry or CGI, Disney has created a hyperreality from which we draw upon socially constructed animal myths, with Disney largely responsible for the myths in the first place. It remains to be seen if the realism of Disney remakes has an evolutionary advantage, or, like 3D movies, it is a techno-fad, which will prove to be maladaptive in its evolution.

'You didn't ask for reality, you asked for more teeth' – Wu, *Jurassic World* (2015): Live-action/CGI hybrid films

The 2019 version of *The Lion King* is sometimes mischaracterized as *live action*. However, films that do combine CGI with actual live action further blur the line between the real and the hyperreal. The *Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic World* franchises are quintessential examples of using live action and CGI to create a hyperreality in which animals can take on mythologies. The original *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993) revolutionized filmmaking with its groundbreaking use of CGI to bring dinosaurs to life (Das 2023). By combining practical effects with digital technology, the film presented dinosaurs with unprecedented realism, allowing audiences to see these extinct creatures as they might have appeared millions of years ago. The wonder felt by on-screen characters was mirrored by the viewers as they witnessed the cinematic marvel (Fuchs 2016). However, rather than representing dinosaurs as they might have appeared, *Jurassic Park* represented dinosaurs as audiences could believe they might have appeared. The biological inaccuracies present in the *Jurassic* franchise have been well documented (see Hu 2022). Yet, even in the original novel, an accurate re-creation of dinosaurs was not the chief scientist's, Henry Wu, goal. In the book, Dr Wu says to Hammond while discussing replacing the dinosaur stock:

> 'Hammond, "…What's wrong with them?" 'Nothing', Wu said, "except that they're real dinosaurs
> […] The dinosaurs we have now are real […] but in certain ways they are unsatisfactory.
> Unconvincing. I could make them better. […] For one thing, they move to fast […]. People aren't
> accustomed to seeing large animals that are so quick. I'm afraid visitors will think the dinosaurs
> look sped up, like film running too fast"'.

> (Crichton 1991: 141)

Wu later acknowledges that these dinosaurs are merely reconstructions of past versions. Genetically engineered dinosaurs can be modified to be better, to meet the expectations of their

intended audience, producing the dinosaur the audience wants to see. The meta-cinematic effect is realized in the franchise's decision to create new, monstrous, hybrid dinosaurs like the *Indominous rex* and the *Indoraptor.*

Despite the assertion that they are 'real dinosaurs' all Jurassic Park dinosaurs are in fact Frankenstein-esque hyperreal versions, constructed from stitching layers of different species' DNA sequences together. So, we can see the convoluted creation of Baudrillard's orders of simulacra. Beginning in the real world, with the existence of a *dinosaur-propre*. Crichton's source novel is one of the fictional theme park visitors and their expectations of both real and fictional dinosaurs. Director Steven Spielberg adapts the fictional dinosaurs using *dinosaurs-propre* as inspiration. As a result, the audience may form hyperreal understandings of dinosaurs via an image created upon copies of copies. As the films progress, and technology advances, the relative realism of the CGI dinosaurs increases too. The CGI enables the depiction of intricate details, such as skin texture, movement and supposed behaviour, which creates a seamless blend of the real and the imagined.

The *Jurassic World* series created even more sophisticated CGI dinosaurs that interacted convincingly with human actors and actual environments. These films utilized motion capture and advanced animation to enhance the lifelike quality of the dinosaurs, making their movements appear fluid and natural. The hyperreal depiction immerses audiences, making the fantastical premise of dinosaurs living in the modern world feel plausible and engaging. Crichton's original writing incorporates plausible scientific realism, achieved by adopting long stretches of popular dinosaur jargon and real-world science to sell his fantasy. In 2005, Schweitzer et al. reported finding preserved soft tissue of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*; the report led cloning speculations with

reference to *Jurassic Park*, positing the influence of the franchise and its hyperreal simulacra (Stokstad 2005).

'I don't control the Raptors. It's a relationship. It's based on mutual respect' – Grady, *Jurassic World* (2015): Mythical narratives surrounding animals in the film

The *Jurassic Park* and *Jurassic World* films are steeped in mythical narratives that explore humanity's fascination with, and fear of, nature's power. The central myth revolves around the hubristic idea of humans playing God, mastering nature and translating it into a commodity. These themes are embodied in the character of John Hammond, whose dream of creating a dinosaur theme park becomes a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition. Dinosaurs in these films are more than just prehistoric creatures; they are symbols of natural wonder and primordial power. The *Tyrannosaurus rex* and *Velociraptor* are mythologized as both terrifying predators and majestic heroes, representing the awe and terror that nature can inspire. But they also represent humanity's dominance over nature both physically and morally.

Jurassic Park's dinosaurs, while modelled on *dinosaurs-propre*, were adapted to have their own species-specific characteristics. Across the six films, the *Tyrannosaurus* was transformed from a senseless, instinctual killer, to a saviour figure. At the end of *Jurassic Park* the *Tyrannosaurus* bursts into the frame as a *dinos-ex-machina* to save our protagonists. The *Jurassic Park* sequel, *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1997), turned the dinosaur from a predator to a concerned parent. The *Tyrannosauruses* of the *Lost World* only pose a threat to humans because they are protecting their child. In *Jurassic Park III* (Johnston 2001), a *Tyrannosaurus* is

killed by a *Spinosaurus* cementing the *Spinosaurus* as the apex predator. Killing a *Tyrannosaurus* reduces the *Tyrannosaurus* species from once apex predator to prey. The reduction of *Tyrannosaurus* has the simultaneous effects; humans and *Tyrannosauruses* are subjugated under a unifying power structure, while at the same time, elevating humans to the level of *Tyrannosaurus*, terrifying predators and majestic heroes. After *Lost World*, a *Tyrannosaurus* only ever kills one more human Eli Mills (Rafe Spall), the main villain of *Fallen Kingdom*, delivering the moral justice demanded by spectators. In *Jurassic World*, Clare (Bryce Dallas Howard) uses the *Tyrannosaurus* to fight the *Indominus rex* and in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (Bayona 2018) it is used for saving a main character from a *Carnotaurus* attack.

In *Jurassic World Dominion* (Trevorrow 2022), the *Tyrannosaurus* is once again reduced to a secondary, mesopredator by the inclusion of the *Giganotosaurus*, and once again, returning to, fight for, and save the human protagonists. There is a moral evolution from the first to the sixth movie. At the end of the first movie, the attack on the *Velociraptors* is a coincidence, a distraction that allows the humans to escape. By *Jurassic World* trilogy, it is an expectation that the *Tyrannosaurus* will aid the humans. The *Velociraptors* follow similar trajectory; in *Jurassic World*, the once highly intelligent predators have, in a philosophical sense, been domesticated. In the novel, Dr Grant believes there is something wonderful about the way kids look at dinosaurs. Grant believes by learning about the dinosaurs, by naming them, children dimmish their power (134). Similarly, Jacque Derrida states:

> But as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it, one begins, because of the 'as such' – it is a monster as monster – to compare it to the norms to analyse it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster.
>
> (1995: 386)

Jurassic World introduces *Velociraptor* Blue. A trained, named dinosaur. In *Fallen Kingdom*, it is Blue, who becomes the protector, shielding our protagonists from the *Indoraptor*. However, by *Jurassic World Dominion*, our protagonists must save Blue's daughter, elevating themselves and therefore humans above the status of protector to the title of hero (for a longer discussion of animal heroes, see Schiffner 2023). In adapting the dinosaurs to a commercially friendly franchise, *Jurassic Park* has turned dinosaurs into moral agents forcing them to fit with human-based moralities. The need to adapt nature to human standards and in doing so devalues nature as something without intrinsic value. Imagination is superimposed over nature obscuring it at best or erasing it at worst.

'It ain't gonna stop with the de-extinction of the dinosaurs' – Malcolm, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018): The myth of conservation in a Jurassic World

In the *Jurassic* movies conservation is mythologized as a moral good. This manifests as a worthy goal for our protagonists to pursue. After Claire Dearing (Howard) was arguably responsible for the events of *Jurassic World*, she seeks redemption from her fictional world and real-world audiences by working for the Dinosaur Protection Group (DPG). The DPG is an actual organization that is 'focused upon securing their health, providing a sustainable environment, and limiting human intrusion into their lives' (Bayona 2018: n.pag.). However, conservation in the *Jurassic* universe transcends traditional ecological concerns, evolving into a paradox where extinction is ostensibly nullified through genetic cloning. Conservation is a modern myth wherein the concept of conservation is redefined by technological prowess. The films depict a world where dinosaurs emblematic of natural wonder and primordial power are resurrected not

merely to be preserved but commodified and controlled. Conservation traditionally a response to the loss of species becomes a spectacle, a curated experience for human consumption.

The conservationist perspective is first seen in *Fallen Kingdom* as part of a televised news report from BBC World News. The broadcast conjures images of Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (a three series postmodern collection first published in 1991) (2023), in which he argues that the media's portrayal and manipulation of information during the Gulf War created a hyperreal simulation that obscured the actual events, making the war more of a media spectacle than a tangible reality. BBC World News was specifically criticized for their handling of the truth in Hamid Dabashi's article 'The Paris attacks did not take place' (2015). The myth of conservation obfuscates an underlying truth: that the saving of dinosaurs is a simulacrum, a false solution to humanity's destructive impulses. In this reality, conservation is stripped of its urgency and ethical gravitas, replaced by the illusion of omnipotence over nature. As DPG state 'the DPG embodies the ideology that these animals represent a living manifestation of our responsibility as a species; they live and breathe because we humans decided they could' (Anon. 2018: n.pag.). The cinematic portrayal of genetic cloning posits an eternal playground of life forms, undermining the inherent value of natural diversity and the authentic finality of extinction. Thus, the *Jurassic World* conservation myth distorts conservation, transforming it from a critical ecological practice into a narrative of virtuous control. This mythologized version of conservation is not about preserving life but about the dominion and spectacle of humanity's technological achievements and moral posturing.

'You're part of this place, not a visitor. That's a huge difference' –

Foster, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020): Documentary films and the

boundary between reality and hyperreality

Moving from animated biomorphs to fantasy dinosaurs, the next stage of evolution is the mythologization of the real. *My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich and Reed 2020) is an Academy Award-winning documentary, which purports to capture the authentic interactions between filmmaker Craig Foster and a wild octopus, presenting a 'genuine' portrayal of the natural world. The film's cinematic techniques elevate this reality to a hyperreal experience, making the underwater environment appear more vibrant and otherworldly than one might encounter in person. High-definition cameras, careful editing and sound design, enhance the clarity, detail and narrative of the underwater scenes, creating a visually captivating experience that feels almost too perfect to be real. Additionally, the narrative structure and emotional tone of the documentary contribute to this sense of hyperreality. Foster's introspective voice-over and the unfolding story of his bond with the octopus add layers of meaning and emotional depth, transforming ordinary wildlife behaviour into an extraordinary tale. This heightened reality draws viewers into a more profound engagement with the natural world, highlighting the intricate beauty and intelligence of the film's octopus in ways that transcend typical wildlife documentaries.

The octopus's role in the narrative as teacher is imposed upon the animal. The octopus's role is one of object not subject. Much like the staff in *Beauty and the Beast* (Trousdale and Wise 1991), the real octopus is reduced to a biomorph onto which human ideology and narrative is placed. In talking about the sexualization of women in film, comic book writer Kelly Sue DeConnick invented the *Sexy Lamp Test*. DeConnick puts it that '[i]f you can take a female character out and replace her with a sexy lamp, and your plot still functions, then fuck you' (2014). The test poses a critical question: Does a female character have an active role, or is she merely a decorative element or sexual object? The ultimate indication of a woman's objectification is

whether she can be substituted with an inanimate object without affecting the story. This is not to suggest the octopus is sexualized. However, it would be possible to replace the octopus with an object and keep the same narrative. Indeed, one YouTuber, created a comedic video about their pool cleaner using the same sentimental script and music (Biderman-Pam 2020). Much like the mundane lion from Baker (2001) already noted, the *octopus-propre* is the least interesting thing about the movie, but this is not automatically apparent to the viewer.

The *octopus-propre* makes an ideal animal for the stripping of subjectivity. The biological structure of an octopus is void of familiar expressions and mannerisms, except perhaps the extension and exploratory behaviours of tentacles. The octopus serves as the blank stare of the man in the Kuleshov effect (Kuleshov et al. 1974). The Kuleshov effect posits a film editing technique where filmmakers can create more meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots than from a single shot in isolation. As Kuleshov et al. wrote, '[t]he content of the shots in itself is not so important as is the joining of two shots of different content and the method of their connection and their alteration' (1974: 47). The Kuleshov effect is best exemplified by shots of an actor with a neutral expression intercut with other images, leading viewers to interpret his emotion differently based on the context of the surrounding shots. Unlike animals with which we are familiar, or those with expressive faces, octopuses are completely void of familiar behaviours and so work in place of the expressionless actor, allowing the filmmakers to assign any emotion or motivation they like. Their irregular pupils, lack of eyebrows and hidden mouth defy obvious intuition. The difference between Kuleshov's effect in works of fiction and works of non-fiction is that the latter is supposedly teaching the audience something real. *My Octopus Teacher* is shot in a way that makes it seem linear, with the camera shots acting as if they were being taken at the same time as the narrator's story. The narrator, under the authority of a documentary, acts as the

arbiter of the subject octopus's point of view and an expert on all octopuses, thus mythologizing the entire evolutionary order of Octopoda.

'A human friend, like, waving and saying, "Hi, I'm excited to see you'" – Foster, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020): Myth-making through narrative and visual technique

My Octopus Teacher presents the illusion of *Aletheia* ([Heidegger 1977](#)). Heidegger's idea of *Aletheia* refers to the process of unconcealment, where truth emerges as things show themselves as they truly are. In this context, when nature reveals itself to us, nature is seen in its own essence, unmediated by human interference or conceptual frameworks. This process requires a contemplative and respectful stance, where humans allow nature to be as it is, experiencing it in its full presence and reality. This genuine encounter with nature reveals its intrinsic value and beauty, leading to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural world. However, *My Octopus Teacher* is the opposite; it is Gestell or enframing ([Heidegger 1977](#)). Gestell describes a technological mindset that views nature as a resource to be controlled, manipulated and exploited for human purposes. Under enframing, nature is not allowed to reveal itself; instead, it is subjected to human will and reduced to mere 'standing-reserve' ([Heidegger 1977](#): 17). This perspective conceals the true essence of nature, transforming it into a collection of resources devoid of intrinsic meaning or value. In this mode of existence, the natural world is fragmented, objectified and alienated from its authentic state. We can see the narrator challenging the nature, enframing the octopus to be something it is not and forcing upon it an array of emotions and motivations. Comments like '[a] mollusc shouldn't be this intelligent' and '[s]he's got no mother

or father to teach her anything, she's alone' (Ehrlich and Reed 2020), demonstrate the pre-existing ideologies the narrator brings to nature and imposes onto the *octopus-propre*.

My Octopus Teacher reduces the environment down to a series of simple tracks and predator/prey relationships that took the narrator one week to master, while simultaneously erasing its *Aletheia* and situating his dominance over nature. The enframing of nature by the narrator in *My Octopus Teacher* is similar to the scientific perspectives of *Jurassic Park*'s scientists, theme park designers, weapons dealers and engineers. These people saw dinosaurs and their genetics as resources to be exploited, or when Scar invited the hyenas into the Pride Lands precisely to exploit the animals as sources of food (Allers and Minkoff 1994).

'You might as well be on another planet' – Foster, *My Octopus Teacher* (2020): The Octopus myth as a dangerous, alien teacher

The octopus is a creature of remarkable fascination in the natural world, captivating human curiosity for centuries. Its unique physical characteristics and behaviours have made it a symbol of alienness, danger and a teacher. The octopus, with its otherworldly appearance, remarkable intelligence and potential for danger, serves as a powerful metaphor for our anxieties about the unknown and the complexities of the natural world. The octopus's physical appearance is a primary source of its perceived alienness. With its eight flexible arms, each equipped with suction cups, and a bulbous head lacking a rigid skeleton, the octopus defies conventional anatomical structures familiar to humans (Garcia 2010). This form evokes and inspires images of extraterrestrial beings in science fiction and popular culture, further cementing its status as an alien entity. Because of unique cells the octopus's ability to change colour and texture instantaneously, facilitated by chromatophores, iridophores and leucophores, allows it to blend seamlessly into its environment or communicate visually (Cloney and Brocco 1983). Using a

combination of muscles and the same cells, the blue-ringed octopus (*Hapalochlaena lunulate*)

can flash its bright rings to warn other animals of its danger (Cloney and Brocco 1983). A

Hapalochlaena, named *Octopussy*, was the titular animal and symbol of the dangerous,

smuggling Octopus cult in the Bond film (Glen 1983). The octopus later became the symbol of

spectre in the Bond franchise.

The potential danger posed by the octopus is regularly adapted to popular culture

narratives. As said, certain species such as the blue-ringed octopus possess venom that can be

lethal to humans, but deaths are very rare. In the Ian Fleming book *Octopussy and the Living*

Daylights ([1966] 2012b), the character Major Smythe was dragged to his ultimate death by his

own wild-pet octopus. Additionally, Bond himself was attacked and held by an octopus in the book

Live and Let Die (Fleming 2012a). The myth of an Octopus's strength has been part of human

culture for centuries. Folkloric tales of giant cephalopods, including the *Kraken* that drag down

ships (Salvador and Tomotani 2014; Duarte 2024), have been adapted and reproduced multiple

times on film such as in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* films (Verbinski 2006; 2007). The

Pirates of the Caribbean films depict a giant octopus-like creature with a monstrous teeth-lined

mouth as an embodiment of humanity's fear of the unknown and the mysteries of the sea. Horror

films like the 1955 classic *It Came from Beneath the Sea* capitalized on a new medium and ancient

tales. In the real world, octopuses pose little threat to humans. The most common octopus-related

death is caused by chocking when octopuses are consumed while still alive (a delicacy in some

cultures) (Lee et al. 2018).

In the film *Octopussy*, the octopus latches onto a henchman killing him. The film cuts to

the octopus wrapped around the henchman's face in a scene reminiscent of the Facehugger from

Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979). The theme of octopus as alien is consistent across fiction and non-

fiction. Octopoid characters are prolific as cultural representations in literature, such as H. P. Lovecraft's *Cthulhu*, the cosmic old one with an octopoid head and its octopus-shaped pre-human spawn (Lovecraft 2016). Films like *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016) adapt cephalopod characteristics in their Heptapods. The octopus's intelligence is regularly discussed and often conflated with its alienness; research has demonstrated the octopus's problem-solving skills, use of tools and escape artistry, highlighting its cognitive abilities (Schnell et al. 2021; Godfrey-Smith 2017; Hoffmann 2022). In Australia, cephalopods are the only invertebrates protected under the *Australian Code for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* (National Health and Medical Research Council 2021).

Octopus, squid and cuttlefish are true aliens with respect to us. No other intelligent animal is as far from us on the tree of life. They show us that big-brained smartness is not a one-off event, because it evolved independently at least twice – first among the vertebrates and then again among the invertebrates (Graziano 2019: n.pag.) This intelligence invites comparisons with humans only if separated by cosmic forces, suggesting a form of knowledge that is both profound and mysterious. During the 2010 Football World Cup, an octopus named Paul predicted eight of eight games, prompting discussions of cephalopod intelligence and even psychic abilities (Mitchell and Lian Ong 2014). In various mythologies and cultural symbols, the octopus represents knowledge and wisdom (see for instance, Dansereau 2011). Scientific fascination with the octopus continues, with ongoing research into its cognitive abilities revealing a creature of remarkable complexity (Röckner et al. 2024; Rosa et al. 2024). The octopus as a subject of scientific wonder and respect underscores its role as a symbol of wisdom and intelligence beyond our own.

The combination of the octopus's intelligence, alienness and predatory capabilities can elicit a profound sense of fear, making it a powerful symbol of hidden dangers lurking beneath

both physical and mental surfaces. The octopus's alien appearance and behaviours evoke a sense of the unknown, while its intelligence and wisdom command respect and wonder. Simultaneously, its potential for danger underscores the unpredictable and perilous aspects of the natural world. This myth reflects broader human concerns about encountering intelligence beyond our understanding and the potential threats it might pose. The octopus threatens our place as the natural, dominant animal on this planet. Its intelligence and power must consequently be separated by supernatural forces. The octopus, therefore, becomes a mirror of our anxieties about the limits of our knowledge and the mysteries that lie beyond.

'How many times do you have to see the evidence?' – Malcolm, *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018): The cuckoo-conclusion

The cuckoo is known for its unique evolutionary strategy called brood parasitism, where the female lays her eggs in the nests of other bird species, leaving them to raise her offspring. The cuckoo chick often hatches earlier, grows faster and outcompetes the host's chicks, ensuring it receives all the food and care from the unsuspecting foster parents (Langmore et al. 2024). The evolution of animal myths operates in a similar manner. If we are not careful, hyperreal animals might outcompete the *animals-propre*. Like the cuckoo chick, hyperreal animals grow off centuries of metaphors and stories. They adapt to decades of on-screen media and evolving technologies. They become more manipulative in their aesthetics and more endearing by their sentimental design. Hyperreal animals as *Gestell* have an advantage over *Aletheia* because they present a nature we expect to see. Nature, as it reveals itself to us, might be 'in certain ways […] unsatisfactory*'*. Hyperreal animals make sense, they are simplified and anthropomorphized. Supernormal stimuli in the form of neotonized characteristics trigger innate parental behaviours and simplified moral messages promoting harmony, conservation and acceptance, obfuscating

further inquiry. As scholars and those concerned with truth, we must interrogate 'what-goes-without-saying' (Barthes 1970: xix).

While much of the research on media messaging contains moral imperatives (*sensu* McCormack et al. 2021: 1201), this article does not. It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the moral or ethical implications of mythologizing animals or constructing hyperreal simulacra. We have tried to avoid any discussion of morality in this article. We take no moral stance on, or place moral judgements for, those who enjoy hyperreal on-screen versions of animals. However, if people do care, as they report to (*sensu* Nolan et al. 2022), and as authors like McCormack insist, they must, then it is necessary that the *animal-propre* is present in the discussion. It is necessary to apply critical thinking to such adaptations to ensure the virtual cuckoos do not replace *animals-propre* with their hyperreal offspring.

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