

‘Greening’ Photoplays: An Ecofeminist-Cultural Reading of *FernGully* (1992), *Frozen* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014)

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Abstract—Cultural studies theory analyses the social context in which culture expresses itself and exposes data allied with nature. Gender is now being collated with green issues, giving birth to ecofeminism. Ecofeminists ask — Why is nature gendered as Mother Earth? Women are illustrated as familiar with nature through societal responsibilities. Liberal feminists disparage gender being essentialised. Cultural feminists celebrate this as a female force. Two concerns will frame the analysis here: One, the connection between domination of women and nature; two, ecofeminism as a political movement for social-environmental changes arising out of women to sustain themselves, their family and community against ‘agencies’ of androcentric culture. *FernGully*, *Frozen* and *Maleficent* illustrate how social views about/of women have shifted. This paper will venture into the ecofilm theory of how Hollywood cinema embeds nature as a feminist issue.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary citizens of the United States of America are one of the world’s biggest consumers of vogue. They seem unusually drenched in this culture of popular films, music and other performance-based arts. Because popular culture leans heavily on the environment and ecological metaphors, we might as the audience be able to say that culture rejoices in as well as appraises conservational codes.

As far as feminism is concerned (with respect to America for this article’s purposes), it has always been about equality for all. However, recent events say otherwise. “For the American women who believed the future was imminently female, Donald Trump’s inauguration Friday marks the end of mourning and the beginning of resistance... A lot of women are going to literally die because of this administration... feminists fight to preserve the law that made it impossible for women to be denied coverage because of their gender” [1].

Is America becoming too divided? Has ‘narrowcasting’ been designing for a small percentage of the country? What about the environment? Feminism? It is no secret that former President George W. Bush has undone decades if not a century of progress on the environment.

The relation/flux between humans and the natural world as reflected in literature is the key concern of ecocritical discourses. The focus of ecocriticism has been widening as cultural and gender issues are now being collated with environmental issues. Such cross-fertilization has given birth to ecofeminism.

The Hollywood film industry is the third-largest market in the world, behind only China and India. It is “expected to account for \$632.09 billion, or 29.4 per cent of the worldwide total of more than \$2.152 trillion” [2]. It has always narrated tales about the environment, told us albeit subtly, our anxieties and fears, painted our imagination vividly on-screen, and essentially conceptualized nature for us. Almost every literary theory uses ‘codes’ to decipher meanings and to make sense of convention as well as chaos. Ditto for cinema studies, as well as for the ecofilm concept.

In fact, the oldest ecofilm has been traced to 1896 – *Oil Wells of Baku* – which explored how ‘decorated’ fires in movies blurred the ecological disaster on the silver screen [3]. Aesthetic theory critics Sergei Eisenstein, Rudolf Arnheim and Siegfried Kracauer also validated and identified film as an authentic art form which was able to capture “even in the simplest photographic reproduction of a perfectly simple object, a feeling for its nature... which is beyond any mechanical operation” [4,5]. Meaning to say that mechanical reproduction does not simply portray the moment, but also captures and re-projects nature and reality! The camera thus, is not merely an automatic recording machine. [6]

2. FEMINISM AND BY EXTENSION, ECOFEMINISM

Why look at these three motion pictures - *FernGully* (1992), *Frozen* (2013) and *Maleficent* (2014) in the light of feminist film studies for the coincidence that they feature women protagonists? By extension, they are also viewed through an ecofeminist lens. The argument goes thus: Environmental issues have usually been inter-related with gender. The latter begs to differ with human kind’s knowledge about ecology.

"There is something very powerful about wilderness," opines Catherine M. Roach [7]. The concern which people have for the natural environment is archetypally been feminist.

Interestingly, the 1970s not only became a landmark for the history of ecofeminist theory but also the ecofilm. Gender and environment became key notions for crusaders adjusting to shifting conditions in the country. Cultural feminists practised neo-conflation of woman and nature for the critique of a consumer society and the technological excesses of the modern industry [8]. Not only did 1974 see the release of two of the best and polemical, ecological films of all time, which explored the sinister underbelly of environmental politics — *Soylent Green* and *Chinatown* — but the term 'ecofeminism' was coined by French writer Françoise d'Eaubonne in *Le Feminisme et la Mort (Feminism and Death)* [9]. The 1970s became a benchmark decade for environmental policy. Never before or since has as much action been taken to address the issues of pollution and toxics, resource management, water and air protection, and a host of other problems. Environmental issues were in the mainstream, and it just happens that American cinema was surging.

3. THE MOVIES

While attempting to comprehend the rapport between women and nature, ecofeminists also study the time-honoured sense of an intimate connection between the two. Though nature is shown to galvanize the female sex, some argue that "such a female-nature connection can be negative, this link leads to matriarchal political power and bonds between women" [10].

In all the three movies studied here, the women (Crysta, Elsa and Maleficent respectively) are active Queen figures who possess nature-based power. Along with having their magical abilities originate and become strengthened within nature, there they also form and continue familial bonds that empower them to utilize their political power in both masculine and feminine spaces. *FernGully*, *Frozen* and *Maleficent's* inclusion of more empowering feminist elements, such as magical and political power and familial bonding, furthers the idea of films as an imperfect cultural mirror, reflecting increased power and presence of women in contemporary society. Alongside these elements, these movies continue the portrayal of women who reflect on and attempt to better their lives within natural spaces.

Portrayals of masculinity within nature impact the lives of women associated with this space and provide a contrast for how the lead characters' act within the feminine, environmental landscape.

FernGully in *FernGully* is shown as a utopian place with friendly animals and fairies, akin to the Forest of William Shakespeare's play "A Midsummer Night's Dream". Crysta - the fairy queen - tells the audience, "Only by using the magical power of nature was I able to save *FernGully*". Crysta's guide is Magi, the latter's name no doubt being taken

from the Biblical Magi, who teaches the fairy queen how to "call upon the magic powers of life". The forest has fallen prey to human kind. It will be razed down so that a concrete jungle can be erected instead of a green one. "*FernGully* as a basic and classist movie was also expressly motivated by Diana Young's environmental activism and the fairy story in the film was followed by a real-world battle to save the rainforest near Byron Bay on the east coast of Australia where Young had set, conceived and written the book which she then collaborated with screenplay writer Jim Cox, producer Wayne Young and director Bill Kroyer in adapting to film [11]. The movie ends with an overtly environmental message that addresses the adult viewer: 'For our children and our children's children'" [12]. Crysta has naturally encoded access to the powers of nature. She eventually carries forward matriarchal tradition by nurturing plants and trees, reinforcing a lucidly romanticized association between women and nature.

Frozen begins with male workers thawing ice and singing "Frozen Heart" [13]. Throughout the song, the workers "strike" and "break," using their bodies and tools to cut and carry ice from its natural habitat toward civilization. Their strength over the environment seems to exhibit patriarchal desire to use and abuse land. Ice functions as a metaphor here. It represents a dangerous environment which instils fear in these men, which Heidi Hansson clarifies: "It has become more or less a truism in ecofeminist criticism . . . that the relationship between human beings and nature is a matter of a mastery, paralleled by men's control of women in a patriarchal world" [14]. The patriarchal skills that take advantage of nature transfer to masculine control and authority over women within nature and culture spaces. Many cultural studies and ecofeminist theorists have exposed this correlation between the feminization of nature and patriarchal imperialism. Thus, as Elsa is represented by ice, the male chorus's desire to utilize ice as a resource and the apparent fear of its uncontrollable strength. These masculine ideas in Arendelle's community are shared other people as well, like the Duke. His fear of Elsa's personal power and willingness to exploit the weaknesses of her political authority takes the desire to utilize natural resources to a personal level. In fact, the Duke of Wesleton's reaction, among others, is what leads Elsa to flee the patriarchal castle sphere for the freedom of a feminine nature-space, the North Mountain [15]. This liberating feature of nature Elsa enjoys contrasts with the controlling quality of the cultural sphere. She explores the fun, freeing quality of her powers. Thus, Elsa embodies the ecofeminist idea that both nature and women are oppressed, but that the connection between women and nature can also be a way to strengthen and empower. Choosing to resist her previous confinement then opens the potential for her character to transfer her personal and political power beyond the solitary matriarchal space to the public sphere in order to rule her kingdom and end the oppression of both [16].

In *Maleficent* (re-telling of the time-honoured classic *Sleeping Beauty* tale), the Moors represent a natural conventional

feminine space. Positive characteristics such as trust, kindness and reciprocity are attributed to the creatures of the Moors throughout the film, the imagery being very colourful and the inhabitants as cordial. Whereas the human kingdom remains connected to patriarchal rule and is described as aggressive, 'discontent' and 'envious'. Disney has a reputation of supporting nature, albeit in human-centric, problematic ways [17]. The countryside automatically associates itself with the feminine. For instance, in one scene Maleficent heals a broken tree branch with her magical power. She watches over the forest like a lioness protecting her cubs; she knows them all by name. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that her position as a leader is a rare phenomenon in literature:

"While it is true that women are found at all levels of the social space, their chances of access (and rate of representation) decline as one moves towards the . . . most sought-after positions" [18].

It is also the ecological space where women befriend women - Maleficent develops a loving bond with Aurora. The latter puts her trust in Maleficent like Cinderella believed her fairy godmother.

4. CONCLUSION

Crysta as the untamed and wild princess/queen of FernGully learns the importance of saving her home (despite not paying attention to the lessons from Magi Lune she was supposed to be taking to intellectually engage in this power). She is at home in a forest ruled by matriarchs. A young logger Zak is accidentally shrunk to fairy size; he teams up with Crysta and together they save the forest and Zak heads back to civilization with a plan to tell the world about the importance of conservation at the film's conclusion.

Elsa learns to wield her female nature and political power within the masculine, public sphere as well as the private, feminine sphere, breaking down the segregation of gendered spaces.

Maleficent develops love for Aurora rather than hatred or rivalry. She then uses her love and trust for Aurora to unify their gendered dominions.

Their stories are ecofeminism in practice. This is because ecofeminists see feminism and ecology as two sides of the same coin. In order to liberate women, we must therefore change our views on the relationship between humans and nature.

According to ecofeminists, nature has an intrinsic value, and must be seen as more than a resource for human beings. This kind of biocentrism gives moral status to both animals and nature, and with this perspective one can discuss the biological, social and cultural aspects of environmentalism. Humanists call this a non-anthropocentric approach to environmental questions. Many anthropologists, economists and scientists have begun to use the term 'anthropocene' to

describe a new geologic era in which human activity has led to comprehensive changes in the earth's landscape. Ecofeminism requires familiarity with issues linked to ecology and biocentrism, and sees this as being connected to the women's movement. Men are responsible for a larger amount of climate gas emissions than women, and this is true all over the world. This is partly because men drive more and buy more products that require large amounts of energy. Women in poor countries have the lowest emissions per capita, but they are those most severely affected by climate change.

The idea of taming nature can be traced back in art, science, philosophy and literature from the 16th century onwards. As the industrial revolution gripped Europe, this view became increasingly dominant. Philosophers such as René Descartes and Francis Bacon must be held responsible for some of this mechanistic way of thinking, according to Merchant. Bacon used brutal rape metaphors when discussing scientific examinations of nature, and has for many conservationists become a kind of anti-ecological arch villain, the genesis of the exploitation and destruction of nature.

Insofar as motion pictures are being observed, feminists first investigated women from a sociological perspective considering the 'woman' in the movie as a reflection of the woman in 'nature'. The images in films appear coded and social-gender constructed with male lineage.

Cinema is created fully under the 'male gaze'. In such representations, women take the role of a 'spectacle' — as an object of desire. Structured in such an ecofeminist film, the audience as a whole is led through a two-stage self-identification, hence creating an 'ecogaze' and 'ecofeminist gaze'. One, the spectators should identify with the female characters who consider nature as solace. This is the essence of an 'ecogaze'.

For instance, every woman's identification with Maleficent — her relentless fight to protect is every woman's struggle to create a room of one's own, not only for aesthetic expressions but also to maintain her umbilical relation with the ecological unit and financial independence.

Within the territory of Postmodernism, nature, probably due to its rapid decimation, emerges as a politico-cultural object, one which is no longer restricted to literature, "fine" art, and formalist cinema and video, but also has starring roles in commercials, photos, and movies, and is at the centre of heated public debates about "ecocide," "ecoterrorism," "ecopornography," "greenwashing" and "animal rights." Responding to these concerns, present academia seems to have developed a variety of sub disciplines — "ecopsychology," "ecological economics," "ecofeminism," "ecosophy" — as well as the many orientations named by adding the adjective environmental: Science, law, ethics, history. In the humanities, academic response has primarily taken the form of "ecocriticism," a literature-based approach within a still

loosely federated but emerging field generally designated as "green cultural studies."

Naturally, "green cultural studies" has major affinities with cultural studies and future studies; the prevalent concern here has been the impact that texts and social practices have upon ethnicity/colour, gender, sexuality, economic class, and age.

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- [13] "Born of cold and winter air
And mountain rain combining
This icy force both foul and fair
Has a frozen heart worth mining

Cut through the heart, cold and clear
Strike for love and strike for fear
See the beauty sharp and sheer
Split the ice apart
And break the frozen heart

Beautiful, powerful, dangerous, cold
Ice has a magic can't be controlled
Stronger than one, stronger than ten
Stronger than a hundred men

Born of cold and winter air
And mountain rain combining
This icy force both foul and fair
Has a frozen heart worth mining

Cut through the heart, cold and clear
Strike for love and strike for fear
There's beauty and there's danger here
Split the ice apart
Beware the frozen heart".

A song very similar to "A girl worth fighting for" track from *Mulan* movie (1998).

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Frozen (2013) dirs. Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, U.S.A.

Maleficent (2014) dir. Robert Stromberg, U.S.A.