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A Disney Movie For the World

In 1999, Disney brought the fictional character Tarzan to life once again in the animated children's classic *Tarzan*. The movie tells the story of a boy who is raised by apes in the African jungle after a leopard kills his parents. The plot surrounds the arrival of a team of British scientists who arrive in the African jungle to conduct research on the native great apes. Tarzan ends up befriending a member of the British team named Jane; however, danger strikes when some members of the British team attempt to kill the apes that are part of Tarzan's family and destroy the forest he calls home. While the movie is primarily focused on being a fictional and entertaining film for children and families, there are many subtle environmental messages that carry thematically throughout the film. Parts of the film depict the deforestation of the natural habitat as well as the poaching of wildlife due to monetary incentive. When considering the environmental injustice shown in the film, one can begin to view the film as a critique of these aforementioned issues. *Tarzan* serves an effective critique of environmental issues because the producers were able to successfully use cutting edge technology and directing to spread their environmental agenda, while still not compromising the fun and exciting nature of a Disney children's movie.

In an attempt to create an effective critique of environmental issues, the producers of the film framed the movie in such a way that the audience viewed the people committing the environmental injustices as the antagonists of the film. For example, the principle antagonist of the film is Clayton, who is in charge of security for the British team in Africa. Clayton is viewed

throughout the film as the antagonist because he tries to kill Tarzan, the main character and protagonist, as well as Tarzan's family of apes. Near the beginning of the film when the British team first arrives in Africa the viewer can hear Clayton mumble, "...That's when I knew I was born for Africa and Africa was created for me" (*Tarzan*). As Clayton is saying this he proceeds to chop down nearly every tree in his path thus creating a forest clearing at the expense of the natural habitat. This is a prime example of the egocentric attitude that many Western aristocrats and explorers had during the 1800s. They often believed that the world was simply their oyster and that they could do as they please. However, it is due to this attitude that problems of deforestation and extinction arose in Africa and around the world in the first place. During the climax point near the end of the film, Clayton, the antagonist, is seen describing how he wants to capture and kill the great apes of the jungle because they sell for "300 sterling a head" (*Tarzan*). This was common practice in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and exotic animal parts such as animal tusks or heads commanded a hefty price. This is a key reason that many of Africa's great animals are endangered and facing extinction. Clayton's common motive throughout the film of attempting to kill Tarzan and his kin cements his status as the principle antagonist in the film. By making Clayton the antagonist in the film, the viewers, especially the young children to whom movie is targeted, will associate Clayton's actions as being bad. As such, the viewers will see deforestation and poaching as bad activities because of Clayton's involvement in them, and this helps to make the movie an effective critique of environmental issues. Furthermore, the directors made sure to create a strong distinction between the protagonists, Tarzan and his family, and the antagonist, so that the viewers could internalize the environmental message of the film.

Although Tarzan is human, he is raised as an animal and he himself calls Kala his mother, who is a great ape. Tarzan is the main protagonist of the film and therefore the viewers often

associate most with Tarzan and his views. However, because animals raised Tarzan and he is essentially one of them, the viewers often see all of the gorillas and animals as protagonists in the film as well. This is very effective in helping the film producers effectively critique environmental issues. Had the film been from the perspective of the British team and framed them as the protagonists, then the destruction of the natural habitat would not have appeared bad but would have possibly seemed as an acceptable means to an end. However, because the protagonists are Tarzan and the other animals, the deforestation and poaching are seen as horrific crimes and the directors are able to better see their message. Even to the little kids who are watching *Tarzan* that don't fully understand what poaching is, they see Clayton attempting to kill the animals and they feel bad, which serves to subconsciously spread the producers ideals and critiques of certain environmental issues. Additionally, while the producers use the good vs. bad characters as the central point in developing the environmental theme of the movie, many subtle production elements, such as film style and the nature of the film as a children's movie, are used to supplement this.

Contrary to movies produced nowadays that often rely heavily on three-dimensional (3D) animation techniques, *Tarzan* uses traditional two-dimensional (2D) animation that Disney often used in the 1990s and before. One advantage of the standard 2D animation is that because the images are often drawn using paint strokes on the computer, and because the technology was less advanced than it is now, everything looks slightly more fake and exaggerated than in reality. However the animators were able to use this to their advantage to help *Tarzan* be an effective critique of environmental issues. For example, the animators were able to make all the good things look nearly perfect, and all the bad things look horrible, a contrast so stark that it could not occur in nature. When they first show the jungle in the first part of the movie all the grass and

trees are a vibrant green, the sky is perfectly blue, and the water and plants look pristine; even the animals have perfectly combed hair. This animation presents nature as a perfect, Edenic landscape that is much more beautiful than the jungle actually is in real life. Additionally, when something bad is happening, such as at the end when Clayton is trying to kill the apes, the animators are able to make the jungle appear extremely dark (regardless of the time of day), and produce large amounts of rainfall and red, ominous lighting. This contradiction parallels the environmental critique of the film because the animators make the scenes look extremely good when showing the pristine nature that they want the world to value and they make the world look bad and ugly during the scenes where deforestation or poaching is occurring. This works especially well on children, who are a target audience of *Tarzan*, because they see ugly pictures and colors associated with poaching and killing of wildlife and those things remain associated with each other in their memories. On the whole, the brilliant animation techniques of *Tarzan* that take advantage of the fact that they had less technology than we do now, represent a major reason that the movie presents an effective critique of environmental issues.

Another way that the producers were able to create an effective critique of environmental issues is in the nature of the film itself. Because *Tarzan* is a Disney movie, it has a reputation that precedes it of being family friendly. This benefits the producers greatly because they know that their audience will be one that is comprised of a large age range, from toddlers to grandparents. The producers took this into account when developing their environmental agenda for the film and created a film that was able to demonstrate an environmental message in a way that was neither too blunt nor too boring. Rather than show many of the true harsh realities of deforestation and poaching, such as death, the producers worked hard to make sure that the movie was one that would bode well with children. Because the filmmakers were able to

incorporate and intertwine their environmental agenda with a children's story, the movie became a Hollywood hit rather than a direct-to-DVD documentary. As a movie that grossed over 200 million dollars, *Tarzan* is certainly a successful example of how to spread an environmental message to a wide audience and the producers were able to use the large and varied audience to their advantage. While the producers hoped to create a fun story so that the movie would succeed with children, they also made sure to use some historical backing in the film to aid them in continuing towards their goal of creating a film that was fulfilling for children to watch and environmentally themed as well.

Tarzan was created in the late 1990's when poaching and deforestation had been a large issue for decades but still only little was being done to combat it in many parts of Africa and around the world. For example, according to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), there were between 5-10 million African Elephants in 1930 but only 600,000 left in 1989, when the African Elephant was added to the endangered species list. Because of environmental issues like this that were occurring at the time, *Tarzan* (released 1999), served as a way for Disney to create a fun children's movie while still bringing to light environmental issues that were very important at the time. The movie *Tarzan* is set in the 1800's and shows how African poaching and deforestation began. It demonstrates in a fictional way what truly occurred on a large scale near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The team of British scientists and explorers that are framed as the antagonists throughout the film, because they destroyed much of the forest and attempted to kill the apes, are analogous to the explorers that arrived in Africa in the 1800s. These explorers are the ones that began the series of poaching and killings that became a major problem in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because the environmental aspects of *Tarzan* are rooted in historical fact, the producers of the movie are

better able to present an effective critique of environmental issues.

While *Tarzan* does present an effective critique of environmental issues, many critics claim that the producers of the film could have gone further in their message, and it is clear that some parts of their critique were not fully developed. For example, the producers were able to paint the British scientists, who were chopping down trees in the forest, in a negative light. However, one glaring hole in their critique is that nowhere in the movie does it show the animals suffering as the result of this deforestation. Parts of the movie show clearcutting of trees to create open spaces for the scientists to set up camp. However, this does not seem to affect the natural habitat at all. In fact, the animals are seen enjoying the instruments and items that the British people brought along with them. Had the filmmakers incorporated a mass migration of animals into the movie due to deforestation, or shown a gorilla not being able to find its home because it was cut down, then the critique of environmental issues would have been more effective. While these critics have some valid points, a very plausible reason that the producers did not include excess sad or graphic portions in the movie is because it was supposed to be a children's movie. The creator's of *Tarzan* strove deeply to create a movie that would be able to debut successfully as a children's movie while also spreading an environmental message. To do this they had to make sure the movie was void of many of the harsh realities that accompany real life poaching and hunting. While people will then claim that the producers struck the balance slightly too far towards the side of caution, *Tarzan* still went on to be an incredibly successful box office hit that carries a strong environmental message.

In many ways *Tarzan* was an incredibly advanced film for its day. The producers were in the midst of a great 20<sup>th</sup> century Green Movement and they showed a generation of children the harms of deforestation and poaching in a way that was both family friendly and fun.

Additionally, their creative use of the 2D animation technology of the time allowed them to paint a picture in the minds of many people that is now synonymous with either pristine forests or the ill effects of environmental degradation and poaching. And while the producers could have developed their environmental critique even further, they chose to strike an appropriate balance between a serious message and a Disney children's movie. Overall, *Tarzan* presents an effective critique of environmental issues because of the wide variety of techniques the directors used to spread a serious message without disrupting the flow of a children's movie.

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#### Works Cited

*Tarzan*. Dir. Chris Buck and Kevin Lima. Prod. Bonnie Arnold. Perf. Tony Goldwyn, Minnie Driver, and Rosie O'Donnell. Walt Disney Pictures, Buena Vista Distribution, 1999.  
Film.