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Weird Art and What It Can Teach Us: Laloux's "Fantastic Planet" and Anthropocentrism

BY CAROLINE CABE ON NOVEMBER 4, 2020 • (1 COMMENT)



Rene Laloux's 1973 experimental cartoon "Fantastic Planet," or "La Planète Sauvage," represents the very best of European postmodern film, making use of childlike animations and whimsical storytelling to transport the viewer into

another state of consciousness. Adapted from the 1957 French sci-fi novel "Oms en serie," or "Oms Linked Together," by Stefan Wul, it boasts the ultimate role-reversal in which humans watch themselves being treated like pests by a highly intelligent alien civilization called the Draag. The film's immediate commercial success and critical acclaim lifted writers and directors Rene Laloux and Roland Topor to prestige, making them the recipients of the Special Prize at the 1973 Cannes Film Festival.

Beyond this commercial acclaim, however, "Fantastic Planet" has a cultural significance unlike any other film. It wrestles with a central question of morality: what makes humans any better than the other creatures we coexist with? Anthropocentrism, or the belief in a human-centered universe, has been identified by many scholars and activists as the root of forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, queerphobia, environmental ignorance, and many more social ills. Philosopher and eco-feminist **Val Plumwood** (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27766045.pdf>) theorized that the anthropocentric desire to separate inferior beings (plants and animals) from superior beings (humans) promotes the classification of certain races, genders, orientations, and religions as inferior to others. "Fantastic Planet" comments on the harm of anthropocentrism by placing human beings at the bottom of the ecological food chain, similar to bugs or mice. This food chain is dominated by an alien race known as the Draag who resort to keeping humans as pets and exterminating those who are non-domesticated. By witnessing this role-reversal, the audience is forced to evaluate the ways in which human beings treat other organisms. This leads to further reflection on how humans treat fellow members of their species from other demographics, making for an unexpectedly reflective viewing experience.

While "Fantastic Planet" is traditionally known as a French film, it was co-produced by companies in France and Czechoslovakia, contributing to the filmmaker's unique use of symbolic imagery and inventive design. This collaboration with Czech artists delayed the initial production of the film until 1969 due to the brutal invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union and subsequent deterioration of Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries. The context of total dehumanization at the hands of the Soviet Union gives "Fantastic Planet" the greater sense of philosophical inquiry that makes it relevant to this day.

The film opens on a female Om (the Draag word for human) fleeing a mysterious giant blue hand with her child. During this initial chase scene, we are introduced to a world of whimsical Dr. Seuss-like scenery, giving the clear indication of a foreign planet. The female Om loses the chase and is plucked from the air only to be dropped again. She is killed by the fall but her infant child is spared. The perspective shifts and we see that the giant blue hand belongs to a Draag child who had been innocently playing with the Om like an insect and played too rough. We are then introduced to Tiwa, a young Draag child who decides to take in the now orphaned infant Om as a house pet,

naming him Terr. Through this interaction, we gather that the Draag are the reigning species on this planet and that humans, or Oms, are reminiscent of snails or mice in their perspective.

The film goes on to follow Terr's life as a house pet, gaining further insight into the Draag civilization through Terr's eyes. We learn that the Draag use meditation as a means of survival, travelling through space via meditation to ensure the continuation of their souls independent of their bodies. We learn that the Draag leaders hold conversations that are broadcasted to the entire Draag community to promote total transparency in government. Perhaps most importantly, we learn that the Draag children receive an education through a special headset that ingrains information into their heads permanently.

While this information does not initially present itself as important, it soon becomes a pivotal plot point as Terr begins to receive Tiwa's education through osmosis, growing smarter and more autonomous by the day. It is this education that allows Terr to escape Tiwa's ownership and flee with the headset into the wilderness. There, he meets a colony of wild Oms and begins to educate them on Draag civilization using the headset. The leader of the colony, an elderly Om with an extreme distrust for all things outside of their shelter, is originally opposed to the idea of educating his colony on Draag civilization, and makes Terr fight to the death for the privilege of educating his fellow Oms.

Through their newly acquired knowledge of Draag institutions such as writing and technology, the Om colony discovers that the Draag are planning a routine de-omisation, or extermination of all Oms. Frantic, the Om colony attempts to prepare, lying in wait for their impending doom. The extermination sweeps across the planet, wiping out a large majority of the Om population with little effort. Terr escapes with a few other survivors and, after managing to kill a Draag who tried to step on them, they find refuge in an abandoned Draag structure. They manage to build two rockets from newly found resources, and set a course for Fantastic Planet, a neighboring satellite used by the Draag for meditative travelling, to see if it can sustain Om life.

Upon arriving on Fantastic Planet, they witness the other end of the Draag's meditative ritual which consists of giant headless figures becoming possessed by the Draag's spirits and dancing together. The Oms use their ship's fire power to destroy these giant figures, endangering the Draag's survival. The Draag assemble in a state of panic, agreeing that something must be done about the Oms to ensure survival. Defeated, they ask to make peace with the Oms, vowing to stop the routine extermination of Oms and giving them a separate satellite to live peacefully. We conclude with a narration from a headset information session that asserts that coexistence is the only route to survival.

While an argument could be made for the gripping effect of the film's aesthetic and artistic brilliance alone, "Fantastic Planet" presents a unique analysis of human destruction. It is a product of its time, thematically commenting on the Soviet Union's invasion of its neighboring Eastern European countries. The

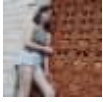
context surrounding the film's production also overlaps with cultural cataclysms such as Apartheid in South Africa and the rising political turmoil of the 1960s in the U.S., and it also reflects on the mass extermination of what Hitler called "inferior races" that occurred during World War II. The Soviet Union's invasion served as a basis for the film's anti-anthropocentric themes, but its analogy extends far beyond that, rooting the cause of most civil unrest in anthropocentrism and State-sponsored ethnic narcissism. It puts forth the idea that humans believing themselves to be the center of the universe is what causes the cultural dissonance that leads to inequality. When left festering, this inequality becomes a deep-seated hatred for certain demographics of people, which in turn leads to unspeakable acts, like those that mar our history, committed against marginalized demographics.

This film is also reflective of ethically cataclysmic events through its somewhat surprising ending. The Draag's decision to finally acknowledge the autonomy of the Oms and provide them with their own land and rights is reminiscent of the **Back-To-Africa movement** (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/cambridge-guide-to-african-american-history/backtoafrica-movement/F16272CE27E9158A11A4AFB936FD8384>) that followed the increase in freed Black individuals in the U.S. during the slave trade. The Back-To-Africa movement was an ultimate failure intended to convince freed Black people to move back to Africa. While some were willing to be relocated, many found this forced removal from the land to which they had become accustomed unethical and refused to leave the U.S. However, this sentiment of relocation was recycled centuries later by the **Black Power movement** (<http://www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/slavery/after-slavery/wider-world/african-diaspora/black-political-movements/>) of the 1960s, with more radical members calling for the mass relocation of African Americans to Africa. The film harkens back to these historical occurrences with an ending that implies that the only true way to acknowledge a previously maltreated demographic is by providing them with physical autonomy, such as land that is separate from their former captors.

"Fantastic Planet" tells us that if we want to reconcile our differences with our fellow humans, we must first exercise our ability to do so by reconciling our differences with the other creatures inhabiting our planet with us. We must stop measuring a creature's value in their ability to contribute to human consumption, and instead value them based on their mere existence.

One of the few redeemable qualities of the Draag is their emphasis on the value of meditation and reflection. All young Draag must participate in a meditation ritual in which they travel to Fantastic Planet through meditation for the very first time. The Draag secure their survival by valuing their fluidity and reflective capabilities as opposed to their bodies. This film encourages us to do the same by ceasing to value ourselves based on our ability to contribute to our global economy and instead placing that value in our ability to connect with and see value in others. "Fantastic Planet" is a map of how to reconstruct a better society, one that does not depend on the destruction of our

environment or one another. It may feel like a DMT-induced hallucination at times, but beneath the whimsical and sometimes frightening imagery and story scape, "Fantastic Planet" is a manual that teaches us how to create our very own *planète sauvage*.



Published by Caroline Cabe

Hi there. My name is Caroline Cabe, and I am a rhetoric and writing student at the University of Texas at Austin. I currently write for the Texas Orator and have worked with literary magazines nationwide such as Eugene Lang College of Liberal Arts' "Eleven and a Half". I enjoy journalism and research-oriented writing as well as fiction and play-writing. **View all posts by Caroline Cabe** (<https://thetexasorator.com/author/carolinejcabe/>)

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Thanks for writing this, I just rewatched the movie after seeing as a young person unable to consciously perceive many of its ideas, and it is now one of my favorite films in existence.

★ (https://thetexasorator.com/2020/11/04/weird-art-and-what-it-can-teach-us-laloux-fantastic-planet-and-anthropocentrism/?like_comment=51547&_wpnonce=c24404482d)

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