https://doi.org/10.1558/jasr.32625
JASR ISSN 2047-704X (print)
JASR ISSN 2047-7058 (online)

Film Review

The Wild Robot (2024). Director: Chris Sanders. DreamWorks.

Reviewed by: Michaela Richards and Michael Toy, Department of the Study of Religion, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington
michaela.richards@vuw.ac.nz

The DreamWorks film *The Wild Robot* was released globally in September 2024 and has been met with critical and popular praise. Based on a 2016 novel of the same name, it is a deeply emotional film. The animation style, the musical score, and the character development all work in tandem to explore deep ideas about what it means to be human. Though there is no mention of God or gods, the movie is underpinned by rich religious and spiritual themes. Recent scholarship in critical religion and lived religion has expanded notions of what 'counts' as religious practice or religious experience (Cotter 2020; Ammerman 2021; Bramadat 2022). This review builds out of those perspectives, bringing the film's theme of human–nature relationship into conversation with contemporary work in Religious Studies within Aotearoa New Zealand, particularly salient to the ongoing journal theme of 'Thinking Religion in Place'. We conclude with some brief comments on the medium of film and its particular potency as a pedagogical tool in the classroom. As a note, while this review is not a summary of the plot, significant elements from the plot will be discussed at length.

One of the film's primary themes is the relationship between humanity and nature. The titular character, Rozz, though a non-human robot, represents human activity in the world. Rozz arrives via transport mishap to a small North American island hitherto untouched by human technology, robots included. Rozz struggles to find her place in the island's ecosystem, trying to be helpful, but ends up being more disruptive—and destructive—than useful to any of the fauna. Eventually, she stops her attempt to find a task, and powers down while observing the natural flow of the island's inhabitants. After days and nights of careful surveillance, she deciphers the shared

animal language used by the bear, fox, opossums, raccoons, deer, and birds occupying the island. Rozz's engagement stands in stark contrast to the rest of humanity we see in the film. Far from the island, the humans that viewers do encounter sit comfortably in a dark room filled with screens, eyes covered by a device akin to virtual reality goggles or the Star Trek VISOR. In the film's futuristic setting, humanity has used robots to tame the natural world. Robots do the work of farming, tending to the orchards, and other domestic tasks. As Rozz struggles to find her place on the island, she lives out the existential question: what am I here to do? There are no humans to give orders, and the animals have no desire to give the robot a task.

The relationship between humanity and nature has seen substantial exploration by scholars of religion in the last half-century in light of the ongoing climate crisis (Taylor 2009; Creegan and Shepherd 2018; Hubbell and Ryan 2022; Verchery 2023). Notable examinations of humanity's relationship with the natural world include the work of Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 seminal work 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis'. The historian of medieval technology argued that Christian theology underpinned the alienation from nature that led to the current ecological crisis: 'Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends' (1967: 1206). While some of the broad strokes of non-Christian religions of White Jr.'s thesis have been challenged (Thornber 2012; Wang 2022), his diagnosis of Christian theology's role in shaping attitudes towards nature has been largely affirmed in theological and empirical work. This dogma of dominance over nature spread with settler colonists throughout islands connected by Moananui-a-Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean (Colgan 2023: 25; Beattie and Stenhouse 2007: 414). Ecotheologians from Oceania and beyond have challenged those views of human dominance over nature, advocating for a new understanding of the biblical texts that justified unchecked expansion and extraction of the land (Balabanski 2020; Bird, Saiki and Ratunabuabua 2020).

The film engages with this theme by emphasising a relational, rather than a transactional, connection between humanity and nature. In our context here in Aotearoa New Zealand, Indigenous Māori engagements with the land are centred upon relationship with the land (Tate 2012: 38; Stewart 2021: 88). It is a relationship founded upon reciprocity, respect, and reflection. For some Māori, the relationship with the land extends to all life connected to it. 'The relationship with nature was

holistic—by being spiritually connected to the land, they are spiritually connected to the wildlife that lives there' (Woodhouse et al. 2021: 9). This mode of relationality stands in stark contrast to the dominance theology of colonial Christianity described above. In many ways, then, Rozz represents a standardised Western human: programmed to act a certain way in nature, behaving in ways that see the environment as something to be tamed and domesticated. These actions are revealed to be not only unhelpful but also harmful. Rozz demonstrates that in taking the time to actively listen to the world around her on its own terms, one can learn how to act in dynamic partnership with it, rather than wield authority over it. But the movie is not content to let Rozz just sit back and adopt a completely laissez-faire approach with no intervention into the world around her. Rather than falling into nihilism, Rozz steps in, caring for a gosling that would have been the product of natural selection, had she not intervened. The film does not shy away from the complexity of the ethical questions of intervention into Darwinian processes. Ultimately, Rozz demonstrates a form of relationship with the world that is neither dominating nature nor letting the harsh process of natural selection eliminate her new animal companions. Pressing further into this theme of human–nature connection, the film showcases a dynamic relationship of continued care. Rozz has been programmed to fulfil a task. In her engagement with the inhabitants on the island, she realises that relationships do not seek a source of completion. So too, a human engagement with the land should not be understood as a transactional task but a relational engagement. Care is never completed. This demonstration of non-linear temporality of eco-relationality is a generative analytic contribution to the academic study of ecotheology and critical religion.

As contemporary academic scholarship within Religious Studies examines the unfolding spirituality in people's relationship with nature and the land, film becomes a powerful tool not only for critical analysis but also for reflecting on one's own spiritual relationship with the world (Wright 2006; Watkins 2008). This film in particular is especially potent in the way it garners an affect of care for the natural world through the character Rozz. As mentioned above, the narrative that drives the film is one of deep relationality. The viewer learns to care for the fauna in the film not through pedomorphic representations or 'Bambification', whereby animals are drawn with human infant features, but by seeing Rozz's missteps and successes as she anguishes over her place within the island ecosystem (Vicchio 1986; de Waal 1999: 260). Through this mode of storytelling, the film provides a grammar of relationality and spirituality that is full of pedagogical possibility in ways outside the norm

within academia. Rather than asking the viewer only to *think* about the earth and one's place in it, the film encourages its viewers to *feel* something about the surrounding world. This mode of engagement beyond rational understandings of critical issues offers a powerful counterpoint to an academic tendency towards noetic abstraction of meaning. Lina Verchery (2018: 16) argues that in film, a certain image can move viewers beyond a critical search for analytical meaning: 'It extracts us from the higher-order narrative of the film—with its story, its characters, its emotional crescendo—and lowers us into a glimpse of life that is nothing other—nothing more, nothing less—than just life itself'. *The Wild Robot* holds many such moments. The grand, animated shots of the flora and fauna of the island bring viewers face to face with the unfolding poetics of the fullness of life. Not only does *The Wild Robot* hold pedagogical promise in its analytic capacity, but also in its aesthetic power to transfix viewers with the world as it is and the world as it might be.

There are myriad other themes within the film that intersect with contemporary investigations into lived religion. We imagine this unconventional 'text' might serve to open up important and productive questions about religion in the classroom. Students might be asked to compare the themes and messages from this film to others in a similar genre, such as *Fern Gully* (1992) or *Avatar* (2009). Another possibility would be an invitation for personal reflection on feelings that emerged as one watches the film. Students might be prompted to write about or discuss the power of alternative narratives to established scripts and trajectories of human–nature–technology relationality. These relationships are profoundly religious and spiritual. Not only have these relationships been shaped by theological and ideological imaginations, but there remains a seductive power in the wilderness of the natural world to evoke and nurture a reverential spirituality within even the most avowedly secular subjects (Richards 2024). *The Wild Robot* provides an excellent and entertaining ingress into these vital conversations within the Study of Religion.

References

Ammerman, Nancy Tatom
2021 *Studying Lived Religion: Context and Practices*. New York: NYU Press.
Balabanski, Vicky
2020 *Colossians: An Eco-Stoic Reading*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

Beattie, James, and John Stenhouse
2007 Empire, Environment and Religion: God and the Natural World in Nineteenth-century New Zealand. *Environment and History* 13(4): 413–46. https://doi.org/10.3197/096734007X243159
Bird, Cliff, Arnie Saiki and Meretui Ratunabuabua
2020 *Reweaving the Ecological Mat Framework: Toward an Ecological Framework for Development*. Suva, Fiji: Pacific Theological College.
Bramadat, Paul
2022 Wellness in the Wild: Reverential Naturalism in the Pacific Northwest. In *New Spiritualities and the Culture of Well-being*, edited by Géraldine Mossière, 135–51. Berlin: Springer.
Colgan, Emily
2023 Kaitiaki: The Human Vocation to Till and to Keep. In *Kōrero Mai: Earth, Our Parish*, edited by Te Aroha Rountree and George Zachariah, 24–28. Auckland: Trinity Methodist Theological College.
Cotter, Christopher
2020 *The Critical Study of Non-Religion: Discourse, Identification and Locality*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
Creegan, Nicola Hoggard and Andrew Shepherd (eds)
2018 *Creation and Hope: Reflections on Ecological Anticipation and Action from Aotearoa New Zealand*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick.
de Waal, Frans B. M.
1999 Anthropomorphism and Anthropodenial: Consistency in Our Thinking about Humans and Other Animals. *Philosophical Topics* 27(1): 255–80. https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics199927122
Hubbell, J. Andrew, and John C. Ryan
2022 *Introduction to the Environmental Humanities*. London: Routledge.
Richards, Michaela
2024 Restoring Taranaki Maunga: 'Religion' and Conservation in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ph.D. diss., Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand.
Stewart, Georgina Tuari
2021 *Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa*. London: Bloomsbury.
Tate, Henare
2012 *He Puna Iti i te Ao Mārama: A Little Spring in the World of Light*. Auckland: Oratia Books.
Taylor, Bron
2009 *Dark Green Religion: Nature Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Thornber, Karen
2012 *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
Verchery, Lina
2018 Blindness, Blinking and Boredom: Seeing and Being in Buddhism and Film. *Religions* 9(228): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9080228

Verchery, Lina
2023 The Personal and the Planetary: Buddhism, Climate Change, and Anthropocene Time. *Religions* 14(1313): 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101313
Vicchio, Stephen
1986 From Aristotle to Descartes: Making Animals Anthropomorphic. In *Animal Intelligence: Insights into the Animal Mind*, edited by R. J. Hoage and L. Goldman, 187–207. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press
Wang, Ban (ed.)
2022 *At Home in Nature: Technology, Labor, and Critical Ecology in Modern China Technology, Labor, and Critical Ecology in Modern China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Watkins, Gregory J. (ed.)
2008 *Teaching Religion and Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
White, Lynn
1967 The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis. *Science* 155(3767): 1203–207. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.155.3767.1203
Woodhouse, Jordan Anna Carr, Nicola Liebergreen, Lynley Anderson, Ngaio J. Beausoleil, Gosia Zobel and Mike King
2021 Conceptualizing Indigenous Human–Animal Relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand: An Ethical Perspective. *Animals* 11(2899): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11102899
Wright, Melanie J.
2006 *Religion and Film: An Introduction*. New York: I. B. Tauris.