

# THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK [1997]

by

H. Arthur Taussig, Ph.D.

Copyright © – 1999, 2020

*The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (PG-13) is one rotten film. Yet millions have seen it and seemingly enjoyed it, and I must admit to thoroughly enjoying it myself. As with many of Spielberg's major films, there is a strong confluence of pop culture, psychology, and film making. What makes *The Lost World* different from his other films is the paring down of the film to its essentials; anything deemed extraneous to the film's manipulation of the audience has been eliminated. This makes a lousy film – no plot, character, motivation, growth, social relevance or any of the other things we normally associate with films. But it also makes the film so damnably fun.

Let me take a few paragraphs to detail the depths to which *The Lost World* has sunk, and then speculate on why it is such a popular, engaging, and powerful film despite all.

One of the basic concepts of storytelling is the concept of the hero and the hero's adventure. The purpose of the hero's journey is to help the hero mature psychically. Thus, to find out what a film is "really about," simply look at the characters who change. Some will grow, some will wither (as in many *films noir*). In either case, psychic growth is the essence of story making.

Applying this idea to *Jurassic Park* [1993], the "prequel" to *The Lost World*, we immediately recognize that it is *not* about dinosaurs. They don't change. It is about a man learning to like children and growing psychically into a good father. Certainly the dinosaurs are important in *Jurassic Park*, for they represent the forces of nature - and it is these forces that manipulate him into the role of father and protector to the two children. Very few other characters in *Jurassic Park* change or learn from their experiences with primal nature (except those who die, but they don't last long enough for us to know if they learned anything except that they weren't up to the task).

In *The Lost World*, no one grows, no one changes. Malcolm, the mathematician, is right about almost everything at the beginning of the film and right about everything at the end of the film. His only flaw at the beginning is his strained relation with his daughter. While he clearly expresses his love for her, their problems do not seem to be resolved.

Sarah (Malcolm's paleontologist girlfriend) idealizes both science and nature at the beginning of the film and retains these ideas unaltered to the end. Her problem is to convince Malcolm she is competent. Hammond, the originator of the scheme to recreate dinosaurs, changes his mind – he wants to explore the island at the beginning and to isolate it at the end. Big deal! And anyway, he is not a real character – he appears for only a few minutes at the beginning and the end. (That a cameo character is the only one who learns anything is a clear sign of wretched writing.)

A secondary character *does* change: the big game hunter (played with clear delight by Pete Postlethwaite with a face that, a few decades ago, would have belonged to Jack Palance). (As the “Great White Hunter Reformed,” he is completely out of character with the rest of the film. It is as if no one let him in on the joke that no other actors were taking the film seriously. He actually endows his cardboard character with depth and feeling. Perhaps that's why he disappears two-thirds of the way into the film – he must stop making the others look bad.) He begins the film with one hurdle left in the field of killing things: kill a dinosaur. Once he has seen this lost world of pure nature, he simply tranquilizes one, realizes his error, and, in a fit of depression, leaves. The most interesting character leaves in the middle of the film? How bad can a screen play get?

Even the minimal politics of *Jurassic Park* have been diluted. *Jurassic Park* was ecologically liberal (don't fool with mother nature for profit) and socially conservative (the patriarchal family structure is enforced by a nature 65 million years old and therefore must by right and “natural”). Even this bit of “relevance” has been eliminated from *The Lost World*. We have the “hunters,” i.e., corporate profiteers, versus the “gatherers,” the scientists gathering information.

Of course, people don't go to see *The Lost World* for the actors and the politics. It's the special effects. But even here, it is not simple. If the titans of computer animation and animatronics had made a film about penguins, would anyone see it? Recreating something that already exists seems an almost useless effort (witness *Jumanji* [1995]). What people come to see are dinosaurs. And from this, *The Lost World* derives its archetypal energy.

Dinosaurs are pure and unadorned symbols of psychic processes. And the more realistic and believable the dinosaurs (and *The Lost World's* dinosaurs are *very* believable), the stronger the connection to our psyche. Thus, dinosaur fascination. Dinosaurs are everywhere: clothing, toys, fast food soda cups, even on TV as super-stars like Barney. One of the first (1914) animated cartoons was of “Gertie, the Dinosaur,” the comic strip Alley Oop has been around for a long time, and the still-popular *Flintstones* began over thirty years ago.

Dinosaurs are unique in three ways: they are monstrous, they are real, and they are extinct. I believe this goes a long way toward explaining our culture's fascination. Interestingly, each characteristic alone doesn't account for their psychological impact; only in the synergistic combination are they powerful. Let me take these one at a time.

What is a monster? The dictionary provides four interlinked definitions. Briefly, a monster is: 1) a plant or an animal departing greatly in form or structure from the norm of its species; 2) any enormous animal or thing; 3) anything strange, grotesque, or horrible in form; and 4) a person or animal unnatural in ugliness and/or cruelty. Let's look how each of these has bearing on our fascination.

First, a monster is anything that departs from the norm of its species. At first thought, this definition would exclude dinosaurs, for they are the norm of their type. However, we must recall that no one has ever seen a dinosaur; all we have are guesses derived from fossil remains. And certainly, one of the contributions of *Jurassic Park* and its sequel to our popular understanding of dinosaurs is a verisimilitude never before achieved on screen. Yet there is a serious hitch here: the filmmakers are projecting themselves and their beliefs onto the objects they portray on screen. Just as in any Disney animation of the past, where we could instantly tell who was good and who was bad by simply looking at the shape of the eyes or by the turn of the mouth.

And this is also true of *Jurassic Park*. Carnivores are obviously "bad," while herbivores are obviously "good." Our portrayal of them on the screen, no matter how much the filmmakers try to recreate the "truth," no matter how many scientists are employed as consultants, will always consist of filling in the gaps in our knowledge and will therefore always contain great amounts of projection. For example, the average dinosaur was about the same size as the average animal today. And it is important to realize that we choose not to make films and toys and stories about the little dinosaurs, but only the biggest. We have, out of an ordinary group of animals, carefully selected only those that allow us to create monsters for our own purposes.

But size alone is not enough to make a monster. Movies that feature gigantic animals rarely show real animals, but rather fantastic exaggerations of the normal. These range from the silly, like *Fury of the Congo* [1951] where Johnny Weissmuller deals with drug-crazed natives and a jumbo spider which produces their drug, or the giant bird fighting with jet planes in *The Giant Claw* [1957], or *The Nest* [1988] with its large and very hungry cockroaches, or the 150-pound rabbits (!) in *Night of the Lepus* [1972], to classic monsters like *King Kong* [1933] or *Mighty Joe Young* [1949] or the two filmings of Jules Verne's *Mysterious Island* [1929 & 1961].

The only animal today comparable in size to a dinosaur is a whale, and whales are rarely singled out as brutish monsters. The actions of film-whales are justified in terms of a strictly Western human morality. In *Orca* [1977] the killer whale takes revenge against the bounty hunter for killing his pregnant mate; in *Mako: The Jaws of Death* [1976] the shark only goes berserk because he and his "friends" are exploited. Rare are even-handed films like *Namu, the Killer Whale* [1966] which documents the capture and training of a whale by a scientist. Rather than being perceived as monsters, just the opposite seems to have happened: whales are romanticized into objects of ecological concern, often becoming the symbols of redemption of the whole planet. The same can be said of elephants. The only evil elephants I can think of appear in *Dumbo* [1941] in the form of the gossipy and vindictive neighbors. These are, of course, clearly balanced by the

goodness (measured, unsurprisingly, in Western and human terms) of the mother and her son, Dumbo. Elephants, too, have become the darlings of ecologists as can be seen in films like *Roots of Heaven* [1958] directed for television by no less than John Huston. So, simply being large does not automatically qualify an animal to be a monster. Something else is necessary.

This brings us to the third and fourth definitions of a monster: ugliness or cruelty, strangeness, or grotesqueness. As with the issue of size, we again choose only those dinosaurs that are either very different in shape than anything living now or are very vicious. *Jurassic Park* goes to great lengths to point out that a specific dinosaur is *not* simply a 6-foot turkey. While *The Lost World* and its filmic ancestors portray herbivorous dinosaurs, these are clearly a sidelight to the central focus on the ravening, meat-eating killers that seem to fascinate both filmmakers and audiences.

But again, simple ugliness or grotesqueness cannot account for the monstrosity of dinosaurs, as a trip to a well-stocked local zoo will amply illustrate. And, if one steps back from the situation, the feeding habits of all carnivores are quite similar. This includes us, as one of the characters in *Jurassic Park* points out, “Ever had a lamb chop?” as the goat is about to be fed to the T-Rex. Certainly size, abnormality, and cruelty contribute to dinosaurs being monsters, but that is only a part of the story. For the rest we have to look at the other two important characteristics of dinosaurs: they are real, and they are extinct.

We are fascinated with the *reality* of dinosaurs. The highest attendance of any natural history museum is the dinosaur exhibition. While there are films about real animals that act monstrously, rats (*Ben* [1972]), or tarantulas (*Tarantulas: The Deadly Cargo* [1977] or *Kingdom of the Spiders* [1977]), or fish (*Piranha* [1978]), or grasshoppers (*Locust* [1997]), none exhibit either the physical or psychological threat of dinosaurs. Thus despite, or perhaps because of, their reality dinosaurs activate the unconscious differently than any other animal. It would not be past archetypal theory to propose that we are still responding to our racial memories of similar monsters that threatened our distant ancestors (despite the gap of several millions of years between the disappearance of dinosaurs and the appearance of humans on the Earth). In any case, reality alone is obviously not the sole reason behind our fascination.

None of us will ever have to face a real dinosaur. Dinosaurs are dead. Therefore, they are not directly threatening, and, of all movie monsters, dinosaurs generate the least amount of fear in the real world (this, of course, says nothing of their psychological impact). Thus, we have manifestations and representations of tremendous power that will always remain symbolic and therefore safe. And this is what makes dinosaurs unique. Because they are safe, they are very attractive and convenient to manipulate. No matter how silly their representation – stuffed fluffy toys and Barney – they simultaneously retain their primordial power and yet are totally unthreatening to anyone who wishes to manipulate them.

Compare this situation to real, normal-size monsters, like rats and cockroaches, that lurk everywhere, ready to pounce on us. King-size variations on these normal animals are

as near as the urban myths of giant cockroaches and giant alligators living in sewers. The news reminds us of our polluted atmosphere and poisoned water; nuclear accidents are announced almost weekly. The dire predictions of the 1950's science fiction films, that radiation is a hazard to our existence, have proved prescient indeed as our headlines constantly remind us of the possibility of the appearance of mutated monsters. But none of this applies to dinosaurs. Dinosaurs are safely extinct, ready to become the safe repositories of our conscious and unconscious fears.

Let me return once again to the original question: why are we hooked on dinosaurs? I have outlined their characteristics – monstrosity, reality, and extinction – and that each alone cannot account for our fascination. Only when these characteristics are combined do we get the very powerful representations that are dinosaurs. For instance, dinosaurs are the largest and most powerful animals that ever lived on land. Nothing could possibly stand up to them. Thus, it seems reasonable that they appeal to children who, as a group, have traditionally been powerless. For instance, the insipidness and two-dimensionality of Barney is needed to balance the inherent power of the dinosaur and make him safe for children.

We can extend this same argument to adults. Dinosaurs have become popular over the past decades exactly in an era when the average person feels an increasing powerlessness. As governments prove corrupt, as wages and property values fall, as our individual inability to do anything about “it” becomes increasingly evident, we feel powerless. Therefore, conjuring up symbols that represent the most blatant power imaginable, yet tempered by the safety of extinction, seems both reasonable and appealing.

Proof of the depth of the psychic impact of dinosaurs is clear from a film like *The Lost World*. Because its dinosaurs are so fascinating, it is difficult to see how badly written, how badly filmed, and how badly thought out it is. Ancient dinosaurs together with contemporary technology have keyed into our collective unconscious in a way not matched by any recent film. Which once again proves that psychology is far more important than other, more popularly recognized filmic values like acting, directing, and writing.

*The Lost World: Jurassic Park*. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Screenplay by David Koepp from a novel by Michael Crichton. Special Effects by Dennis Muren and Stan Winston. Distributed by Columbia Pictures, 1997.