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# Making Old Stories New in the Anthropocene: Reading, Creating, and the Cosmological Imagination in Darren Aronofsky's Noah

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Making Old Stories New in the Anthropocene: Reading, Creating, and the  
Cosmological Imagination in Darren Aronofsky's *Noah*

Kellianne Houston Matthews

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Making Old Stories New in the Anthropocene: Reading, Creating, and the  
Cosmological Imagination in Darren Aronofsky's *Noah*

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This thesis examines Darren Aronofsky's 2014 film *Noah* as a pattern for metafictionalizing narratives into *thinking* stories as we confront the uncertainty and challenges of the Anthropocene. While Ecocriticism has sought for the development and promotion of nature writing and environmentally oriented poetry and fiction—"new stories" that will shape a stronger environmental ethic—it has placed too much responsibility for the environmental imagination on *what* we read rather than on the more important question of *how* we read. My argument addresses the readerly responsibilities that, if met, have the power to transform old stories and old habits of mind into environmentally relevant attitudes and behaviors. The search for new stories, in other words, although important, has tended to understate the responsibility of the reader to make stories new and to read them as cosmologies that pertain to our contemporary situation. What is needed are new ways to read and engage with stories, new reading methods to metaphorize narratives themselves, making them metafictional even when they are not. Now, in an age of climate change and environmental degradation, it is time for us to think about stories in relation to our role as protagonists in the story of the earth, imagining new possibilities and actively accepting our role of writing our story anew. I hope to demonstrate that this type of aggressive reading of even popular culture (often regarded as mainstream, or "*thoughtless*" stories) can mine the necessary insights to reexamine humanity's relationship with the earth and its inhabitants.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, environmental humanities, Ecotheology, Anthropocene, climate change, Darren Aronofsky, Noah, metafiction, imagination, storytelling, cosmology

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## Introduction

*Because that's what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.*

*–Saving Mr. Banks*

Living within the planetary condition of the Anthropocene, we are faced with entangled issues of climate change, environmental degradation, ecological health, biodiversity and extinction, human rights, poverty, and violence, questioning meaning and our own place and responsibility in the midst of it all. Theologian and ethicist Willis Jenkins asserts,

It is not unprecedented for a species to transform the biosphere... It is unprecedented that a species should do so knowingly, worrying over the changes it makes, wondering if it imperils the systems on which life depends, if it acts badly, if it risks its hopes for the future. Never before (we think) has a species understood that its story was renarrating life, and asked itself if it was telling the story well. (2)

Understanding the effect that humanity's narrative has on our relationship with the natural world, Ecocriticism has sought for the development and promotion of nature writing and environmentally oriented poetry and fiction. It has, in other words, tried to identify and advocate for the "new stories" that will shape a stronger environmental ethic, attempting to help us confront issues of the Anthropocene and reorient our humanity. However, in all of this work, Ecocriticism has placed too much responsibility for the environmental imagination on *what* we read, rather than on the more important question of *how* we read. That is to say, even more than a new story, we need a new method for reading and engaging with stories with moral imagination, an active storytelling system that inspires us to reexamine the stories we are telling, and actively

imagine resolutions to the challenges we face today. What are the stories that we are telling and living today, and how might we read them differently?

Emerging as a response to the unexplained and traumatic chaos of the world, Theologian Thomas Berry identifies the traditional stories of the Western tradition as being twofold:

In effect, science rather than a sense of salvation history came to dominate cosmological thinking. The religions, for the most part, maintained ancient cosmological symbols in their liturgies, but effectively retreated from cosmological knowledge of reality. These two worlds, namely, the world of historical change and the world of the sacred cosmos, became two separate realms with little rapport with each other. (*The Christian Future* 109)

Berry further argues that while contemporary technology and research indicates that “the universe carries within itself a psychic-spiritual as well as a physical-material dimension” (*The Dream of the Earth* 131), Western society remains dedicated to keeping these two components severely disconnected. As separate and closed systems, these mimetic metanarratives repetitively provide objective information, but do not allow for the integration of new ideas, only new observable data disseminated from those of perceived authority. While we remain dedicated to these old narratives and understandings, Berry contends, the origin and understanding of human consciousness remains a mystery, and hence “[t]he human is seen as an addendum or an intrusion and thus finds no real place in the story of the universe” (131-32).

Desperate for truth, identity, and meaning, we ultimately allow our survivalist alter-egos to take over, accepting what literary scholar Marshall Gregory has termed “*thoughtless*” stories: “The kinds of stories whose influence I deplore, and invite you to deplore as well, are not deliberately malicious stories but are mostly *thoughtless* stories that eagerly reflect, mostly for

commercial reasons, the leading clichés and prejudices of any given cultural moment... anesthetiz[ing] our ability to *think* about the very issues they pretend to illuminate” (194). Because stories innately hold within them the power to shape society, identity, and ethics, these *thoughtless* stories—void of substance or meaning—consequently shape their readers into thoughtless, empty beings as well. Consequently, we now suffer from what literary scholar Brian Boyd calls a “mental diabetes epidemic” (qtd. in Gottschall 198), sacrificing our freedom to gain security, believing that “behind bars [we] lead more secure and better lives” (Vargas Llosa 2). Consuming *thoughtless* stories in this way, we struggle to take action and make sense of our world and our place within it.

However, we cannot blame stories for not moving us in the right direction, since they are at least in part, our creations. The stories we tell say much about the kind of world we want to live in, and as such, we are responsible for their meanings. Jenkins argues, “Instead of constructing alternative cosmologies from the start... moral consciousness shifts as agents use their inheritances, and collaborate with others using their own inheritances, to create possibilities of moral action in the face of overwhelming problems” (43). The search for new stories, in other words, although important, has tended to understate the responsibility of the reader to make stories new and to read them as cosmologies that pertain to our contemporary situation. Jenkins further suggests that in confronting overwhelming global issues like climate change we need to reexamine religious traditions, as religious and ethical groups are inherently structured to use moral imagination in adaption: “[R]eligious ethics holds promise for confronting unprecedented problems not because it possesses a special kind of moral resource (values, beliefs, worldviews) but because it works within traditions that are constantly being renegotiated and redeployed in order to meet new contextual demands” (5). This paper seeks to address the readerly

responsibilities that, if met, have the power to transform old stories and old habits of mind into environmentally relevant attitudes and behaviors.

As stories transmit ideas, morals, and ethics they give rise to belief, providing order and meaning to our lives. Just as our bodies cannot physically survive without breathing air in and out of our lungs, neither can our minds exist without the constant intake and emission of stories. On a physical plane, we certainly can exist and survive, provided we can obtain the proper food, water, and shelter; however, the true beauty of our human existence, the very lifeblood of our own humanity, is the unique partnership of creativity and reason that ultimately makes us human—and this is what lies at the very core of stories and storytelling. Mario Vargas Llosa, recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, explains that it is within this partnership that humanity's strivings for deeper value began, as primitive man began to imagine and tell stories in a collective, communal experience:

From the time they began to dream collectively, to share their dreams, instigated by storytellers, they ceased to be tied to the treadmill of survival, a vortex of brutalizing tasks, and their life became dream, pleasure, fantasy, and a revolutionary plan: to break out of confinement and change and improve, a struggle to appease the desires and ambitions that stirred imagined lives in them, and the curiosity to clear away the mysteries that filled their surroundings... That is why this must be repeated incessantly until new generations are convinced of it: fiction is more than an entertainment, more than an intellectual exercise that sharpens one's sensibility and awakens a critical spirit. It is an absolute necessity so that civilization continues to exist, renewing and preserving in us the best of what is human. (11)

Today, however, as we find ourselves encountering issues of the Anthropocene, we are faced with forms of chaos and uncertainty that envelope life on a global level. Even as globalization and contemporary technology works to preserve our physical bodies and lives, these are the very things degrading our environment and cultural ecologies. While we continue to tell stories, we do so forgetting the intentionally deeper meaning they once provided; rather than “renewing and preserving in us the best of what is human,” our stories have become automated and mimetic, separating us from our innately human, imaginatively creative responses to the world around us.

Functioning as separate and closed systems the rigid duality of our old metanarratives and the *thoughtless* stories we have been telling do not promote the use of the active, integrative imagination that is needed to confront the global challenges of the Anthropocene. Berry further argues that our traditional repertoires of understanding must adapt in order to encourage a “growing awareness of the integral physical-psychic dimension of reality” (*The Dream of the Earth* 133). Jenkins elucidates,

A cosmological strategy approaches social problems through interpretation of cultural worldviews. It addresses problems indirectly by confronting the metaphors, symbols, and stories that shape an agent’s perception of her world. Through this strategy... ethics sustains possibilities of moral agency in the face of unprecedented problems, by using imaginative resources to reinterpret worldviews and thus alter the pictures of reality by which persons orient their action. (81)

By exercising our internal moral imagination rather than waiting for an external answer produced from only half of the equation (solely religion or science), we can interpret the global challenges at hand and concretely learn from our own participation in the world.

Accordingly, we need to read stories in a manner that requires more imagination from the reader. We need new ways to read and engage with stories, new methods to metaphorize narratives themselves, making them metafictional, even when they are not. Works of popular culture (often seen as *thoughtless* stories) can have important, redeeming values even when they are not inherently self-reflective, for as readers we can both read and re-create these stories in metafictional ways. Viewing stories in this way produces a productive tension between readers and creators, as neither are given the ultimate authority over the meaning of the work, at least not entirely; instead, both readers and creators become co-producers as they navigate this metafictional tension, reading, interpreting, and re-creating the work. Peter Stoicheff in “The Chaos of Metafiction” explains that unlike the closed system of a mimetic narrative that “creates the illusion that it is transmitting information about the world, a metafictional text reveals the world’s constructed nature. Refusing to arbitrate between levels of reality, metafiction generates multiple significations” (Stoicheff 21). By reading stories as metafictional, complex, open systems, the reader is encouraged to exercise more imagination in order to structure new interpretations and possibilities with which to confront the demands of the Anthropocene.

Because of the multiplicity of views and possibilities offered by the unpredictability of the imaginary, both the chaos of the imagination and the order of reason can coexist in a creative and productive manner, involved in continual integrated feedback loops of ordered disorder. Stories become such open systems when, as readers, we approach them deliberately with more imagination and active engagement, through which new meanings and new possibilities for belief can be discovered and created (as Victor Turner suggests, “make-believe is a way of making belief” [Jordan 175]). Such stories have the ability to structure an order to the chaos of the world, providing meaning to our lives and connecting us as individuals to the whole of

humanity (and to the cosmos). However, even in this we run the risk of becoming again ossified and overly rigid, as we could attempt to replace one structure with another. Consequently, as we metaphorize these narratives into metafictional stories, we also acknowledge the artificiality and constraints of the multiple forms, patterns and orders that we construct as we attempt to order the chaos of the world. Nevertheless, Caroline Levine explains that while there are “potential uses and actions latent in materials and designs” such limits can be disrupted: “Designed things may also have unexpected affordances generated by imaginative users... Rather than asking what artists intend or even what forms *do*, we can ask instead what potentialities lie latent—though not always obvious—in aesthetic and social arrangements” (6-7). Stories and storytelling contain such potentialities, accomplished through the microcosmic surrogate realities constructed in stories, within which the true power of stories is found, that is, the freedom of imagination. In order to take advantage of this power, readers must actively participate in the creative process of storytelling, becoming the storytellers themselves by imagining new meanings and entering into the story of the earth as active protagonists.

To intentionally enter into a story transforms old narratives into new, metafictional stories. I call this process that of the “*thinking*” story, the antithesis of Gregory’s *thoughtless* stories. As the inverse of the deplorable *thoughtless* stories that merely confine the reader to a knowledge of *what* to think, *thinking* stories are narratives and readings of stories that provide unique patterns of the imaginary, inspiring us *how* to think for ourselves—that is, how to actively create belief and participate in the story of meaning directly. More than even a *thoughtful* story, the *thinking* story is a story grounded in the perpetual action of reading and imagining meaning and thus requires an *active* verb rather than a passive adjective. The *thinking* story is a structured and ordered narrative and evaluation, yet one that leads to the openness of chaos and imaginary

thought, the context through which it is then guided back to order through the creative imagination of the reader himself as he constructs meaning and belief, assigning order to the disorder of imaginary thought produced by means of the story. Thus, the linearity of the process becomes nonlinear and cyclical rather, with “imagination clos[ing] the circle” (Jordan 137) as order begets chaos and chaos begets order.

An experience of C.S. Lewis illustrates a foundational example of the transformational power of a *thinking* story or an old story made new. Lewis did not know whether to give himself over to the chaotic freedom of his imagination or the structured order of his intellect—until J.R.R. Tolkien helped him to resolve this struggle through integration: Tolkien showed Lewis that the two opposing sides within, his reason *and* imagination, could actually be reconciled through a deliberate reading of already existent stories. Using a well-known literary medium—that of the Christian Bible—Tolkien revealed to Lewis a distinctive manner of reading and engaging with the Gospel narratives, illustrating that at their most basic foundation the Gospels are simply stories. The Gospel narratives had all the qualities of great human storytelling and creative allegories, yet simultaneously they still portrayed a true historical event, expressing the harmonious amalgamation of story and fact together. Colin Duriez explains, “Everything was true in the actual, primary world without losing the quality of myth that engendered joy. The Gospel narratives thus demanded both an imaginative and reasoned response. For the first time, both sides of Lewis—the philosophical Lewis and the imaginative Lewis—became engaged” (57). Here in the Gospel narratives, God is the external storyteller who then enters into the very story that he is telling, entering into that world in natural flesh, and by so doing, deliberately imagined and re-ordered a joyous conclusion from a tragic situation. In other words, God

restored order to a chaotic world with imagination through the telling of and entering into a story.

Likewise, we are the storytellers of the Anthropocene narrative, and as such we can deliberately enter into that story as active protagonists, creatively imagining new endings for our world. This type of aggressive reading of even popular culture can mine the necessary insights to reexamine humanity's relationship with the earth and its inhabitants. Through more deliberately imaginative reading and interpretation, we can "restore order with imagination" as we begin to imagine and create meaning for our relationships with the earth, and thereby instill hope for our future and the future of the earth and humanity. Now, in the age of climate change, it is time for us to think about stories in relation to our role as protagonists in the story of the earth. An example of this process in action is that of the 2014 film, *Noah*, directed by Darren Aronofsky. Aronofsky did not create an entirely new story, but neither did he accept the strict order of the biblical story of Noah as it is traditionally told; instead, Aronofsky essentially took the "old" story of Noah, traditionally seen as even mimetic in cultural representation, and re-read it with a metafictional lens. Aronofsky's film demonstrates the ability of both creator and reader to approach an already existent story in a metafictional way. Reexamining the narrative in light of our contemporary situation, Aronofsky reimagined Noah into a *thinking* story, bringing it to life and providing the opportunity for viewers to reimagine their relationship with the earth and with each other.

### **Old Stories Made New: Reimagining Noah**

Within the Western tradition, the story of Noah is presented not literally as recorded in the Bible; instead, it is portrayed as a positive salvation narrative, emphasizing the righteousness

of Noah, a caring old man who cheerfully leads a group of endearing animals to new life, concluding with the awe-inspiring rainbow finale. Theologian and scholar Robert K. Johnston describes this traditional presentation of Noah: “Picture-book stories, children’s songs, nursery school decorations, flannel-graph stories, movies, and ceramic collections of Noah and his ark have mostly been presented as comedies, not tragedies, with God protecting a bearded, white-haired Noah, his family, and the animals... The take away has often been: we can count on God to be gracious, and we can, but that is not the whole story” (89). Presented in this sanitized manner, the story of Noah illustrates a seemingly Edenic and natural harmony between God, the environment, and mankind that “maintain[s] the reader’s happy ignorance of the illusion in which he is enmeshed” (Stoicheff 86). In other words, it is a *thoughtless* story, as its traditional mimetic repetitions reinforce and repeat the same moral directive. Paramount Studio’s vice-chairman, Rob Moore, explains, “Most people do have a sense that the Noah story is a short, happy journey where Noah rescues mankind and the animals. They’re not thinking, All [*sic*] but eight people die” (Friend). Similarly, environmentalism in the Western tradition has focused on the ideal “beauty” and “purity” of a peacefully harmonious natural world, excluding its inherently monstrous and destructive aspects from the narrative<sup>1</sup>.

However, the director of *Noah*, Darren Aronofsky, chose to deviate from this traditional representation, explaining that as a child he saw the darker aspects of Noah and the ark. Entering into the story of Noah himself, Aronofsky sympathized with those who had drowned in the flood, wondering, “What if I was not one of the good ones to get on the boat? ...I recognized

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<sup>1</sup> William R. Jordan examines this issue in depth in *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature*. “This, I will argue, is why the constituency for environmentalism, though broad, has remained inadequate to the task of bringing about real social change. Lacking a robust, reflexive awareness of shame, a way of confronting it somewhere near the center of the economic interests that define our relationship with the landscape, and of dealing with it creatively, environmental thinkers have typically sought communion in exactly the wrong places—in parables and models of harmony rather than in those troubling aspects of life and relationships in which the shame and tensions inherent in them are revealed and made accessible” (41).

there's wickedness in all of us" (qtd. in Falsani). For Aronofsky, the story of Noah had much more metafictional potential, the narrative itself framed by the dynamic of order and chaos as it brought up issues of justice vs. mercy, righteousness vs. wickedness, dominion vs. stewardship, our role and responsibility to Creation, and questions such as what is obedience? What is the nature of God? What about suffering?

Such questions plagued Aronofsky, staying with him into adulthood where he spent a decade researching and creating his film. Rather than relying solely on the order of the biblical account, Aronofsky pulled from both sacred and secular texts and fantasy as well as history and contemporary environmental concerns. Accordingly, *Noah* is a co-creational text as Aronofsky both reads the biblical text, delving into aspects of the narrative rarely considered, and then encourages the viewer to read his film, reexamining and recreating a new interpretation and *thinking* story for herself. For many viewers, Aronofsky's vision of Noah is upsetting, as it breaks apart the order of traditionally accepted interpretations opening the narrative to chaos and uncertainty. The Religious Right took particular offense to the film, seeing it as a work of anti-humanist environmentalism, calling Aronofsky the "anti-Michelangelo: a master craftsman using his talents to a dishonest and wicked end" (Nolte) and declaring that "If you're looking for a biblical movie, this definitely is not it... There's no redeeming value in Noah" (Bond). During an interview regarding his film, Aronofsky himself stated that "*Noah* is the least biblical biblical film ever made" (qtd. in Friend). However, in truth Aronofsky's statement illustrates how he has reimagined the biblical account, distancing his film from the enclosed order of traditional Christian expectations. Aronofsky's film, as the director himself explains, is not meant to contradict scripture, but rather to open it to questioning, to reimagine it in a new way for a new time. He explains, "The hope is that the film is for everyone" (qtd. in Collins) and that "it's about

the spirit and the spirit of it is going back to all those four chapters [in Genesis] and trying to be very, very truthful to every single word, every sentence and to bring it to life for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience” (Aronofsky, “‘Noah’ Director Darren Aronofsky Responds to Critics”). To connect to a contemporary audience, Aronofsky wanted his film to be an open interpretation of the story that would get viewers thinking past traditionally accepted paradigms and restrictions; Aronofsky wanted viewers to face the diverse questions that the chaos and uncertainty of the story and his film would ultimately engender, particularly regarding our stewardship over the earth in the Anthropocene. Invoking scripture, Aronofsky explains, “Leviticus, also in the Bible, talks about how every seventh year we’re supposed to give the land a rest. When’s the last time our land has gotten a rest? We’re way overdue for that jubilee. And I think that’s what I want. That’s why I made the film. For that reason” (qtd. in Falsani). Re-imagining *Noah* into a type of metafictional text, Aronofsky encourages viewers to ask questions of their responsibility within their own world.

While the biblical account remains, the film takes various liberties with the order of the original story and its related texts, adding to, subtracting from, and imagining them in a new dynamic way. Johnston explains, “[Aronofsky] wanted as a filmmaker the freedom to dramatize the story anew and to explore a different set of questions that the text more fundamentally suggested. What the filmmakers wanted was not so much a retelling of the story, but a reimagining, one that would invite a new dialogue and spur new questions” (93). Essentially, the filmmakers created *Noah* as a modern-day midrash, hoping that it would encourage viewers to ask theological and contemporary questions, as the film’s co-writer, Ari Handel, explains, “In the Jewish tradition, you look at a text in the Bible, and there are clues there, subtle details that raise questions. And they’re there for a reason, the thinking goes. They’re there to make you ask those

questions. They're there for more stories to tell, and to invent, and to imagine, that would shed light on those questions" (qtd. in Dunaway). In this way, *Noah* functions as a *thinking* story, raising numerous questions and contradictions about the past, present, and future of our world, many of which the film never truly resolves.

Elie Wiesel explains that the biblical account actually should be read in this imaginative way; the Noah narrative is full of never ending questions, but that therein lies its deeper storytelling power, as the past connects and transforms the present: "I read and reread the story of Noah, and experience a joy and anguish which are not just my own... they vibrate with life and truth and thus compel us, who approach them, to enter their lives and search for truth... it sharpens our awareness; it enhances our consciousness" (21). As Wiesel emphasizes, to view the narrative of Noah in such a way encourages its reader and viewer to enter into the story and participate in the search and discovery of truth. Consequently, Aronofsky's *Noah* was particularly appreciated by many religious leaders and communities, including leaders from Christian organizations such as the American Bible Society, National Catholic Register, The King's College, Q Ideas, and Hollywood Prayer Network. Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, declared the film to be "interesting and thought-provoking" (qtd. in Clark). Jim Daly, president of Focus on the Family, affirmed that the film "is a creative interpretation of the scriptural account that allows us to imagine the deep struggles Noah may have wrestled with as he answered God's call on his life. The cinematic vision of the Noah story gives Christians a great opportunity to engage our culture with the biblical Noah, and to have conversations with friends and family about matters of eternal significance" (qtd. in Alter). Rev. David R. Henson contends, "Go see *Noah*... It is faithful to what the text is trying to say, to its themes, and to what questions the text raises about

God and humanity. And, most importantly, it doesn't really answer them. It wrestles with them... The film functions more along the lines of faith: asking questions and living in them." The film lacks ultimate resolution to many of the uncertainties it presents, instead encouraging the viewer to reexamine and actively participate in the creation of meaning.

In this way, *Noah* functions as a *thinking* story, as it opens a space for its viewers to participate in the creation and recreation of meaning not only during the film, but also long after the film is over. Regardless of what philosophy or theology the viewer may hold, Aronofsky's metafictional approach to *Noah* opens the opportunity for "an inexhaustible possibility of interpretations" (Stoicheff 87). This can be seen in the film's contradictory reception: while *Noah* received predominantly positive reviews from critics and grossed over \$362 million worldwide, it simultaneously generated a great deal of controversy among audience members. However, whether or not viewers initially expect strict fidelity to the biblical text, the film incites deeper examinations of traditionally held ideas. Johnston reports that statistics from the weekend that *Noah* premiered indicate that "people opening their Bibles to Gen 6 increased by 300 percent in the United States and by 245 percent globally. Bible Gateway saw a 223 percent increase... You Version<sup>2</sup> reported that on opening weekend of *Noah*, almost 400,000 people read or listened to the Noah story on their app, the highest number of people exploring that passage that they had ever experienced" (110). Aronofsky's film challenges viewers to reexamine what they know about their own traditions, offering the opportunity for reflection, questioning, and possible self-transformation through application in their own lives.

*Noah*, it appears, endures as an invitation to postmodern speculation—to open and reexamine traditional biblical understandings, to ask what the story is about, why and how this

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<sup>2</sup> YouVersion is a free Bible app, not to be confused with YouTube.

film reimagines it, and why the story matters at all in our contemporary day. Theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer affirms that “no one culture or interpretive scheme is sufficient to exhaust its meaning, much less its significance” (419). Accordingly, Aronofsky argues, “[The Bible] *should* be a living, breathing document. That’s what it *should* be” (Falsani). As a living text, Aronofsky approaches these “old” stories as *thinking* stories to enter into, contending that biblical narratives can provide us with insights into our contemporary environmental problems:

Whether you see the Bible as truth or parable, it is evident that the ancient stories told within it are long-standing philosophical meditations on the world, the sacred, and our place within it... Made in God’s image as we are, possessing the power to create and destroy worlds, holding dominion over the globe and its inhabitants, we are asked to be good stewards. We have taken the dominion that was offered us. Have we taken the responsibility of stewardship? (Aronofsky, “Genesis”)

Aronofsky’s film thus provides a pattern for us to read and re-examine our relationship with the earth during the Anthropocene, helping us to make sense of our world in new, imaginative ways. Accordingly, *Noah* approaches the Bible as a timeless weaving of metaphors, revealing as much about a poetic past as it does about the present and the future, as Aronofsky explains, “It is a story of our tendency to fall into wickedness, and of the challenge to live in accordance with our better natures. It is a story of falling short of our responsibilities, of taking the beauty that has been entrusted to our care and corrupting it. But it is also a story of hope, a story of the possibility of change, a story of mercy” (Aronofsky, “Genesis”). Accordingly, *Noah* encourages us to reexamine our role in the story of the Anthropocene and imagine practical responses for the challenges we face.

### ***Noah* as a Pattern for Participation in an Ongoing Creation**

In this reimagined telling of Noah, Aronofsky takes the Creation story from Genesis and imagines it into several metaphors and retellings throughout the film, perpetuating the Creation as an active, ongoing process. Weaving these metaphors of the Creation into layers throughout the film encourages the viewer to not only view the Creation as an ongoing process, but also to take an active part in that ongoing process of Creation himself. S. Brent Plate explains, “Metaphors are not just flowery words or decorative flourishes for our speech and writing; ...Metaphor is imaginative, allows us to travel, feel, and comprehend the places, experiences, and knowledge to which we do not have immediate access... One thing suggests another; the familiar, already experienced, carries us to the strange, as yet unexperienced other shore” (19). By reimagining the original Creation into numerous metaphors throughout his film, Aronofsky enters into the old story of Creation and reimagines it anew as he recreates the Creation again and again. Each reimagined metaphor of the Creation (Noah, Adam and Eve, the Creation of the world, scientific evolution, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Isaac) transmutes into a conglomerate of integrated and often conflicting images and metaphors within the film, fluctuating between the impression of order and an aura of chaos. The effectiveness of such a method, as James M. Hansen explains, is that “while the abrasive pairing of anomalous images is initially meant to startle, it also has a way of concretizing truth in our minds that will not likely be forgotten” (21). These visual metaphors of the Creation “accomplish far more than providing viewers with an indexical storyline,” as they allow the film to both “cut and heal, dismantle and construct” (21), causing the viewer to continually reinterpret the meaning therein. Additionally, Aronofsky allows the characters within the plot to enter into the story being told and actively create and

recreate a new Creation story for themselves, further adding to the ongoing process of creation and recreation.

A film by such a design compels the audience to seek for understanding, becoming co-creators in what Theologian Gerard Loughlin explains as “a cinema of ‘reciprocity’ in which the audience comes to share with the author in the ‘misery and joy of bringing an image into being’” (301). In this manner, *Noah* transforms the ancient narrative of the flood from a dead document into a living, breathing story, “each individual of which will see the film differently” (300). Moreover, Aronofsky never directly names these metaphors, nor does he explicitly inform the viewer of their absolute meanings, so that with each metaphorical layer the audience must enter into the story themselves by assimilating what they see into their own experience, questioning traditionally accepted biblical metanarratives and reinterpreting the film and its meaning for themselves. In other words, with each viewing and each individual viewer, the original story of Creation is continually reimagined and recreated once again within and without the film. James K. A. Smith explains that the perpetual process of interpretation is at the core of the original Creation: “The hermeneutical structure of creation is good; it produces goods: a plurality of interpretations and a diversity of readings... Plurality in interpretation is not the original sin; it is, on the contrary, the original goodness of creation” (31-32). Rather than passively interpreting an overarching moral imperative directly given through the story, each interpretation, just like each viewer, will be transformed in a different way as each viewer ultimately chooses her own reading of Creation and how she will reimagine it moving forward within the reality of the Anthropocene. Even after the film has ended, the viewer can assimilate this pattern and creational experience of the film, yielding the potential to make sense of and better confront contemporary environmental challenges.

### **Cinematic Transformation of Time and Space in *Noah***

The Creation, as illustrated by Aronofsky, is depicted as an ongoing process involving the director, characters, and audience of the film as they become contemporaries in dialogue participating in the creation and recreation of meaning. Scenes of the original Biblical Creation are interspersed throughout the linear story of the film, allowing the cinematic narrative itself to act as its own version of that original Creation. Additionally, by transposing the story of Noah and the flood into cinematic form, Aronofsky opens the traditional narrative to a unique sphere of interpretation and understanding of our relationship with the earth. Ecocritic Adrian Ivakhiv asserts that film has an “ecosystemic” quality to it, an intimate and interactive relationship with the earth, acting as a medium for transformation: “Together this movement of images and affects reshapes the ways viewers perceive themselves (as individuals and as groups) and the world (including the landscapes, places, nations, civilizations, and ecologies that make it up), the earth that subtends them, and the relationships connecting all of these” (100). Claire Colebrook, elucidating upon the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, further explains, “Cinema is produced not from synthesized wholes and human observers but from the machinic and singular images of cameras, using cuts and multiple viewpoints” (34). For cinema to transform its viewer, according to Deleuze, it must go beyond simple mimetic replication. Colebrook clarifies that when cinema augments these technical characteristics (cuts and sequencing) it “can offer a challenge to the whole of life. The very techniques cinema uses to follow life – image sequences – can also be used to transform life, by disrupting sequences” (31). Cinema presents a challenge to our perceptions of our world, offering an opportunity to transform our relationship with that reality beyond the screen, particularly as we confront the uncertainties of the Anthropocene.

By reinterpreting, reconstructing, and splicing various biblical metaphors of the Creation through narrative, time, space, and uniquely cinematic elements, Aronofsky's film utilizes this power of cinema, producing new the new "worlds" Colebrook describes (47) as it connects the past and the present into a newly recreated domain. This in turn, creates a number of competing viewpoints and angles, liberating the sequencing of images from any single observer, abstracting time and movement, and blending the virtual and actual: "For Deleuze cinema has this power of releasing us from our tendency to organize images into some shared external world. We see imaging itself. Or, more accurately, there is no organizing and presupposed 'we' so much as a presentation of 'imaging'" (32). Such "imaging" for Deleuze presents itself in what he defines as the phenomena of *movement-image* and *time-image*. A *movement-image* produces competing points of view, allowing us to see movement itself. In other words, cinema used in this way allows us to see things directly in motion. Colebrooke explains that "the camera can 'see' or 'perceive' without imposing concepts. The camera does not organize images from a fixed point but itself moves across movements. This is the power of the movement-image... the power to free movement from an organizing viewpoint" (32). While the *movement-image* gives us competing points of view, the *time-image* frees us from any fixed, singular view-point through "irrational cuts" (53). Rather than a succession of self-contained moments, Deleuze sees time as a flow of mobile images. Colebrooke elucidates, "The cuts of cinema, playing mobile sections alongside each other, give us an indirect image of time as a constantly differing whole, open to variation and multiple durations" (46). The way in which cinema presents these mobile sections, creates a space where the past and present become contemporaries, cross-referencing and overlapping one another. In this way, time lends itself to creation: "From the complex flow of time we produce ordered wholes... There is not a world that contains time; there is a flow of

time, which produces ‘worlds’” (41-42). As Colebrook describes, this assists in creating an atmosphere of uncertainty as well as imaginative questioning as it provides the viewer with unique visions of time and movement.

By utilizing cinema in such a way, Aronofsky presents *Noah* as a *thinking* story as he establishes an ordered cinematic world of linear disorder, encouraging viewers to imagine and create a new order for themselves and the world they perceive. This is established from the onset of the film, opening with a dramatic visual montage of the Creation from Genesis, ordered in this uniquely chaotic way: a black-screen, followed by flashes of cross-cutting images of the cosmos, a green serpent, glowing silhouettes of shadow-like figures, and a vibrant red apple that beats like a human heart—familiar images and symbols, but composed in unfamiliar ways, encouraging the viewer to invest herself in the search for meaning and understanding. Close-ups are interspersed by long-shots, pans, and tracking shots, the sharp cross-cutting accentuated by a strong rhythmic sound. This fast-paced editing is used at various times throughout the remainder of the film as well, leaving the viewer caught between a feeling of stability and detachment, presenting the audience with both a series of competing points of view as well as the refusal of any singular viewpoint. As such, the audience is kept in a perpetual state of flux, lacking the stability to settle upon one single meaning and thus stimulating thinking and interpretation.

Centering the film around the Creation found in Genesis, Aronofsky places another spectacular reimagined depiction of it at the core of *Noah*. He explains that this was “one of the major reasons we did the movie... [it] kind of sums up the entire movie, so if you haven’t seen the film this is a really good cliff note of the entire film. It kind of sets up the stakes of the film, which is, we really wanted to capture the beauty of creation” (Aronofsky et al.). The scene begins aboard the ark as Noah and his family crouch in its dampened interior. Sitting in silence,

the family eats while attempting to ignore the screams and suffering of those drowning outside of the ark. After establishing this disquieting atmosphere, the camera cuts to a close-up of Noah's face as he looks down, eyes flickering in the chiaroscuro lighting as he mutters in a low voice, "Soon everything you know will be gone. All that is left of creation will lie within these walls. Outside, just the waters of chaos again." As he speaks, the camera cuts to brief close-ups of each family member as they look apprehensively at Noah, who whispers, "You're angry. You judge me." Lifting his eyes to look around at his family, he says, "Let me tell you a story. The first story my father told me and the first story that I told each of you." Within the framed darkness of the ark, Noah and his family are quite literally surrounded by a primordial chaos as the world outside is destroyed and the future remains uncertain. The only form of order accessible to them is that of the story that Noah tells.

This initial setting, cast with shadows and dim lighting as the camera cuts across close-ups of each individual's face, establishes the personal intimacy of the present moment as it connects across time and space to the original Creation of the world. Mircea Eliade explains that in repetitions of the cosmogony, such as seen here in the film, "time was regenerated, it began again as sacred time, for it coincided with the *illud tempus* in which the world had first come into existence" (80). It is important to note that at this point Noah becomes the master storyteller, attempting to restore order by retelling the original Creation story to his family once again—a story, he explains, that he told each of them at birth, highlighting its significance as a regenerative and communal power. Eliade asserts that the commemorative illustration in turn "*reactualizes* the event" of Creation (81), and together both those in the ark and those in the audience, witnessing the repetition of the original Creation as it is recreated aurally and visually, become contemporaries with that Creation.

As Noah begins the tale, he holds a bowl of glowing *tzohar*<sup>3</sup> near his face; covering the bowl, the scene also closes into darkness as he softly begins, “In the beginning, there was nothing. Nothing but the silence of an infinite darkness. But the breath of the creator fluttered against the face of the void, whispering, ‘Let there be light.’ And there it was, and it was good.” Mirroring Noah’s own setting, the primordial darkness of chaos is interrupted by a sudden explosion of light emanating from the center of the frame, opening into the order of the cosmos. As Noah continues telling the Creation story, the camera presents a stop-motion series of rapid shots; the effect producing a similar feel to watching a type of time-lapse photography, but rather than showing the progression of a single image, the viewer is presented with hundreds of different scenes, figures, and settings, all combining into one constantly moving time-lapse cinematic experience. For example, when Noah states, “Everything that creeps, everything that crawls, everything that walks upon the ground,” shots of such creatures and their various habitats flash in rapid succession, so quickly that it almost appears to be one single entity evolving over time—each millisecond a new picture, each picture a new creature and a new setting, composed in a similar position to the previous one in a unique match-cut montage. Noah’s voice is heard narrating the Creation while shots of biological evolution move across the screen: fish in water to lizards crawling on dry ground, short-haired to long-haired mammals running on all fours, and creatures climbing boulders to primates swinging through the trees.

The unique editing of these scenes implements the *time-image* and *movement-image* described by Deleuze, displacing the events and figures from any one fixed time or place; this in

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<sup>3</sup> In Hebrew, the word used for “window” in Genesis 6:16 (“A window shalt thou make to the ark.”) is *tzohar*, a word that generally refers to “midday” or “light”. In various Hebrew and Rabbinic texts *tzohar* is often described as a rock or stone hung in the ark to provide light (Bush 127). In the film, *tzohar* is depicted as a luminous gemstone holding the primordial light of Creation. Noah and his family use *tzohar* as a source of light and to create fire within the ark.

turn allows the biblical Creation to be reimagined in combination with the scientific theory of evolution, the two perspectives working together without giving definite authority to either one. As Berry explains, evolution is seen within a linear, historical time, and the mythos of the Genesis story of Creation is more outside of time; however, Berry further argues that while these two representations of the natural world remain separated from one another in Western tradition, they do not actually oppose each other:

The dynamic of Christianity that has insisted on redemption out of the original world of nature into the sacred world of grace should now lead us to return to the natural world to bring a new understanding for the entire planet... This return has not yet brought Christianity into full relationship with the natural world because we have not fully embraced modern science and its understanding of evolution... The evolutionary and the cyclical do not negate each other. They only need to integrate each other. (*The Christian Future* 110-111)

Berry's argument further emphasizes the paramount importance of reexamining already existent stories and traditions in order to productively confront the challenges of the Anthropocene. Aronofsky's approach is inclusive of both worldviews; in fact, when questioned about science and religion in his film, Aronofsky frankly replied, "I actually don't think they exclude each other" (Aronofsky et al.). Handel additionally expounds on the importance of including both science and religion in the film:

[T]his scene was all about trying to create a sense of wonder of creation, the wonder of the natural world, and for us, the most powerful way we could do that was to join the poetry of Genesis, which is incredibly powerful, with the visuals coming out of science, which are equally awe-inspiring when you actually start to

look at what science says about how life on earth came about... so that combination, we felt, gave the strongest sense of what's at stake when we talk about the environment being at stake. (Aronofsky et al.)

Like Berry, Aronofsky's vision renders holy the story of evolution, integrating the sacred and secular sense of time into a dynamic complex on screen. By grounding the narrative in this collaborative synthesis of the two traditionally opposing ideas, *Noah* once again opens a unique space for recreation and reinterpretation of the natural world and our place within it in which we utilize already existent traditions and values in imagining new possibilities of moral action within the Anthropocene.

Following this sequence of a sacred and evolutionary Creation, the film abandons the unique match-cut montage of time-lapse editing, returning to a more traditional cinematic flow as Noah speaks, "All was in balance. It was paradise." The juxtaposition of styles—from the rapid sequence of *movement-images*, *time-images* and montage to a suddenly peaceful and steady linearity—allows the viewer's mind to settle, albeit briefly, allowing what she has just witnessed sink in and connect back to her own experience and reality. A glowing hand reaches into the frame, followed immediately by a second reaching from the opposite side; as the hands come together to clasp one another, the camera pans forward with them toward a large tree. The image cuts to a worm's eye view within the grass as a brilliant green snake slithers into the center of the frame. "He gave them a choice" Noah continues, the snake shedding its skin to reveal a black serpent.

At this point, most viewers can recognize this as Adam and Eve in the garden, tempted by the serpent to eat the forbidden fruit as the camera cuts to a close-up of what appears to be an apple, although anatomically shaped and beating like a human heart. Noah's statement of

“balance” and “paradise,” combined with the onset of steady linearity, tempt the viewer with a nostalgic and peaceful Edenic state. However, as the film reiterates, the natural world is not so, as it is also inherently monstrous and destructive, causing the viewer to once again reexamine traditional environmentalism and the preservation of an idealized, romanticized natural world. Additionally, these particular images are the exact same shots presented in the opening sequence of the film as well as interspersed in Noah’s dreams throughout, once again transgressing the linear flow of time and space and unsettling any chronological stability for the viewer.

Subsequently the camera cuts to a new sequence entirely, as the editing shifts back and forth between a rapid montage sequence of match-cuts and conventional filming. The progression illustrates the story of Cain and Abel, as a silhouette of two men is lit by a sunset; as the first strikes the second with a large stone, Noah states, “And so for ten generations since Adam, sin has walked within us.” In a very creative sequence of rapid match-cut shots the two men are presented as if evolving through time, reminiscent of the evolution sequence seen earlier: their garments fluctuate through various historical attire and their weapons change from rocks to clubs, rifles, guns, riot shields, grenades, and so forth, as the one moves in to kill the other. This sequence highlights the sustained presence of original sin within all of mankind, reconnecting to the reality of the viewer with the emphasis of Noah’s words, “Brother against brother. Nation against nation. Man against Creation. *We* murdered each other. *We* broke the world. Man did this” (emphasis added). In addition, the scene integrates the viewer’s own reality by incorporating a visual account of human history once again into the mythos of the Genesis story. Bill McKibben explains, “The drive for human power and control that began in Eden is gaining an unstoppable momentum, and we are making that same choice with each day that passes” (80). In this way, the scene further encourages the viewer to consider the choices of the past and present that

perpetuate many of our difficulties in the Anthropocene today, reexamining and reimagining possibilities for the future.

Noah removes the covering from the glowing *tzohar* and we return with him once again to the present moment on the ark as he murmurs, “Now, it begins again,” revealing how even as he told the original story of Creation, he and his family are now entering into that story and living it through their present mission on the ark. Presented in only a few brief minutes, the viewer experiences a vast array of worlds and time periods, as the images themselves are presented in a way that causes a sense of movement in time as well as across time, cross-referencing past, present, and future in history as well as mythos. This is further impacted by the framing of the Creation narrative, beginning and ending with Noah in the present moment on the ark: the intimate experience of Noah’s family contrasts the cosmos and whole of Creation, fusing a point of connection for the familiarity of human experience within the context of the world’s diversity and uncontrollable nature.

Repeating and retelling the story of Creation in this fashion, as Eliade explains, is “a return to the original time, the therapeutic purpose of which is to begin life once again, a symbolic rebirth” (82). Wiesel further asserts, “That is the profound beauty of Scripture... Somewhere Cain is still looking for his brother in order to murder him; somewhere Isaac is still sensing death challenging his father; and somewhere Noah, as in a bad dream, still feels that the end of the world is near” (21). Rather than a single dogmatic story to pattern our lives by, Aronofsky presents the possibility of a new story, but one that actually encourages the perpetual reverberation and creation of an immeasurable number of new stories and understandings, integrating tradition and religion with science and the arts. In this way, the film represents a type of poesis or world-making; rather than mimetic (allowing the world to imprint itself on a person),

Aronofsky sees the biblical narrative as poetic and metafictional—a creative and even pro-creative way of making the world anew and making sense of things. As viewers experience the procreative power of Creation they are encouraged to think and create meaning for themselves, reimagining their role in the story of the Anthropocene today and the possibilities it entails. Utilizing this poetry of the Creation in this way reveals its inherent power, as Aronofsky asserts, “[B]ecause you can learn so much about it, and what we were able to do is to really look at it as this incredible mythical text and say hey, how does this apply to our world now and our condition in the world right now, and what can we learn from it” (Aronofsky et al.). In this way, Aronofsky encourages viewers to enter into the story of Creation as they reimagine and recreate a new understanding of the universe, experiencing it as a “cosmic liturgy,” as Berry defines, wherein we can “adopt a new sense of a self-emergent universe as a sacred mode whereby the divine becomes present to the human community” (113). By re-reading and retelling the story of Creation through this metafictional lens—joining religious and scientific values together—Aronofsky brings it to life a more tangible opportunity for the viewer to engage with inherited traditions, entering into the story and imagining a new ending for the story of the Anthropocene.

### **Re-Reading Stories as an Ecotheology of Transformation**

With the original Creation at the core of his film, Aronofsky allows the poetics of that Creation to radiate out from its center and penetrate into the more familiar, personal life of Noah, continuously reimagining new worlds of Creation that reflect back upon each other as well as onto the personal world of the audience as a *thinking* story. Aronofsky reimagines Noah as both protagonist and antagonist of the story, upsetting any traditional preconceptions the viewer may have of the narrative. Initially the viewer is presented with a peaceful and ecologically-minded

Noah who reprimands his son for taking the life of a picked flower; however, we quickly experience a Noah who can be violent, killing others to protect his family as well as the natural world, a Noah who admits to wanting “justice” for the destruction of his world.<sup>4</sup> Sneaking into a nearby human settlement, Noah observes violence and evil permeating the colony: women are violated, daughters are exchanged for meat, live animals are brutally torn apart, people fight over food and water, the entire community filled with desperation and greed. As he witnesses the scene before him in horror, Noah sees a man ravenously scrambling for food; as the man turns around, Noah is shocked to see his own face staring back at him, eyes flashing with the image of the dark serpent in Eden. Fleeing from the village, the image of his doppelganger and the destruction of Creation fresh in his mind, Noah questions why his family was chosen to be saved, realizing that they have not escaped the “original sin” any more than these people in the village. After witnessing human depravity at its greatest, Noah takes on a very anti-humanist environmentalism, deciding that the justice he longs for must come even at the cost of his own beloved family.

The anti-humanist extreme that Noah’s character adopts reflects questions back to the audience of the film, causing us to question our own moral status within the Anthropocene, because Noah is right; his family, along with the rest of humanity, are not perfect, and each of us continually contributes to environmental degradation, “whether intentionally or unintentionally”, as Ecologist Marc Bekoff explains: “All our buildings and roads, every human community, every vehicle, every energy source... our lives always impact nature, and it is difficult to live in our demanding world and not occasionally harm nonhuman animals, as much as we try not to” (71). Handel further stresses the importance of remembering our own faults, as he explains, “It was

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<sup>4</sup> Toward the beginning of the film, Noah confronts three men who are hunting one of the few animals left on the landscape. One of the men asks Noah, “What do you want?” Noah gravely replies, “Justice,” and then kills the man.

really, really important to us that this was not a story about there's good guys and bad guys ... What I'm saying is that the story is about all of us as individuals, too. And once you say, "That's about the bad guys and if I was there, I would have been on the boat because I'm good" then we're letting ourselves off the hook. A lot of what the movie is about is we can't let ourselves off the hook" (qtd. in Henson). *Noah* does not provide clear-cut answers and distinctions of what's "good" and what's "bad." Instead, the film illustrates these conceptions as entangled together in the character of each individual, encouraging the viewer to see herself and her world reflected in the story. Within the story's microcosmic surrogate reality, the viewer can better make sense of this and how it applies in the real world, reconnecting the various pieces and reimagining how they could be put together within the relationships between the environment and humanity.

However, it is all too easy to distract ourselves from this truth, as Bekoff further asserts that one of the critical complications of the Anthropocene is that humanity today operates as what he terms "*Homo denialus*" in which "we ignore nature because it's convenient to do so. We choose to live in oblivion and deliberately not know and not feel what we're doing. We prefer detachment and ignorance rather than to feel and share the pain experienced by other animals and nature" (36). In contrast, Aronofsky's *Noah* is willing to face the shame of an imperfect humanity, accepting his own wicked nature and the part he plays in the destruction of the natural world. Returning to his family, Noah reveals, "The wickedness is not just in them. It's in all of us. I saw it." Noah's wife, Naameh, immediately questions her husband's understanding, choosing instead to focus on the virtues of mankind: "No. Noah. There's goodness in us. Look at our boys: Shem's loyalty, Japheth's kindness, Ham's integrity. Good men." While Naameh highlights truthful attributes of her family, Noah is not blinded by the goodness in his sons; he knows that there is still wickedness in each of them: "Shem is blinded by desire, Ham is

covetous, and Japheth lives only to please.” Noah goes even further, asserting that he and his wife are just as wicked as well: “I am no better. And you? Is there anything you would not do, good or bad, for those three boys? We would both choose to kill in order to protect our children... We’re no different. We were weak and we were selfish to think we could set ourselves apart.” Naameh continues to question Noah’s logic, arguing now for love and relationships rather than individual virtues: “They are our children, Noah! Have you no mercy?” Undeterred, Noah only sees that humanity has destroyed Creation: “The time for mercy has passed. Now our punishment begins.” Handel repeats the importance of Noah’s revelation, reaffirming that the story is “not the good guys and the bad guys but the good and the bad within us” (qtd. in Chattaway). Aronofsky reiterates, “[W]e had to look at all the warts and all the mistakes and all of the issues... wickedness is in all of us, and we have the choice to choose between good and wickedness, but no matter what we still have wickedness within us” (Aronofsky et al.). Presenting the idea of a misanthropic environmentalism, the film incites viewers to investigate if human involvement in the natural world can actually be constructive, or if in the end we only deliver environmental devastation.

Like Noah, faced with our own involvement in the destruction of the environment, many turn to this anti-humanist approach, unable to find a productive way of seeing human participation in natural systems; however, Aronofsky illustrates many other possible responses to the Anthropocene. Naameh, for example, refuses to accept Noah’s interpretation of the Creator’s plan, acting on her own by asking Methuselah to circumvent their fate. Initially, Methuselah responds like Noah, explaining that the flood *is* justice: “The Creator destroys this world because we corrupted it, so we ourselves must be destroyed.” Naameh counters the order of justice, demanding, “All [my sons] desire is love. Isn’t that all their hearts need to be good?” Like the

countless number of questions within the film, Methuselah leaves this one unanswered, and instead asks a question of his own: “Who is good? Who is wicked? How am I supposed to know what is right?” Rather than inserting a divine imperative or moral principle, Aronofsky leaves it open-ended and uncertain allowing the audience to sit with this question, asking themselves who can be considered good or wicked, and what they consider to be wrong or right. This again reinforces the film’s encouragement of individual interpretation as a *thinking* story.

Additionally, while Noah dedicates himself to an anti-humanist environmentalism, Naameh chooses instead to fight for human life balancing Noah’s extremism. George Handley explains, “[W]e can say that since the Anthropocene implies a human stain that has perhaps always been with us and that may never be removed, climate change only foregrounds the age-old problem of accepting and finding hope in our vulnerable, broken yet beautiful humanity” (25). Bekoff further argues that while we cannot escape the fact that we are responsible for harming the environment, this “should keep us humble and nonjudgmental. We simply need to agree that we all must make every effort to minimize harm whenever and however we can... the best solutions are always a balancing act, a compromise between sometimes conflicting or competing needs” (71). Illustrating the good or bad within humanity, the film incites us to examine what sacrifices may or may not be necessary as we reimagine possible solutions to confront the problems of the Anthropocene. Balancing the destructive nature of Noah, Aronofsky reimagines hope and life of the Creation story metaphorically into the figure of Naameh. While Adam and Eve are told not to partake of the fruit of the tree in Eden, Eve questions this order, resulting in their fall from the garden and producing disordered lives, but also providing them with the ability to become the parents of humanity and begin anew. Like Eve, Naameh questions the presumed purity of an Edenic world and reimagines the meaning of the Creation, leading to a

new beginning of humans as she persuades Methuselah to bless and heal Ila who later conceives twin daughters.

When Noah discovers his wife's actions, he once again must question his own interpretation of the Creator's order. Rushing outside of the ark Noah desperately shouts to the sky, "I cannot do this! Tell me I don't need to do this! Please. Have I not done everything You asked of me? Is that not enough? Why do You not answer me? Why?" The sky grows dark, and Noah's desperate pleas are answered only by an empty silence. Rather than giving Noah a divine directive, the Creator leaves the choice in his hands, offering him the opportunity to make sense of and recreate a new order from the chaos Ila's pregnancy causes. Handel insists, "I see no reason why God couldn't put this decision in Noah's hands, and say, 'Here's a really good man. Here is a really just man. Here's a man who sees the wickedness of mankind as clearly as I (God) see it. I'm going to let him decide. And if he chooses mercy, I'll choose mercy'" (qtd. in Henson). Noah knows all too well that the wickedness of man cannot be eradicated unless all of mankind is; if he allows his family to continue having children, then inevitably the innocence of Creation will be destroyed once again. Lacking a deeper moral imagination, Noah struggles to create alternative possibilities of moral action to engage with the overwhelming reality he is now faced with, and thus he ritualistically responds to the void above him, "I will not fail You. I will not fail You. I will not fail You. It shall be done. It shall be done." Noah's dilemma once again parallels the overwhelming nature of climate change and issues of the Anthropocene, in that what we need is not more information or additional facts, but rather, a deeper moral imagination to re-narrate our story. Jenkins explains that "the greatest uncertainty in climate change is moral: how will humanity respond to its atmospheric powers? ... The meaning carried by a tradition's way of life is jeopardized until its participants create a way to extend its interpretation to a new

domain” (20-21). Like Noah, we struggle to make sense of the uncertainty of environmental concerns today, looking for higher authorities and experts in religion and science to tell us what to do; however, without actively exercising our moral imagination in new ways, we too will become paralyzed and unable to adequately respond.

While Noah’s response to the chaos at hand is unsettling (what kind of prophet would kill his own children?), it does show that he is willing to face the pain and the sorrow of his reality, rather than accepting Bekoff’s *Homo denialus*. Charles Shirō Inouye explains that “by not taking on the problem of sorrow head on, we are only postponing, or actually making impossible, a solution to this overwhelming dilemma [the Anthropocene]. By rejecting sorrow, we are simply training ourselves to avoid the negative consequences that justice brings, and by so doing, we hasten an unfortunate end of the world” (42). However, while Noah is willing to face his own shame, the understanding he has of the Creator’s story lacks the imaginative capacity to confront and deal with that shame in a productive manner. William R. Jordan, widely recognized as an intellectual leader in the field of ecological restoration, explains that when old experiences and understandings become obsolete, “[T]hen it is our job to invent satisfactory substitutes for them, and it is a dangerous mistake to go on using the old words, as we now do, sentimentally. Purified of their shame and drained of their tougher meaning, they serve only to reassure, distracting us from the task of inventing something entirely new” (52). Unable to do so, Noah is left without the means to create new meaning and hope within his situation, desperately holding on to his perceived ideal of an Edenic natural world without the interference of humanity.

Inherent in every act of Creation is a certain level of uncertainty, violence, or loss,<sup>5</sup> and here we see Aronofsky visualize this aspect of Creation in perhaps the most poignant metaphor

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<sup>5</sup> Jordan explains, “It is also, however, a paradigm of creation, an immediate encounter with the fact that all creation is destruction, and that all animal life proceeds out of death and depends on it” (38).

in *Noah*, that of Abraham and Isaac, reimagined through Noah and his newborn granddaughters. After giving birth, Ila escapes with her children to the roof of the ark where she is confronted by Noah, who blankly states, “I will not be stopped.” Although Noah is willing to face the pain, sorrow, and justice that humanity has incurred on the world, without the means to reimagine a new ending with the intrusion of Ila’s children, he must rigidly cling to his prior interpretations of absolute justice for Creation, driving him here to the desperate point of filicide. Inouye further suggests that “justice is not only *a* problem, but *the* biggest problem we face, the one that makes the destructive end of the world more, rather than less, likely to incur” (21). Noah’s intent may be to preserve Creation, but his single-minded focus upon the justice of a misanthropic environmentalism causes him to destroy his own humanity.

This scene marks the choice given to humanity in the face of the Anthropocene—to accept a misanthropic environmentalism that has no productive way of seeing human participation in natural systems or to reimagine an alternative type of coexistence, the choice between destruction or creation, absolute justice for the past and present or compassionate hope for the present and future. Knowing that Noah cannot be stopped, Ila ultimately submits, but first calms her crying children with a lullaby. Recognizing that Ila’s lullaby is the same song that he sang to her as a child, Noah is reminded of the compassion he once held for humanity. Suspended in time, the series of swaying shot-reverse-shots between Noah and Ila creates a deepening sense of intimacy as we see Ila’s resistant love for her children and Noah’s softening humanity, torn between his drive for violent justice and compassion for his innocent grandchildren.

Returning to the task at hand, Noah raises a large dagger poised above the serene faces of his sleeping granddaughters, alluding to Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac. However, unlike

Abraham's story, Noah must face the reality of his decision without divine intervention, using only his own creative agency (or lack thereof) to act. Noah indecisively raises and lowers the knife over and over, one eye wild and covered in blood and his face oscillating between competing emotions as if revealing the inner turmoil within, the choice between justice and destruction or hope and recreation. Unlike Abraham's story, Noah hesitates, then lowering the dagger he kisses each of his granddaughters gently before throwing down the knife and walking away. Muttering to the still silent sky, Noah concedes, "I cannot do this." Inouye asserts, "the upshot of deluge and destruction, this massive exercise of justice, was that it taught Noah to ask God a question" (49). Like Kierkegaard, Aronofsky questions the meaning of Abrahamic faith, but reimagines an entirely different conclusion to the narrative, causing Noah and the viewer to question the correct course of action in the face of chaos and uncertainty.

Believing that he has failed the Creator (as he has seemingly condemned the whole of Creation to inevitable destruction), Noah leaves his family, resigning himself to live in a drunken and isolated stupor. However, Ila seeks Noah out, desirous to know why he spared her newborn daughters, to which he replies, "I looked down at those two little girls, and all I had in my heart was love... I failed Him, and I failed all of you." George Handley explains,

Unlike the divine aid that relieves Abraham of his horrific duty, Noah lowers the knife and relinquishes himself of his duty out of mercy for his own kind. He can barely live with himself afterwards, seeing himself as an abject failure whose fallenness and weakness as a human are manifested by his mercy for his own posterity. In Noah's mind, we are so depraved, in other words, that we love each other, sinners though we are. Love is our curse. Until he can begin to see and

accept his freedom in a universe of moral complexity, he can only see human love as further evidence of weakness and depravity. (21)

Such freedom, Owen Barfield explains, comes through acting and exercising one's imagination: "[T]he individual imagination is the medium of all knowledge from perception upward... The act of the imagination is the individual mind exercising its sovereign unity" (Duriez 31). Unable to accept his imaginative freedom amid the moral complexity of his world, Noah dejectedly stares at the ground. The camera cuts to a close-up of Ila looking ponderously off toward the sea, opening the space to the vast expanse of the natural world. Turning back to Noah, she responds to his sense of failure with, "Did you?" As she speaks, the camera cross-cuts between close-ups of the two figures, presenting the viewer with a series of shot-reverse-shots; with each cross-cut the camera angles move in closer, until each face fills the majority of the frame, transforming the space to one of intimacy and individuality. Ila explains, "He chose you for a reason, Noah. He showed you the wickedness of man and knew you would not look away. But then you saw goodness, too. The choice was put in your hands because He put it there. He asked you to decide if we were worth saving. And you chose mercy. You chose love." Ila saw the justice of the Creator enacted through Noah, but unlike Noah she allowed that sorrow to spark imaginative questioning.

Jordan explains that taking action, even in the face of uncertainty, is actually an essential part of participating with the Creation: "The point is that it is in making such radical decisions that we participate most fully in the monstrous and beautiful process of creation itself, and the inevitable foreclosing of possibilities it entails. This is naturally troubling and shameful. Yet it is a principle of creation and, properly handled, it too can be the source of beauty, community, and meaning" (39). Inouye further suggests, "Like Noah, we see that of all the destructive forces on

earth, the most dangerous power of all is truth without mercy” (105). Noah intended to preserve Creation, but in an idealistic, Edenic state; like many Environmentalist agendas, Noah failed to recognize the destruction and violence that is inherent in Creation and the natural world. In order to confront the challenges of the Anthropocene in a productive manner, we must also acknowledge the shame, difficulties and frustrations that are part of the natural world and our participation with it but nonetheless continue to take action, accepting a certain level of risk and uncertainty.

Aronofsky asks, “So, why go through this? What is the reason for it? To me, that’s what’s powerful about it. It’s meant as a lesson. It’s poetry that paints images about the second chance we’ve been given, that even though we have original sin and even though God’s acts are justified, He found mercy. There is punishment for what you do, but we have just kind of inherited this second chance. What are we going to do with it?” (qtd. in Falsani). Noah attempted to control that second chance with ultimate justice and unrelenting order, feeling hopeless to any other option, but in the end, he could not follow-through; instead, upon facing the sorrowful reality before him, he enters into the story being told, an active agent participating with the creation and recreation of meaning as he chooses compassion and imagines an alternative ending, as Ila clarifies to him. Arguing for the necessity of compassion in such apocalyptic situations, Inouye contends that we must first accept the order of justice, confronting shame and sorrow, but that such suffering is answered by the opening of compassion, an “energizing from the exhaustion of our hope. ...we find peace within strife, hope within despair, beauty within sorrow, joy within suffering. Living on a warming planet from which we cannot escape, the way ahead opens only if we grasp our connections with each other and learn how to make the most of all things” (108-109). Accepting a more compassionate approach allows us to participate and

connect to the rest of the world, helping us to envision and create better solutions to the problems we face.

Like Tolkien's understanding of the Gospels, Noah at last recognizes that he must enter into the story being told and take on the embodied role of the storyteller himself by imaging a new ending and actively implementing that recreated story. Returning to his family, Noah embraces his role as a second Adam in the recreation of the world. As his wife Naameh digs a new garden, the camera cuts to a close-up of her hand in the dirt, coming into the shot from the right side of the frame. Shortly after, Noah's hand reaches into the frame from the opposite side, and the two come together to clasp hands in an echo of Adam and Eve during the earlier Creation sequence. This once again reinforces the metaphor of Adam and Eve in the garden, illustrating the narrative as eternal and virtual, as the philosophy of Deleuze underscores. Colebrooke explains, "Time moves forward, producing actual worlds in ordered sequences, but time also has an eternal and virtual element, including all the tendencies opening towards the future that can always intervene" (33). The film ends by coming full circle as the family gathers together on a mountainside where Noah performs the birthright ritual for his granddaughters that was attempted in the beginning of the film. In the ritual, Noah explains that "the Creator made Adam in His image, and placed the world in his care... This will be your work, and your responsibility." As Noah passes that birthright on to his granddaughters, he mirrors the same directive given to Adam and Eve in the Garden (Genesis 1:28), saying to them, "So I say to you, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth." In so doing he bestows upon the future of his posterity the creative role and responsibilities of Adam and Eve, that of active protagonists in the ongoing story of Creation, recreating and renewing the earth over and over again.

## Entering the Story of the Anthropocene with Redemptive Imagination

As the film concludes, we see that Noah has undergone his own recreation and reimagining, as critic Jadranka Skorin-Kapov explicates, “Noah’s resurrection occurs upon his understanding that innocence and sin, love, and hate, are inseparable in humanity, and he is ready to live with it” (127). Noah’s actions thus illustrate faith in a “redemptive imagination—the discovery that redemption is, in fact, a creative act, an imaginative revisioning and re-creation of the world” (Jordan 158). Without such imagination, Noah never could have grasped this understanding, as Jordan asserts that such reconciliation can be achieved “only in the realm of make-believe, where we can resolve in imagination inequities and uncertainties that cannot be resolved in literal terms” (137). However, Skorin-Kapov further warns, “[T]he hero’s journey ends cautiously but happily, posing recurring questions about the human condition. The situation is not that peaceful, and the future in the new world carries uncertain elements... something is won; something is lost, and maybe it is the best of the worst possible endings. There is a ray of hope, but cautious hope” (127-28). The ambiguous ending, balanced precariously on the possibility of hope, reiterates the film’s modus operandi as it refuses a solidified resolution, continually encouraging the viewer to decide, to create and interpret meaning for herself and take an active role in in the story of the Anthropocene, creating and reimagining relationships and methods to makes sense of the uncertainties we face.

By reimagining traditional biblical narratives and conventionally held interpretations of the Creation, Aronofsky’s *Noah* engenders what Em McAvan describes as “a virtualisation of the sacred, a foregrounding of the virtual as a legitimate form of experience, a pastiche of multiple traditions and generic tropes... and lastly a consumptive approach to that sacred” (4). As such, the film perpetually keeps the audience in a state of flux and questioning, even after the film has

ended, rousing the viewer to examine her own traditions and belief systems, and to reimagine the role of an ongoing Creation for herself. Aronofsky insists, “Noah finds grace in the eyes of the Lord. Humanity is given a second chance. We are living that second chance. This is our garden. We have dominion over it. Are we tending it? Are we keeping it?” (Aronofsky, “Genesis”). Today we are faced with overwhelming challenges of the Anthropocene, most of which we do not yet have solutions for, but as a *thinking* story Aronofsky’s film encourages us to continue to ask these questions, so that we might reimagine possible answers and potential courses of action.

### **Conclusion**

As we confront the confusion and uncertainty of the Anthropocene, we must think about stories in a new way; now is the time for us to see ourselves as the protagonists in the story of our earth, imagining new possibilities and actively accepting our role of writing our story anew. Aronofsky’s cinematic retelling of *Noah* embodies a form of poesis, offering us a pattern for the possibility of telling a new story and proactively re-creating our world within the Anthropocene. As he weaves metaphors of the Creation into the dynamic complex of the film, Aronofsky illustrates an ongoing process of Creation, wherein Noah must make sense of the chaos he is faced with and act even amid the uncertainty of the world around him. This in turn reflects back upon the world of the viewer, encouraging a metafictional viewing of the film that encourages active participation in creating meaning and making sense of the world within the film and the reality beyond it. Moreover, Aronofsky employs the philosophies of Deleuze through his use of the *movement-image* and *time-image*, creating a microcosmic surrogate reality where past, present, and possible futures can interact and cross reference one another. By poetically weaving together time and movement with the collaboration of science and religion, Aronofsky brings to

life the narrative of Noah for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century audience, asking us to imaginatively question what we know and how we wish to act in the Anthropocene. *Noah* helps us understand how to apply our moral imagination in patterns of thought as well as practices of action. Just as Noah learns to enter into the reality of his own story, not only imagining a new ending but physically enacting it, the film helps us understand how to imaginatively participate in literary ecosystems, but also how to subsequently enter into the reality of our contemporary situations and participate in literal ecosystems in a productive and creative manner.

Like Aronofsky's *Noah*, we are witnessing destruction all around us; we know of the impending doom that faces our future. However, as Inouye asserts, "The end of the world began long ago. What are we waiting for?" (109). Hence, like Aronofsky's *Noah*, we need to tell and actively re-read our stories as *thinking* stories, reading stories in a manner that requires more imagination from the reader (or viewer), even if the stories themselves are not about the earth directly. Such stories, as literary scholar and Ecocritic Ursula Heise suggests, "Enable the imagination not so much of the end of nature as its future" (69), constructing an open system of chaos and order, imagination, and possibility, not only in the world itself but in the unpredictable feedback loops and relationships between the stories and their readers. To read our narratives as *thinking* stories in this way, "[E]nvisions a world that can renew itself rather than a universe that is constantly running down" (Hayles 12), opening the space for potentialities rather than denial or despair. We need to tell *thinking* stories and read stories in an active, imaginative way, inspiring readers how to think, so that we ourselves can become the storytellers and enter into our own story, restoring order to the chaos of our world with imagination, instilling hope again and again and again. By viewing the Creation as an ongoing process that we ourselves can actively participate in, we are given the power to reimagine our relationships with the earth and

with each other, because as Vargas Llosa contends, “Ours will always be, fortunately, an unfinished story,” and as active readers we have the responsibility to imagine the meanings and possibilities for our story of the universe.

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