

# Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/122403/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Garner, Ross 2020. Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom by J. A. Bayona [Review]. Science Fiction Film and Television 13 (3) , pp. 449-454. file

Publishers page: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/766531>  
<<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/766531>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



***Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (J.A. Bayona US 2018). Universal Pictures/Amblin Entertainment/Legendary Pictures. PAL Region 2. 2.39:1. £14.99**

**Ross P. Garner**

*Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (*JKFW* hereafter) was released in UK cinemas on the 8<sup>th</sup> June to directly coincide with the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg 1993; in the US the film opened slightly later on June 22<sup>nd</sup>). *JWFK* has grossed over \$1.3 billion at the global box office, outperforming the franchise's ground-breaking first instalment but falling short of the returns generated by the film to which it is a direct sequel – *Jurassic World* (Trevorrow 2015). Whilst these figures point towards the property's continuing popularity to provide audiences with dinosaur-derived spectacle, critical reception of the film was predominantly hostile. Bryan Bishop of *The Verge* named *JWFK* “the kind of dumb, cynical blockbuster that the first *Jurassic World* was warning audiences against” while Peter Bradshaw of the *Guardian* deemed the film “a boisterous but muddled franchise-iteration which reshuffles all the old constituent plot points.” (Bradshaw 2018: para. 1). Such commentary replays popular attitudes towards franchise sequels which interpret these simply as corporate money-making exercises which are devoid of creativity. Some of these positions are applicable to *JWFK*: the human characters are, for example, one-dimensional types who are given little opportunities for development across the film's narrative. However, some of the replaying of established franchise notes do, as this review argues, attempt to push the property forward by accentuating different genre codings. Whether these strategies are successful thus becomes the point for debate as it is also arguable that such shifts create tonal inconsistencies which undermine the franchise's scientific discourses.

Given the anniversary context and the aforementioned ‘reshuffled plot points’, some might expect a nostalgic edge to *JWFK*. This is not the case, though. Whilst certain self-referential homages, such as cueing audiences to again gaze awe-struck when first seeing a Brachiosaurus, carry a momentary affective charge, others (e.g. a new take on the ‘clever girl’ who can open, in this instance, windows) fall flat. It therefore becomes easy to read the nostalgic response to allusions such as the latter as exemplifying the reified nostalgia discussed by Frederic Jameson concerning postmodern Hollywood blockbusters.

Alternatively, nostalgic cues are undercut by demonstrations of unnecessary cruelty. One sequence especially demonstrates this point: after having been invited to care about Isla Nublar’s Brachiosaurus’, audiences must then endure an extended sequence where a fellow herd member (possibly the same Brachiosaurus) is abandoned at the island’s dock and subsequently engulfed in lava and ash from the now-active volcano. On the one hand, the sequence is visually clever as its use of colour implies that the park’s dinosaurs are returning to being fossilised in amber, just as their DNA was preserved many millennia ago. On the other, this sequence feels distinctly ‘off-brand’ for a property that has frequently foregrounded the wondrous and whimsical nature of witnessing dinosaurs in the present. The harrowing, lonely and frightened cries of the Brachiosaurus, combined with the (melo)dramatic non-diegetic music, instead make this sequence a gruelling and manipulative watch.

Some critics of particular political persuasions may praise the film’s stance towards nostalgia as this represents a step-away from revelling in regressive ideas concerning either the cinematic experience or how popular media construct the Mesozoic. However, I would argue that in many ways this sequence is emblematic of *JKFW* in general: deployments of sophisticated visual style are infrequent and cannot make up for either tonal inconsistencies

or the film's failure to make coherent points about humanity's current relationship to natural history or genetic engineering.

In terms of narrative themes, *JWFK* does demonstrate some (sub-)generic innovation.

Writing on popular fictional dinosaur narratives, academic W.J.T. Mitchell has argued that "It is ...rare for dinosaur stories to deal with extinction." This has partly been because of the work that dinosaurs culturally perform to remind us of our own species mortality. The fact that *JWFK*'s first hour directly confronts these issues through its volcano premise should therefore be recognized and perhaps provides an additional layer of meaning as to why the 'abandoned Brachiosaurus' sequence is such a difficult watch. Moreover, directly engaging with themes of extinction provides both the movie's initial ethical dilemma concerning humanity's obligations towards the welfare of creatures that it has engineered back from extinction and the narrative motivation for returning characters Claire (Bryce Dallas Howard) and Owen (Chris Pratt) to the now-derelict Jurassic World site. These ethical debates are twice juxtaposed against the agendas of neo-liberal capitalism, and lose the discussion with disastrous consequences. Firstly, ethical scientific responsibilities are negated at the level of the nation state (cue a brief cameo by Jeff Goldblum as fan-favourite Dr Ian Malcolm) as the US government refuses to help evacuate the dinosaurs as the volcanic eruption is an 'act of God' and responsibility is deemed to lie with the private company. This leads to the second juxtaposition as the dinosaurs become subject to depersonalized global economic flows: the rescue mission, initiated by gentile-but-aging philanthropist Benjamin Lockwood (James Cromwell; a hitherto unseen former colleague of John Hammond (Sir Richard Attenborough) who assisted in developing the genetic technology used in resurrecting the dinosaurs) via his second-in-command, Eli Mills (Rafe Spall), is revealed to be an exercise in private gain as the acquired dinosaurs are to be sold by Mills for scientific and/or militaristic

experimentation and exploitation. If *JWFK* confronts extinction head-on, then, there's a sense that humanity will ultimately get what it deserves if it continues down a path of private wealth accumulation; the dinosaurs of *JWFK* are where audience sympathies are directed towards.

It is during these points that *JWFK* feels like it might make some statements of socio-historical critique. Whilst the Great White Hunter-type characters (led by Ted Levine's trophy-collecting Wheatley) are suggested as under Lockwood's and Mills's employment, and therefore might be representatives of the franchise's enigmatic InGen corporation, these links are not explicit. Moreover, when the attendees assemble for the dinosaur auction in the second part of the film, these are similarly constructed as anonymous business personnel from around the world (Indonesia and Russia are explicitly mentioned) whose source of income is unclear. In other words, *JWFK* obfuscates its location of power and capital, suggesting that these processes operate at a dizzying level beyond the comprehension of the average citizen. Yet, like the thinly-veiled implication that auction host Gunnar Eversoll (Toby Jones), complete with a wispy, golden comb-over haircut and obnoxious attitude, represents a Trump-esque character these critiques are not developed into an explicit stance. Instead, the representatives of global capitalism function solely as types, representatives of 'cruelty' that we should simply delight in getting their comeuppance at the hands of the creatures they singularly understand as commodities. In other words, the dinosaur's oppressors are overcome but no broader resolutions are offered.

*JWFK*'s greatest strengths lie not in its social commentary but in its deployment of horror conventions. Mitchell has also argued that the original *Jurassic Park* narrative resonated because it fused together "two great modern narratives - the big game Hunt (*King Kong*) and

scientific resurrection (*Frankenstein*)". The gothic trappings of the latter are recurrent throughout *JWFK*, especially during its second half where the Lockwood Estate becomes reconfigured as a 'terrible house' harbouring dark secrets in its basement laboratories. This is because it is revealed that genetic experiments have been restarted with a view to creating a new weaponizable dinosaur hybrid: the Indoraptor (a cross-breed between Velociraptor DNA and that of the last film's cross-breed, the Indominus Rex). The Indoraptor's introduction is skilfully teased via horror tropes including concealing the creature's true form so that only glimpses of its monstrosity occur. When Lockwood's (assumed) granddaughter, Maisie (Isabella Sermon), has her hair unexpectedly stroked by the Indoraptor's spindly clawed digits, her reaction is characterised by the shrieks, recoils, and suggestions of impurity which Noel Carroll identified as art-horror's aesthetic. The Indoraptor is also coded as a creature that violates cultural categories: it demonstrates human cunning through how it tricks and kills Wheatley whilst also being an instinctive, animalistic hunter-killer; it is simultaneously timely (as a creation of genetic science) and temporally displaced (through existing in the present). In short, it is an abomination of genetic fusion.

The Indoraptor's coding of (gothic) monstrosity is skilfully constructed during sequences where the creature (inevitably) breaks free and pursues Claire, Maisie and Owen around the Lockwood Estate via the use of German Expressionist-esque high shadows. These aesthetic choices, alongside the dark and rain-drenched colour palette into which the Indoraptor blends, add to the monster's dread and menace, enhancing the atmosphere. Similarly, following the narrative twist where it is revealed that the Indoraptor is not the only genetic anomaly that has been made in Lockwood's basement via revealing that Maisie is not (the by-now deceased) Lockwood's granddaughter but instead a clone of his daughter who was created following a car crash, there is a brief-but-clever shot inviting audiences to consider Maisie and the

Indoraptor as alike. As Maisie looks out on Lockwood's darkened room of dinosaur fossils, the Indoraptor's drooling jaws become super-imposed over her reflection as though she is looking in a mirror. Human clone and genetic abomination become visually linked in terms of their genesis and it's disappointing that this idea is not explored further. Instead, *JWFK*'s opportunities for building upon such ethical and philosophical positions are glossed over as this brief contemplative moment is abandoned in favour of another high-octane pursuit sequence.

Whilst *JWFK*'s aesthetic engagement with discourses of monstrosity is effective, its handling of who are the real monsters shows less sophistication. The core question becomes whether it is the scientists and workers who endorse irresponsible genetic engineering (of which Owen and Claire are implicated) are 'less human' than the creatures they create. The answer that the movie provides points the finger towards the former. After all, it falls to fellow laboratory-product Maisie to take the decision to free the dinosaurs who are choking to death in the basement and let these co-exist with humanity at the film's conclusion. As the character says in defence of her actions, "they're alive. Like me." Maisie's thoughtful cross-species libertarianism is nevertheless juxtaposed with the film's other representations of cloning and genetics which teeter towards self-parody. For example, although the Indoraptor is a successful cinematic monster, I was left speculating as to what genetically-engineered dino-hybrids the third film will generate: an Indolophosaurus-rex? An Indoraptoceratops? A Doyouthinkhesaurus? Such acts of fantasy may play well with child audiences by inviting them to imagine other hybrids as well as supporting wider brand parameters (the movie's accompanying AR game *Jurassic World: Alive* also contains opportunities for cross-breeding multiple dinosaur species) but, as an adult academic of science fiction media and a franchise fan, the approach seemed over-simplified. In all honesty, *JWFK* left me with an

understanding of genetic splicing akin to that represented by *South Park*'s genetic engineer who creates monkeys with an ever-increasing number of anuses just because he can. Such constructions are disappointing not only because of how easily they connect with existing popular culture parodies of genetics but also because, as A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* observed, the original *Jurassic Park* book and novel offered "a parable and an example of extravagant human ambition... The results were a little ridiculous, but also scary, thrilling and intermittently thought-provoking." Whilst 'hard scientific' plausibility is not expected within this franchise, some level of sophistication in its engagement with scientific ideas is anticipated. By pushing the horror codings, *JWFK*'s science-fiction discourses are underserved.

In summary, whilst *JWFK* demonstrates some positives in terms of aesthetics and the narrative themes it sets up, it is severely let down by its cartoonish representations of villainy and its scientific premise. The franchise deserved better in its anniversary year.