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Cryptozoo

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Cryptozoo

Abstract

This is a film review of *Cryptozoo* (2021), directed by Dash Shaw.

Keywords

Mythological creatures, Environmentalism

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John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Cryptozoo (2021), dir. Dash Shaw

Cryptids are animals whose existence is disputed or hidden, and this film applies this term to all the legendary creatures of mythologies from around the world—from unicorns, to satyrs, to dragons and gorgons. In this way, they are not called imaginary beasts, but animals that could be real because someone has viewed them as real. Writer and director Dash Shaw has envisioned a wildly creative world in his hand-drawn animated film, utilizing the talents of Animation Director Jane Samborski and a host of artists who have drawn their own visions of these creatures from cultures and religions all over the planet.

Lauren Grey (voiced by Lake Bell) devotes her life to finding and capturing cryptids, not to harm or exploit them, but to save them from those who would. A survivor of the Second World War, she was tormented by nightmares of atomic devastation as a child in post-war Okinawa, until a baku—an animal that eats dreams and nightmares—freed her of this pain. Hence, she lives to save the creatures who saved her.

Her nemesis is Nicholas, who kidnaps cryptids for the United State military. He dreams of using them as weapons to win the war in Vietnam, and to subdue protestors—this is 1967, and so American Imperialism is under attack, but enslaving and harnessing the power of the cryptids could be crucial for restoring American power and pride. To preserve White American Supremacy, diversity—viewed as monstrous—must be domesticated, or destroyed. We have seen this narrative’s persistence all too recently in the real world, and as Shaw admits that his story is an allegory, it is easy to see its sad relevance to our own time.

Lauren and her mentor Joan dream of creating a Cryptozoo where the animals can be safe, on display not as objects of horror but for education and the dispelling of prejudice and fear. Modern day zoos in our world have the same aspiration, but raise the same question of whether they actually increase concern for natural creatures or only exoticize them for voyeuristic purposes. Everyone has their own dreams in the film, whether to free, control, or save what is viewed as monstrous—and like the baku itself, we all thrive on dreams. But utopias have a habit of not working out, as one character puts it in the film; the hopeful idealism of the 1960s met the reality of government suppression and deceit. We face similar challenges today, torn between those who have hopeful visions of an accepting and diverse society, and those who fear difference and want to control or destroy it. We do not yet know how the story will end, but this film replicates the hopes and fears of our own era, creating a world in which tragedy lives alongside progress—if only in the form of a little more acceptance of difference, and freedom for those who struggle.