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Citation for final published version:

Garner, Ross 2017. Tomorrowland: A World Beyond (Brad Bird 2015). Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television 10 (2) , pp. 294-298. file

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Tomorrowland: A World Beyond (Brad Bird US 2015). Walt Disney Pictures/A113. PAL
Region 2. 2.20: 1. £17.99

Ross P. Garner

Developed during the 1950s and 60s, and accredited to Walt Disney's authorial vision, the Tomorrowland area of Disney's theme parks employ (now retro-)futuristic ideas concerning scientific progress, technological advancement and space travel in its aesthetics and attractions (e.g. the Space Mountain rollercoaster). Drawing loosely from these pre-sold (brand) values, *Tomorrowland: A World Beyond* (*Tomorrowland* hereafter) is a charming science-fiction blockbuster which distinguishes itself from many of its contemporaries due to its pleasingly optimistic (albeit ultimately ambiguously-coded) tone. However, popular reception of *Tomorrowland* has been less than favourable as the film was positioned as a box office flop on its release and drew an ambiguous response from critics. Whilst gaining favourable reviews in the UK (both the *Guardian* (2015) and movie magazine *Empire* gave *Tomorrowland* four stars), US critics were less enamoured as multiple aspects of the film generated negative evaluations. These included critiques of *Tomorrowland's* narrative structure (such as the plot being difficult to summarise and keeping the film's fantastical titular location off-screen for too long), its lack of cynicism – read as being 'too Disney' – and the commercially-rooted motivations behind the film. Addressing some of these criticisms, I'd argue that reviewers have missed the contributions that these devices provide to the film and that *Tomorrowland* ~~this discourse~~ should be reconsidered as an *Tomorrowland* interesting SF blockbuster which uses its generic tropes and imagery to by engages with issues including relating to nostalgia at the same time as asking audiences to

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think about how myriad contemporary socio-cultural issues, ~~generational positivity and how to envision and~~ shape our collective future.

Tomorrowland's narrative structure splits into three acts. The first, which likely accounts for the critical hostility concerning easy summarisation, adopts a stylised approach by regularly shifting perspective between protagonists Frank Walker (George Clooney) and optimistic teenager Casey Newton (Britt Robertson). These early sequences are essential for various reasons. Firstly, they provide important aspects of character backstory (including young Frank's (Thomas Robinson) visit to the 1964 World's Fair and his first meeting with both the enigmatic automaton Athena (Raffey Cassidy) and humourless technocrat David Nix (Hugh Laurie)) as well as giving audiences their first journey through the utopian Tomorrowland location. In addition, and demonstrating the benefits of using intercutting beyond purely stylistic purposes, these scenes establish some of the core narrative oppositions that structure *Tomorrowland*. The exchanges between Frank and Casey initiate their playfully fractious relationship which endures throughout and so alludes to one of *Tomorrowland's* ongoing tropes concerning inter-generational conflict. Whereas the majority of adults, such as Frank's Dad (Chris Bauer), Nix, and, initially at least, Clooney's adult Frank, are cynical and disillusioned, the younger generation represented by Casey are cheerful and enthusiastic.

Moreover, Frank's recollection of visiting the World's Fair and arriving in Tomorrowland establishes the movie's contrast between 'past' (and extrapolated future) and 'present' via the film's visual design of its temporal locations. Both 1964 and Tomorrowland are emblematic of how American society continues to remember the post-World War II era as a time of confidence and innocence where the belief that technological advancement would improve everyone's horizons was unquestioned. Such discourses are connoted through the gleaming chrome and white surfaces used in the World's Fair's visualisation and are also transferred to

the design of Tomorrowland. The latter is a world of shining surfaces and escalating curved architecture that suggests harmony between man and machine (the frequent use of double-helix structures reinforces this point). So, when the inter-switching between Frank and Casey settles on the latter, our 'present' contrasts starkly: the first location seen is the side of a dark and empty urban street where a graffitied mushroom cloud adorns the side of a building. These spatial juxtapositions thus set up *Tomorrowland*'s key enigma concerning how, as a society, we turned away from technology-fuelled optimism to accept the cautious, pessimistic world (symbolised by the decommissioning of NASA's launch platforms) that Casey anachronously inhabits.

These differences continue across *Tomorrowland*'s linearly-plotted second and third acts and culminate in an (admittedly formulaic) final confrontation-resolution segment. Here Nix is revealed as the villain who oversees the apocalyptic images that incessantly flow through *Tomorrowland*'s Monitor to our dimension and it is these which are leading humanity towards its self-extinction. Resolution is achieved by young (Casey), old (Frank) and technology (Athena) combining to destroy the Monitor but this is not before the movie's genre premise is used to provide socio-political commentary about scientific elites and contemporary social attitudes. Nix emblematises the dangers of how a singular commitment to scientific progress can lead to a superiority complex whilst humanity's willingness to accept its own self-destruction by passively embracing obesity epidemics, starvation and climate change is also made explicit. The latter critique is especially rare to find in a mainstream Hollywood blockbuster and is indicative of how *Tomorrowland* regularly asks audiences to think about the limitations of the present moment.

If *Tomorrowland*'s finale is routine, these complaints can be overlooked as what comes before is more crucial to the film's emotional impact and academic significance. This is because *Tomorrowland* excels in using its structuring oppositions and genre imagery to produce an intriguing interplay between different encodings of nostalgia. One form of nostalgia constructed during the film's second act focuses upon Tomorrowland's removal as a diegetic location. After being released by the police following being caught using everyday technology for sabotaging the decommissioning at Cape Canaveral, Casey receives the mysterious 'T' pin which acts as the 'novum' that temporarily transports her to Tomorrowland. Her journey through the location makes the audience care about this place, and Casey's attachment to it, as we witness the awe-inspiring architecture and futuristic society (including levitating swimming pools and high-speed transport) from the character's perspective. Consequently, when Casey's time in this utopia ends abruptly and the character is unceremoniously (yet humorously) returned to the dark and gloomy 'present' in the middle of a Floridian lake, we are invited to experience the same sense of disappointment and longing to return that she does (a feeling assisted by Robertson's assured and charming performance throughout). Moreover, when Casey, Athena and adult Frank eventually return to Tomorrowland and encounter a decaying and malfunctioning world (following a series of joyously innovative action set-pieces including launching an inter-dimensional rocket hidden within Paris' Eiffel Tower), the undermining of the film's nostalgia for its titular location, and its associated way of life, is both devastating and heartfelt. Critics who chastised the film for not giving Tomorrowland enough screen time have therefore missed the point – central to the film's emotional impact is a nostalgia for the titular location and the past-coded optimism that it represents.

Read from an ideological perspective, this 'nostalgia for Tomorrow(land)' could be interpreted as regressive hankering for the imagined values associated with a bygone period of American history. *Tomorrowland* offers a more complex attitude towards nostalgia, however, because of how this longing is articulated through Casey's characterisation. Although undoubtedly a girl out of time, and connoting a retro-sensibility (she is introduced wearing a John Lennon t-shirt and is always accompanied by her Dad's (Tim McGraw) battered NASA baseball cap), Casey's anachronous disposition within the present is always forward-facing. This is evidenced through her continually questioning 'can we fix it?' when faced with tales of impending devastation (both at school and in the now-dystopian *Tomorrowland*). The character therefore articulates a discourse of *pragmatic nostalgia*: although too young to have directly experienced NASA's achievements during the 60s and 70s, Casey is constructed as attempting to retain the positive, can-do attitude popularly associated with the US Space programme and its astronauts (see *The Right Stuff* (Kauffman US 1983)) and applies this to the 'present'. Rather than invoking aspects of the 'past' in a solely rose-tinted manner, the discourse of nostalgia constructed through Casey posits using the 'past' in a way that allows mankind's future to be approached optimistically as malleable and outward-facing. This additional discourse creates a complex interplay between nostalgia discourses, and how we as a society presently envision the relationship between 'past', 'present' and 'future', which makes *Tomorrowland* an enthralling movie for scholars of both science fiction and nostalgia. On the one hand, the movie invites us to consider the impact that a loss of belief in technological forward-thinking can bring but, on the other, it suggests that these values can be returned to and adapted for pragmatic purposes within the context of the 'present'.

Yet, the pragmatic nostalgia constructed through Casey's character solicited hostility from critics who accused *Tomorrowland* of both being too naïve in its optimism and forwarding core Disney brand values (be hopeful! Have imagination!). A. O. Scott of the *New York Times* best summarised this perspective by stating that the film's 'idea of the future is abstract, theoretical and empty' as asking audiences to be optimistic 'is really just propaganda'. Such comments are disappointing for a number of reasons. Firstly, at a time when era images of ubiquitous destruction dominate Hollywood science-fiction, *Tomorrowland's* optimism provides a refreshing contrast. Secondly, I'd suggest that some reflexivity needs to be demonstrated to where and when commercially-derived dismissals are deployed. *The Lego Movie* (Lord and Miller US/Australia 2014), after all, irritatingly ended strongly 'on brand' but this aspect has been overlooked in favour of praising the film for its engagement with political discourses. Dismissing *Tomorrowland* for ending in a similar manner, only this time through forwarding Disney-esque positivity, seems indicative of certain brand preferences at work. Finally, these negative evaluations overlook the various aspects of socio-cultural critique threaded through the film. For example, comments on the hollowness underpinning commercial culture are identifiable: the comic book store that Casey visits during her quest to find Tomorrowland harbours sinister robotic assailants whilst the revelation that the utopian vision that Casey has experienced through touching the pin is an immersive advert renders its imagery hollow and devastating. What's more, *Tomorrowland's* closing sequence implies that, for the future to be reimagined, this involves bypassing white male hegemony. As Casey and Frank re-commence the project of inviting creative visionaries from scientific and artistic backgrounds to Tomorrowland, those charged with envisioning Earth's future are East Asian musicians, female designers and non-white community workers and environmentalists. Despite Frank being present, it is strongly implied that Casey is in charge and this idea, encapsulated in the movie's final image of the

new recruits standing together amongst golden cornfields and glancing up at the futuristic city. Ending on this strong multicultural message provides a contrast to repeated images of white male (superhero) protagonists which dominate blockbuster SF at present and so suggests some substance to the future that *Tomorrowland* envisages.

Yet, the positivity of this final sequence is rendered somewhat ambiguous due to its polysemy and ability to be read from an alternative perspective through brand ideologies. Despite strongly gesturing towards racial and gender diversity, *Tomorrowland*'s closing shot directly recalls its first – that is the Disney Studios logo which here replaces the typical Cinderella castle with the gleaming dual spires of Tomorrowland. Whilst still readable as an optimistic finish, doubt arises: is diversity being encouraged with regard to helping shape humanity's future or simply towards being welcomed into the branded spaces of Disney? Where you choose to place your emphasis may, to borrow a metaphor from the film, come down to deciding which wolf you feed. As Casey recounts to her Dad at one point in the movie, 'There are two wolves and they are always fighting. One is darkness and despair. The other is light and hope. Which wolf wins? ... Whichever one you feed'. Although these commercial associations potentially taint *Tomorrowland*'s final statement, I'd argue that the film's aesthetics, use of science fiction themes to engage with nostalgia and optimism provide more than enough to side with Casey and feed the latter.

Works Cited

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