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The Commodification of the Natural World

As contemporary societies around the world begin to recognize diverse perspectives on global economics, more conversations regarding the capitalist ideology of the West are being held. In what was once considered a driving force behind economic growth and innovation, capitalism is now being questioned in Western society. As climate change and environmental problems continue to lead the discussion of worldwide issues, one may wonder how Western society's capitalist ideals have contributed to the destruction of the natural world. Art has followed the trend of questioning Western society. As climate change grows as a pressing issue, artists are feeling inclined to share their perspectives. For example, Harry Styles in his song "Music for a Sushi Restaurant" has prompted an interesting discussion on capitalism's profit-driven initiatives. The music video depicts Styles as a merman captured by the owners of a restaurant. Following his entrapment, Styles (the merman) is revealed to have singing abilities. The restaurant owners become entranced by his voice and ultimately decide to keep the merman around to generate more profit for their growing business. However, once Styles performs, he loses his voice; consequently, the restaurant owners and chefs decide to cook him into food. The "Music for a Sushi Restaurant" music video, directed by Aube Perrie, underscores the exploitation of nature for human gain. Perrie changes the perspective of the camera, coloring of the video, and uses fast cuts in editing to portray how Western capitalist ideals commodify the natural world, highlighting the ways in which it is destroying the environment.

The inclusion of a merman has a significant influence on the music video's narrative and message. A merman is a hybrid of man and nature, serving as a symbol of the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world. Through Style's character, the merman, viewers are presented with a tangible representation of nature. By embodying the aspects of the human and natural world, the merman creates a connection between the audience and nature as a whole. Nature is a rather abstract concept, making it difficult for humans to see their profound impact on the environment. The merman's personified representation of nature helps to make nature seem less distant and, therefore, invites a sense of empathy and understanding. The design of the merman reinforces this connection. Twenty-nine seconds into the video, viewers are shown that the merman's tail is subtly colored to blend seamlessly into Style's skin ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant" 0:29). Despite the mythological associations of the merman, the "flesh" color of his tail makes the creature extremely human-like. Style's character bridges the gap between man and nature, inviting viewers to contemplate their own relationship with the natural environment.

The connection between the merman and the audience is further established as Perrie utilizes the camera to play with perspective. The first scene of the video shows the restaurant owners finding Styles from the merman's perspective ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant" 0:01). This is what is known as a worm's eye point-of-view— where the camera is positioned low to the ground, looking up. Art theorist Arnheim Rudolf notes that the "worm's eye point view" is used to express "the domineering forcefulness of a character" (Rudolf 38). Through making the subject come across as more dominant, this perspective suggests a power dynamic. Perrie's use of the worm's eye point-of-view depicts the merman as the smaller character, emphasizing his vulnerability to the restaurant owner. This power dynamic reflects broader themes of humanity's relationship with nature. As noted earlier, the merman is symbolic of this relationship. Therefore,

the merman's vulnerability reflects the precarious position of nature in the face of human exploitation. By portraying the merman as powerless, Perrie invites viewers to consider humanity's ability to exploit and manipulate the resources of the natural world.

This power imbalance is further emphasized thirty-three seconds into the video. Once the restaurant owners capture Styles, they are shown holding up the creature with smug smiles ("Music for a Sushi Restuarant" 0:33). This shot is reminiscent of trophy hunting. The International Humane Society explains that trophy hunters "will pay huge sums of money to kill wild animals for in-home display" and then "enter their achievements into record books" (Humane Society). Oftentimes these hunters will aim for "the largest, strongest animals" which includes many "endangered and threatened species" (Humane Society). In other words, the shot of the restaurant workers proudly showing off their 'catch of the day' replicates the behavior of trophy hunters. Trophy hunting is a great example of how Western capitalist ideals have commodified nature. To these hunters, wildlife is primarily viewed as inputs for economic growth and human consumption. This profit-driven mindset reflects the characteristics of entitlement and exploitation in Western capitalism. The restaurant owners modeling the behavior of trophy hunters confront viewers with the reality of exploitation and power imbalances, prompting reflection on the ethical implications of treating the natural world as a commodity.

The impact of Western capitalism on nature is highlighted as the merman is shown performing. Two minutes and five seconds in the video, viewers see the restaurant owners watching Style's character sing. However, the shot quickly changes to show cash and a debit card ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant" 2:05). This quick change in shots to a market exchange demonstrates how profit-driven the owners of the restaurant are. As the merman is singing, all these men can think about is the money they are making. The transactional nature of the

exchange reinforces the idea that even the most sacred aspects of the natural world are reduced to commodities in the pursuit of profit. Overall, the quick change in shots offers a critique of Western capitalism by demonstrating the greed within the restaurant owners.

Viewers can note a prominent shift in the tone of the video during the merman's performance. At 2:29, Style's voice falters ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant" 1:29). Once this happens, the restaurant owners turn on him—deciding that the merman would be more beneficial if turned into food. The coloring of the video shifts from bright and beautiful to a deep, ominous blue ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant" 2:37). Additionally, the chefs are shown sharpening their knives ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant" 2:36). These shots paired with the coloring tell the viewers that something bad is about to happen. This helps further establish empathy between the audience and the merman. At 2:38 Style's pained expression and palpable distress convey his anticipation of impending tragedy. In other words, the merman is becoming a victim of the Western capitalist exploitation of nature. Perrie's direction in this scene helps the audience recognize humanity's callous treatment of nature. As the merman's abilities diminish, the restaurant owners condemn him to death—mirroring man's destructive tendencies toward the environment.

One must note that when the merman was first introduced as a talent act, he seemed rather comfortable with the idea. At 1:13 in the video Style's character is depicted enjoying a massage and at 1:29 he indulges in the 'star treatment' by demanding tea from the chefs ("Music for a Sushi Restaurant"). This differs greatly from Style's distress at 2:38 when he realizes the restaurant owners plan to consume him. This contrast between the merman's attitude at the start of the video compared to the end highlights how the commodification of the environment can initially seem like a positive step to connect people with nature. Yet, while making nature more

accessible may foster this connection, it often leads to destructive consequences. In America, National Parks were established to preserve and protect nature— allowing individuals to closely observe the natural environment. However, in this process, certain species and wildlife are put in danger due to the influx in visitation. National parks are incredibly overcrowded and this “current pace of visitation [is] outstripping resources” (Simmonds). So, while making nature more tangible can seem beneficial, in reality, it is very harmful. “Music for a Sushi Restaurant” demonstrates this, as keeping the merman as a talent act seems like a better option than killing him. However, despite Styles’ potential value, he is ultimately exploited and killed by the restaurant owners anyway. The discussion prompted by this video contributes to the conversation regarding humanity’s relationship with nature. Despite Western society’s appearances of efforts to protect nature, these actions are often driven by profit rather than genuine conservation.

Perrie’s direction of the scene, when Style’s voice falters, resonates greatly with the lyrics to the song in the video. At 2:23 the merman sings “if the stars were edible and our hearts were never full, could we live for just a taste?” (“Music for a Sushi Restaurant 2:23). The words “edible,” “full,” and “taste” create the imagery of consumption, prompting viewers to reflect on humanity’s gluttonous appetite. Western society’s relentless consumption is mirrored in their treatment of nature— it is exploited until it is depleted. Instead of coexisting with nature, Westerners seek to conquer it. In other words, this lyric is prompting the audience to consider if we could live in harmony, or with just “a taste” of nature, rather than devouring it to the point of destruction. The merman’s fate at the end of the video further emphasizes this theme. Styles is not simply killed; at 2:39 the imagery suggests that he is cooked into food. A stovetop is shown as well as the chefs chopping fish (“Music for a Sushi Restaurant” 2:39). These scenes turn the consumption of nature literal by showing the restaurant owners' plan to eat the merman. To put it

simply, this video prompts the audience to envision a world where Western society's relationship with nature is more balanced and overconsumption is no longer the norm.

Overall, "Music for a Sushi Restaurant" promotes an interesting contemplation of Western capitalist ideology. The decision to show a merman becoming victim to greed in Western society highlights the ways in which capitalism has tainted our natural world. Perrie's direction in the video paired with Styles' lyrics urges viewers to consider the ramifications of commodity consumption. Our environment has been turned into a commodity and it is only destroying nature more rapidly. Art like "Music for a Sushi Restaurant" allows individuals to question their behavior towards nature and to contemplate alternative ways of interacting with the natural world. By valuing nature from a distance rather than seeking to exploit it, we may foster a more sustainable relationship with the environment.

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