

# *Censorship, Speakability and Contemporary Green Fiction Cinema*

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This article considers the relative paucity of environmental fiction films in relation to documentaries with similar thematic concerns. It engages theories of censorship, in particular, the processes of informal and prior censorship, to better understand the myriad of forces that shape the possibilities, parameters and limitations for contemporary environmentally focused cinematic narratives. It is argued that while informal modes of censorship can be difficult to discern in their everyday operation, the effects can be highly significant, influencing not only content but also form and genre.

**KEYWORDS:** censorship, environmental film, speakable discourse, green consciousness, environmental emotion

This article represents an attempt to better understand the relative paucity of contemporary environmental fiction films in comparison with the number of environmentally themed documentaries currently being produced, distributed and consumed. In particular, it suggests that this disparity may be more fully illuminated through examination of the ways in which environmental films and filmmakers are subjected to censorship. Reflecting the multi-layered workings of censorship itself, the emphasis here is on the often opaque but highly significant influence of processes of informal and prior censorship, rather than looking just at direct state bans or other overt processes of restriction. Theories of censorship tend not to have been engaged to date in the rich body of academic work that exists on environmental cinema. Rather, there has been a focus more on the form, themes and ideologies embedded in texts and what they might reveal about the filmmakers and industries that enable their creation and/or the attitudes and beliefs of societies more broadly.[1] This article both builds on and extends these concerns by suggesting an explicit link between the workings of informal censorship and the production and circulation of environmental films.

The formation of this analysis has its origins in my experiences as the Director of the University of East Anglia's annual Green Film Festival (GFF). As its name suggests, the GFF focuses on the exhibition

## Introduction

[1] For example: E.E. Moores, *Landscape and the Environment in Hollywood Film*, Palgrave, London 2017; P. Brereton, *Environmental Ethics and Energy Extraction: Textual Analysis of Iconic Cautionary Hollywood Tales*: Chinatown (1974), There Will be Blood (2007),

and Promised Land (2012), "Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment" 2020, no. 27(1), pp. 6–26; *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, eds. S. Rust, S. Monani, and S. Cubitt, Routledge, New York and London 2013.

of films that engage contemporary environmental and climate justice issues. The programme usually runs over four to five days, structured principally around the screening of films but with additions such as guest speakers, Q&A sessions, market/information stalls and hands-on workshops that give further context to the films and extend opportunities for social connection and exchange. The programme has an international focus and regularly screens films that are not made in English. It is a free event based in Norwich (where the University of East Anglia is located), using a variety of venues around the city, including the iconic Norwich Castle, Theatre Royal and local cinemas, as well as the university campus.

Across its eight-year history, the GFF has mostly screened documentary films, with the occasional fiction title in its early iterations (before I became the Festival Director in 2022, taking over at the conclusion of that year's event). As part of the initiatives implemented for the 2023 festival, we secured a new venue for the final evening – Cinema City, a three-screen arthouse cinema in Norwich, owned by UK exhibitor/distributor, Picturehouse – with the aim of screening a fiction film to close the Festival. We selected *Woman at War* (Benedikt Erlingsson, 2018), an Icelandic-Ukrainian co-production. However, securing this film was a lengthy process, as we found that the number of relevant fiction titles to select from was very much smaller than comparable documentaries. The problem was not one predominantly of distribution and/or copyright restriction,[2] but rather stemmed from the paucity of fiction film titles overall to select from.

We were looking for a fiction film with a particular set of subjectivities, and these were prioritised ahead of any specific genre or style. While the range of themes we were open to was at once very broad (from global warming, pollution, waste, energy, indigenous land and cultural rights, food and water security, non-human rights, biodiversity, diseases, epidemiology, consumerism, capitalist systems and more), the selection also had some definable parameters. The Festival is explicitly framed within a contemporary environmental and climate justice-oriented consciousness, distinguished by its decentering of humanity in relation to the natural world, a growing sense of urgency, and expanded possibilities for action. This 'green' planetary consciousness is encapsulated by Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller:

Green has come to stand for the good life – not merely our own but that of our fellow animals and our collective descendants yet to be born. It stands for a new solidarity that takes off from climate science to seek a better, more secure future that transcends ... individual agency or investor returns.[3]

[2] As a non-profit and free event we are typically able to secure films on non-theatrical terms with a single-screening licence, which renders most titles accessible, even if they have not previously been released commercially in the UK.

[3] R. Maxwell, T. Miller, *How Green is Your Smartphone?*, Polity, London 2020, p. 11.

The term 'Climate Fiction' or 'Cli-Fi' has become a popular means of denoting creative stories and narratives that engage this awareness and purpose. As a designation, Climate Fiction has its origins in literature but is also applied to film.[4] It is a searchable category on the film listing database IMDB and appears on two user-generated lists on the film-only streaming platform Mubi. Currently, on other major streaming platforms (including Netflix, Amazon Prime, Paramount+, Apple TV) it is a search term that will return recommendations but is not an identified content grouping.

During the work of locating a suitable fiction film for our event, I considered whether the problem in finding one could be attributed to the way I was searching for them. I applied much the same process as for the documentaries, which involves keyword searches on Google with multiple terms, as well as looking at IMDB, genre and themed searches on streaming platforms, and the programmes of other environmental film festivals, including many outside the UK. In contrast with the experience of finding non-fiction films for screening relatively easily, I continually located much the same limited selection of films no matter which investigative route was taken. Our selection of *Woman at War* was by no means a compromise; this is an excellent film that received a very warm reception from our audience, but it was selected from a relatively narrow range of possibilities.

Detailed research undertaken by the Norman Lear Centre at USC Annenberg published in 2022 suggests that my experience was not an isolated instance but part of a wider absence in the representation of the contemporary environmental crisis. Its report, which communicates much simply in its title, *A Glaring Absence: The Climate Crisis is Virtually Non-existent in Scripted Entertainment*, was based on a study of the frequency of mentions of 36 climate change keywords in US TV and film content between 2016–2020. Researchers found these keywords (which included carbon footprint, clean energy, climate crisis/change/justice/disaster/emergency/migration, fossil fuel, global warming, sea level and save the planet) appeared in only 2.8% of scripts, with only 0.6% mentioning 'climate change' specifically. On the few occasions when climate change did appear, it was rarely linked to extreme weather events, the fossil fuel industry or individual climate actions.[5]

In politics and news, research suggests the absence may not be as immediately 'glaring'. In the UK, detailed analysis of 200 years of English Hansard records by the Carbon Brief in 2019 found an increase in the use of the term 'climate change' in parliamentary debates in recent decades,

### Green Consciousness: Culture, Politics and Citizens

[4] R. Glass, *Global Warning: The Rise of 'Cli-fi'*, *The Guardian*, 31.05.2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/may/31/global-warning-rise-cli-fi> (accessed: 24.01.2024).

[5] S. Giaccardi, A. Rogers, E.L. Rosenthal, *A Glaring Absence: The Climate Crisis is Virtually Non-existent in Scripted Entertainment*, USC Norman Lear Centre, October 2022, [https://learcenter.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/GlaringAbsence\\_NormanLearCenter.pdf](https://learcenter.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/GlaringAbsence_NormanLearCenter.pdf) (accessed: 22.01.2024), pp. 8–12.

superseding ‘greenhouse effect’, which had become popular in the 1980s. At the date of their report, ‘climate change’ had been mentioned over 19,000 times in parliament, a figure that seems substantial, but which also requires some qualification. Almost half of these mentions were by Labour Party MPs and peers who were not in government for the majority of the period this term has been in its widest use. It is also important to note the mentions in themselves are not indicative of any particular position on the environment and climate; in fact, they range widely, from statements of support and calls to action through to the expression of doubt or opposition to climate related science, policies and legislation. The need for caution in interpreting the mentions too positively (from the perspective of climate justice action) is further underlined in one of the report’s non-headline findings, which noted that while a large number of British MPs were using Twitter (now X) – 576 of a total 650 MPs, only 64 of these (of which 42 were from Labour) were following climate scientists on the platform.[6] Over a similar time period, separate analysis of international media coverage by the Media and Climate Change Observatory indicates that news reports on climate and environmental issues have grown significantly. However, one of the key trends identified in 2023 was a 4% decline in news stories that year, continuing a decrease (14%) from the zenith of news coverage of the issue recorded in 2021.[7]

Together with the content that populations read and watch, and what their elected representatives say, the goods and services that citizens buy have been another important site of negotiation and engagement with a growing green consciousness. Across numerous parts of the world, many consumer products and services are increasingly attaching themselves to ‘green values’, promoting sustainable attributes such as product or packaging recyclability, sustainably produced ingredients, carbon offsetting, ethical manufacturing processes, locality and durability. In some instances (though not all), consumers demonstrate a willingness to pay a premium for products with one or more these attributes. A recent report published by Deloitte from data collected in 23 countries led with the statement ‘[S]ustainable products are no longer niche.’ It claimed that in April 2023 46% of consumers had purchased at least one sustainable good or service, noting, however, that this figure had reached 61% in 2021, and attributed the decline to rising inflation rather than pointing to a change in consumer sentiment.[8] Such statistics can be read as signs of awareness and of a *desire* on the

[6] J. Gabbatiss, *Analysis: The UK Politicians, Who Talk the Most about Climate Change*, Carbon Brief, 11.09.2019, <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-the-uk-politicians-who-talk-the-most-about-climate-change/> (accessed: 25.01.2024).

[7] Media and Climate Change Observatory, *A Review of Media Coverage of Climate Change and Global Warming in 2023*, University of Colorado Boulder, 2024, <https://sciencepolicy.colorado.edu/icecaps/>

[research/media\\_coverage/summaries/special\\_issue\\_2023.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/retail-distribution/consumer-behavior-trends-state-of-the-consumer-tracker/sustainable-products-customer-expectations.html) (accessed: 22.01.2024).

[8] L. Pieters et. al., *Green Products Come of Age*, Deloitte Insights, 31.05.2023, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/retail-distribution/consumer-behavior-trends-state-of-the-consumer-tracker/sustainable-products-customer-expectations.html> (accessed: 24.01.2024).

part of some financially able citizens to make a positive action towards the planetary effort utilising their individual purchasing power. While it is outside the focus here, it is relevant to add that those efforts are simultaneously undermined on a regular basis by the exaggeration or misrepresentation of the environmentally positive features of consumer products and services (greenwashing) by corporations.[9]

Two lines of thought emerge from this very brief overview: Firstly, that in the Global North, and in particular the Anglo-American parts of it, the environment and climate action, as broad concerns, are permitted within public discourses. It is an accepted and legitimate topic to discuss, though what is said may vary significantly. Secondly, that engaging and/or performance of a green consciousness is part of the consumer experiences of a substantial number of citizens. However, the trend that emerges in relation to green films more specifically is that while documentaries proliferate, creative fiction-based stories seem to be slower to emerge. This article contends that theories of censorship may offer a useful approach to understanding some of this lag.

In its most obvious forms censorship involves actions taken by nation states and/or corporations to control the movie consumption practices of its citizens. These restrictions can take a variety of forms, from the designation of content ratings and corresponding limitations on cinema admission (usually based on age), demands to remove or edit perceived offensive scenes, through to an outright ban on the screening of some films. Collectively, such interventions are grounded in assumptions about the power of film to offend, disturb and/or subvert, and to influence human thoughts and behaviour in sustained and material ways. At their core, these ‘techniques of government’ seek to contain radical possibilities – possibilities for thought and action that could disrupt or destabilise the established compliance of populations as either consumers or citizens, or both.[10]

There is little evidence to suggest that in the Anglo-American parts of the Global North state action to ban and/or restrict environmental films has been a substantive limiting factor in the representation of progressive environmental and climate justice concerns. However, there have been some notable instances in recent years where explicit control over media content has been exercised in ways perceived as limiting free speech. In 2023 the UK national broadcaster, the BBC, announced it would not screen live to air the final episode of *Wild Isles*, a nature documentary series narrated by the renowned wildlife

## Censorship and Content Control

[9] For example: R. Donald, *Climate Delay and the Fossil Fuel Industry* | Ketan Joshi, Planet: Critical, 9.11.2023, <https://www.planetcritical.com/p/climate-delay-and-the-fossil-fuel-industry> (accessed: 25.01.2024); T. Miller, *Greenwashing Sport*, Routledge, Oxon and New York 2018; T. Miller, *Greenwashing Culture*, Routledge, Oxon and New York 2017.

[10] M. Foucault, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3, trans. J.D. Faubion, Penguin Books, London 1994, p. 343; M. Bunn, *Reimagining Repression: New Censorship Theory and After*, “History and Theory” 2015, no. 54(1), p. 39.

filmmaker and advocate David Attenborough. While earlier episodes in the series had been broadcast, the last episode was offered instead only on the BBC's streaming platform iPlayer. This final instalment in the series offers a stark perspective on environmental degradation and loss in the UK and the reasons for it, and the BBC was heavily criticised for what many environmental advocates believed was a capitulation to right-wing political pressure.[11]

Several years earlier, the release of the documentary *Planet of the Humans* (Jeff Gibbs, 2019, with executive producer Michael Moore) also caused considerable controversy, although in that case it was environmental advocates who were calling for its ban. *Planet of the Humans* looks at the development of renewable energy as an alternative to fossil fuels. It is highly critical of environmental advocates and questions the ethics of their links to corporations and wealthy elites. Numerous highly regarded scientists and environmental activists declared the content of the film misleading and dangerous, and there were multiple calls for its distribution to be curtailed.[12] The film was eventually removed from YouTube, after amassing over 8 million views. However, the deletion was temporary, and the film was reinstated within a week or so. YouTube claimed the film was removed due to a copyright issues with some of its footage. The decision was nevertheless condemned by some, including the filmmakers, as an attack on free speech.[13]

While debates on these two examples was impassioned and polarised, those involved behaved, broadly speaking, in legally sanctioned ways. In other parts of the world, environmental advocacy, including the making of films on the issue, is regularly a far more dangerous activity to be engaged in. In the Global South, censorship actions by governments and corporations against advocates imperils not only livelihoods, safety and liberty but also life itself. The NGO Global Witness has been tracking world-wide violence against land and environmental activists for over a decade. Their first ten-year review in 2021 reported that 1733 activists had been killed in the previous decade, including 200 in the past year alone, the majority in Latin America (mostly Brazil, Colombia and Mexico), the Philippines and India.[14]

[11] H. Horton, *BBC Will Not Broadcast Attenborough Final Episode Over Fear of 'Rightwing Backlash'*, *The Guardian*, 10.03.2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/mar/10/david-attenborough-bbc-wild-isles-episode-rightwing-backlash-fears> (accessed: 25.01.2024).

[12] O. Milman, *Climate Experts Call for 'Dangerous' Michael Moore Film to Be Taken Down*, *The Guardian*, 28.05.2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/28/climate-dangerous-documentary-planet-of-the-humans-michael-moore-taken-down> (accessed: 24.01.2024).

[13] L. Chilton, *Planet of the Humans: Michael Moore and Jeff Gibbs Criticise 'Blatant Act of Censorship' After Controversial Documentary Removed From YouTube*, *The Independent*, 26.05.2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/planet-of-the-humans-michael-moore-youtube-removed-censorship-climate-change-a9532221.html> (accessed: 24.01.2024).

[14] Global Witness, *A Decade of Defiance: Ten Years of Reporting Land and Environmental Activism Worldwide*, September 2022, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/decade-defiance/#a-global-analysis-2021> (accessed: 25.01.2024), pp. 4–5, 17.

As further, though less violent, examples of repression, Russia has made well documented efforts in recent years to suppress environmental advocacy, banning leading NGOs from working in the country, and criminalising citizens who continue to cooperate with them.[15] China has been also subject to scrutiny over the repeated disappearance of popular environmental documentaries from its domestic internet services. Highly regarded documentary filmmaker Wang Jiuliang has had several of his films deleted, including *Plastic China* (2017) and *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2010).[16] In 2015, another film, *Under The Dome* (Jing 2015) about China's pollution crisis, was also removed from several popular Chinese streaming services after it amassed over 300 million views in the days following its release.[17]

Discussion of environment and climate issues in threatening and hostile contexts cannot be regarded as similarly permissible or accepted as it is in the Global North contexts discussed above. Despite the very serious risks, numerous important and highly impactful documentary films have emerged from the Global South in recent years, drawing attention to pressing and urgent issues. However, the kind of privilege that creates space for more imaginative creativity (privileges such as time, money and stability/safety) is unquestionably less accessible. Fictional forms are not rendered entirely absent in the Global South, but the situations from which they originate are undoubtedly more challenging. This may contribute to some of the noted paucity in fiction titles, but certainly not the entirety of it. In the Global North, there are many places that enable filmmakers socially and economically (albeit within certain industrial boundaries[18]) and where they do not face explicit restriction and/or the danger of violence. Yet the production of green fiction cinema in these relatively free and open circumstances continues to remain emergent rather than actively dynamic.

While censorship is often most explicitly manifested and recognisable in forms of state intervention, these actions are always underpinned by a complex web of socio-cultural and political systems and interactions. Within this wider framework of influence, regulation and repression by states and corporations may be regarded as a distillation, or an end point in a longitudinal and multi-layered *processes* of censorship. These processes are rendered most effective in their opaqueness and imperceptibility, qualities which Judith Butler notes work to insu-

## Censorship and Social Control

[15] L. Koralova, *In 2023 the Kremlin Worked to Dismantle Russia's Environmental Movement: Some of It Survived*, The Moscow Times, 28.12.2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/12/28/in-2023-the-kremlin-worked-to-dismantle-russias-environmental-movement-some-of-it-survived-a82383> (accessed: 14.01.2024).

[16] K. Zhao, *China's Environmental Woes, in Films That Go Viral, Then Vanish*, The New York Times,

28.04.2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/28/world/asia/chinas-environmental-woes-in-films-that-go-viral-then-vanish.html> (accessed: 16.01.2024).

[17] T. Branigan, *China Takes Environmental Documentary That Went Viral off the Web*, The Guardian, 6.03.2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/06/china-takes-environmental-documentary-off-the-web> (accessed: 24.01.2024).

[18] E.E. Moore, op. cit.

late the complex informal processes of censorship as a socio-political practice from the risk of instability by protecting them from the possibility of contestation.[19] In this context, state and corporate interventions may be understood as indicative of failures (from the perspective of elites) in these processes, a breakdown in efforts to appropriately direct and contain institutions, citizens and other actors in order to contain them within the acceptable boundaries of a given socio-political context.[20] These broader social structures and the dynamics of their network of actors and institutions *precede* the imposition of explicit and visible forms of information control, determining when and in what form the latter is perceived to be required. It is a set of practices that form part of what Pierre Bourdieu terms 'prior censorship'.[21]

Bourdieu conceptualises the landscape within which censorship takes place as a 'field' structured by the governance of both 'access to expression and the form of [that] expression.'[22] This field determines who gets to speak and the platforms and pathways through which it may be said (form), as well as what (content) is authorised or acceptable. In terms of its governance, the structure of this field is hierarchical in an ideological sense, with those at the apexes of power permitted to regulate its form and boundaries. However, it is only partly hierarchical in its operation. Censorship encompasses a diverse range of highly complex, non-linear processes that can be understood as an exemplar of Foucault's notion of governmentality and the ways in which it works through intersecting layers of regulation and control that are simultaneously direct, co-opted and self-moderated. Within this frame of understanding, power, as manifested in censorship, is vastly heterogeneous and multiplicitous.[23]

Conceptualising a process that precedes Bourdieu's notion of the field and its site as a process of 'prior censorship', Butler argues the 'field of censorship' is not created simply by what occurs within it. She contends that within the field actors and citizens are first pre-constructed in order to *then* enter and behave within in that space.[24] Butler frames this wider conceptualisation of censorship as the 'speaking discourse', which she conceptualises as constituted by form and content (Bourdieu) but with the added dimension of knowledge, a pre-condition that enables actors and citizens to know how to behave in the field and for it to be rendered intelligible to them and others.[25] When subjects stray too far from recognised terms, concepts and familiar modes of speech, their ability to enter into the space of the field of censorship can be constrained or blocked entirely.

Considered in relation to environmental fiction cinema, Butler's intersecting framework of form, content and knowledge illuminates

[19] J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, London 1997, p. 130.

[20] P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. G. Raymond, M. Adamson, Polity Press, Cambridge 1991, pp. 138–139; M. Bunn, op. cit., pp. 26–27.

[21] P. Bourdieu, op. cit., p. 138.

[22] Ibidem.

[23] M. Foucault, op. cit., pp. 343–344.

[24] J. Butler, op. cit., pp. 130–132.

[25] Ibidem, p. 133.



an approach to gaining a more nuanced understanding of the key factors that enable, moderate and/or constrain production. Rather than considering films at the point where they enter the discourse as finished products (and where they might be open to explicit forms of censorship), it opens analysis to the *prior* processes that shape the conception, production and future possibilities of these films – how the speakable discourse and its subjects are constructed, questions that have not previously been given much attention in environmental cinema research.

The remainder of this article focuses on the ways in which the workings of prior censorship can be discerned in environmental cinema through conventions of form (type of film, fiction vs non-fiction) and genre. These are key prior organising frameworks for fiction film, pre-determining how they enter fields of accepted discourse and the terms upon which they exist there.

The speakable discourse is constructed from a vast array of influences, actors and subjects that intersect and intermingle across multiple hierarchies of influence and sites of exchange. The analysis here does not represent an attempt to capture this process in its entirety: such a task is so vast as to be beyond the scope of this article. Rather, the focus is on form and genre as entry points from which linkages between form, content and knowledge can begin to be discerned. In doing so, the aim is to make visible some important processes that shape the ‘field’ of environmental cinema, and the workings of censorship more broadly.

## Form

Form (or type) and genre function as fundamental organising structures for commercial film. They enable the identification of films for a range of industrial purposes, especially financing and marketing. They also have aesthetic and textual dimensions, and are engaged as stylistic modes that filmmakers variously work within, subvert or recombine. These recognisable categories help audiences understand what is presented to them and, in this way, they also have a role in determining what is speakable. Shared knowledge and expectations of format and genre enable actors and subjects in the field to exchange information and ideas, and to understand each other. This shared knowledge is part of what enables social groups to construct a consensus and to ‘act together,’<sup>[26]</sup> a process that is crucial to prior censorship and its necessity for a perception of consensus that elides the contestation of power relations that underpins it.

The distinction between fiction and non-fiction film formats – or feature film and feature documentary – is a fundamental delineation in film production. While both tell stories and construct narratives and use many of the same filmic techniques, they are separated by expectations of content. Non-fiction formats deal in material emanating from the

[26] C.R. Miller, *Genre as Social Action*, “Quarterly Journal of Speech” 1984, no. 70(2), pp. 151–167.

real world as lived in and experienced by audiences, featuring people that have really existed and events that have actually happened. While fiction films can be based on real world stories and stylistically can be highly realist, they are not bound to the same expectation of adherence to a particular set of essentialisms on a given topic. In order for films to realise their communicative purpose they must be capable of being understood by their audience, not just what they are saying but what they *are*. A film that cannot be understood is one that has strayed so far from the acceptable modes of form and content that, in a theoretical sense, its existence may be called into question; it is outside its field and is unrecognisable.

Shared knowledge and expectation of form represent a certain baseline of understanding that renders these forms accessible and recognisable. This allows audiences to perceive both what the film is (in a cultural sense) and what it is communicating to them. However, form also marks out key points of distinction. Audiences often *expect* (and are more willing) to be informed by a documentary, they look more towards being *entertained or emotionally engaged* by a fiction film. This generally provides documentaries with more scope to communicate empirical information and with more reason to be hopeful their audiences will be receptive to it.

Sean Cubitt has suggested this is informative/education aim of documentaries is aided by new possibilities created in the use of data visualisation and modelling favoured by environmental documentaries. He sees these visual tools as crucial to more effectively communicating the nature and scope of environmental and climate issues, which can otherwise be difficult for people to fully grasp and engage with because it is a topic that is at once immense, diffuse and highly complex.[27] In contrast, Pat Brereton argues that the possibilities of affect in fiction stories can actually make them more engaging and powerful than their non-fiction counterparts. More specifically, that emotional engagement creates an active dialogue that transcends deficit models of knowledge exchange and opens up new possibilities for climate change learning and action that begins from emotion rather than empirical knowledge.[28]

Social science-based research suggests that Brereton's assertions have merit. A recent study of the link between knowledge and pro-environmental behaviour noted it had been 'convincingly' shown that deficit models (where information is provided with the aim of changing behaviour) are not, on their own, sufficient to achieve sustainability goals. In a study conducted by Geiger et al., it was found that that despite high levels of general and environmental knowledge in their sample, pro-environmental behaviour was only average. They suggest

[27] S. Cubitt, *Everyone Knows This Is Nowhere: Data Visualization and Ecocriticism*, [in:] *Ecocinema Theory...*, pp. 279–298.

[28] P. Brereton, op. cit., p. 9.

this disparity may be the result of normative and situational influences but also highlighted a growing interest in ‘environmental emotions’ as an alternative mediator of knowledge that might help to close this gap.[29] While it may yet to be more fully realised, it underlines the potential for fiction-based environmental cinema, as emotional mediators of knowledge, to contribute substantially to the ongoing development of a green consciousness.

Ellen Moore’s study of genre and the environment in contemporary Hollywood film contends that genre categories not only provide a means of discerning differing perspectives on environmental issues from a content or textual perspective, but also function as a means of understanding the operative ideologies of the entertainment media industry. For films produced in the Anglo-American parts of the Global North, this approach suggests a way of understanding where and how some of the capacities for fiction film to engage a green rather than just environmental consciousness may currently be stalled. Moore argues that the genres typically favoured for environmental stories help reveal the industry’s positionality and the discourses of consensus which it attempts to construct to serve both its own interests and those of other institutions and corporations. This cultural approach to genre also serves to temper and reorient some of the collective ambition for environmental fiction as explicit political tools or agents of change, and where they are imagined as working through evidence rather than emotion. This has seen some films and filmmakers critiqued variously for falling short of satisfactorily ‘represent[ing] the reality of the natural world,’[30] the imperatives of science and the mission of environmental movements.[31]

Brereton suggest that environmental fiction film narratives have tended to follow particular patterns of thematic concern and narrative construction that encompass a prevalence for innocent or primitive protagonists (such as children, animals, non-human sci-fi characters, robots), a nostalgia for the past in which a simpler or more authentic life was possible and an attachment to residual elements in the present that symbolise that past.[32] Moore’s approach to analysis provides a way to engage and further illuminate these tendencies by directing attention to the ontologies and epistemologies that underpin them. She suggests four key questions as central to uncovering these as represented in film: how the problem/s is identified; who is responsible; what solution/s exist; and who should fix it.[33]

[29] S.M. Geiger, M. Geiger, O. Wilhelm, *Environment-Specific vs. General Knowledge and Their Role in Pro-environmental Behavior*, “Frontiers in Psychology” 2019, vol. 10, article 718.

[30] D. Whitley, *Animation, Realism, and the Genre of Nature*, [in:] *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion,*

*Ecology, and Film*, ed. A. Weik von Mossner, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo 2014, p. 145.

[31] P. Brereton, op. cit., p. 8.

[32] Ibidem.

[33] Ibidem, p. 14.

## Genre

Science fiction and fantasy genres have been a popular vehicle for environmental film stories, and these often engage the kind of innocents or primitives that Brereton alludes to (for example *Wall-E* [Stanton, 2008], *Avatar* [James Cameron, 2009], *Okja* [Bong Joon-ho, 2017], *FernGully: The Last Rainforest* [Bill Kroyer, 1992]). These kinds of framings distance the responsibility for the dire situation presented in the story, either by setting them outside the narrative (*Wall-E* begin with Earth is already abandoned and covered in rubbish) or by positioning the destructive behaviour as an outlier – the work of an *evil* corporation, not just a corporation. The solution is individual and local, and in this way also broadly non-disruptive and certainly not inviting radical socio-political possibilities.

This tendency towards diffusing responsibility for climate action through localisation of problems is demonstrated across another key genre for environmental cinema, dramas focused on the misdeeds of companies and conglomerates. In films such as *Silkwood* (Mike Nichols, 1983), *Erin Brokovich* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000), *Promised Land* (Gus Van Sant, 2012) and *Dark Waters* (Todd Haynes, 2019), the gross misconduct of the companies involved is starkly portrayed. Here the questions of what the problem is and who is responsible for it are very clear indeed, but any outrage it might elicit is dampened and contained in the singular or one-off nature of the story and its subjects. These might be connected to one-off stories in other places, but these tend to be treated as exceptions. This similarly limits the potential for contestation by encouraging audiences and others to perceive a distinction between virtuous and evil capitalism, the former associated with economic prosperity and positive impacts on living standards, while the latter is defined by its ruthless acquisitiveness and unethical business practices.<sup>[34]</sup>

Disaster movies and science fiction often overlap in their fetishisation of technology and human ingenuity – another regular trope of environmental fiction film and of real-world responses to the environmental crisis by governments and capital more broadly. Again, in these representations, responsibility and accountability for solutions is conveniently devolved and diffused to technocrats. As Ulrich Hoffmann argues in his critical evaluation of the possibilities of green growth, technology offers a highly attractive solution for maintaining current economic and socio-political structures and systems because the possibility of innovating humanity out of impending ecological disaster is less confronting than the need to fundamentally alter societies and their socio-economic drivers.<sup>[35]</sup> Following this line of thinking, Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014), for example, sees the hopes of humanity pinned on a team of astronauts in outer space searching for

[34] Ibidem, p. 15.

[35] U. Hoffmann, *Can Green Growth Really Work? A Reality Check That Elaborates on the True (Socio-)economics of Climate Change*, [in:] *Green*

*Growth: Ideology, Political Economy and the Alternatives*, eds. G. Dale, M. Mathai, J. Puppim de Oliveira, Zed Books, London 2016, pp. 22–23.

a new, habitable planet as Earth's liveability reaches a crisis point. In disaster movies such as *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015) and *Geostorm* (Dean Devlin, 2017), human skill and ingenuity also triumph in quite unrealistic ways in the face large-scale, catastrophic natural events.

In such films, a certain nostalgia is also perceptible, a time when it seemed human capacity could not just outwit nature but also control it – an idea that has underpinned frontier stories, especially Western and settler narratives, in cinema for decades. The latter is also evident in films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Scott Derrickson, 2008, adaptation of 1951 version), in which Klaatu the alien is sent to Earth to help humans learn to collaborate and thereby avoid ecocide. After emphasising the exceptionalism and specialness of humanity, the story sees Klaatu increasingly convinced by and invested in these ideas and culminates in him sacrificing his own life to save Earth and its inhabitants. It is a resolution that can only seem reasonable when non-human life (as part of the resources of nature) is perceived as subordinate to and created in the service of humans.

While environmentally orientated, none of the films mentioned in the previous section could really be argued as aligning with the green consciousness that was outlined at the beginning of this article. They broadly engage an awareness of some of the possible and probable dangers posed by the continued destabilisation of the natural world. However, collectively, they tend to underline an uncomfortable relationship with responsibility (both cause and remedy) and the displacement of humans from the apex of the natural world. In filmic terms, this is resolved variously, often in ways that localise or isolate problems and solutions, and/or by indulging the fantastical promises of the technological and/or human willpower, determination and honourable virtues. In contrast, the green consciousness that Maxwell and Miller articulate, and which the Festival that I lead seeks to engage, is founded on solidarity, humility, a strong interest in climate justice, and cognisance of human fragility and its interconnectedness with non-humans and with the natural world.

The speakable discourse in popular environmental films from the Anglo-American parts of the Global North as briefly mapped out in the previous section does not suggest an obvious pathway for a new green consciousness to emerge from within that existing framework. Such moves would be disruptive and risk placing those who attempted to make them at the periphery of the field in which they seek to become actors, rather than simply exist as subjects, if they were to be allowed to act at all. Further sedimenting this intransience is the concentration of ownership and immense financial resources of the entertainment media industries, whose present ideologies regard profound systemic social change as threatening.

However, this may not be the area of the world from which such change could and in fact is emanating. Our fiction film in 2023 was

## Environmental v Green Fiction Film

*Woman at War*, an Icelandic-Ukrainian co-production made outside the Hollywood studio system. For 2024, two of the three films on our shortlist also derive from outside the Global North entirely – *Utama* (Alejandro Loayza Grisi, 2022, Bolivia) and *The Cow That Sang a Song Into the Future* (Francisca Alegría, 2022, Chile). Our third, *Alcarràs* (Carla Simón, 2022) from Spain, was also made without major studio funds, and features non-professional actors, with much of its dialogue being in Catalan. These are all examples of films that engage a different type of consciousness about the relationship between humans and the environment. These films engage a sense of custodianship, and with it, collective responsibility, and emphasise the interconnection (and indivisibility) of land, language and cultural practice. In this ‘field’, the Global North’s logics of localisation and individualism, and limited responsibility meet the possibility of being subject to increased difficulty in remaining ‘speakeable.’

These films represent a departure from the notion of the natural world as a resource to be used primarily for the benefit of humans, and show the social and environmental costs of this extractive mentality. These ideas have been at the heart of operating logics of colonialism and Christianity for centuries, and more recently of industrial capitalism. They remain deeply embedded and still regularly celebrated despite the immense destruction it has wrought, so that the task of shifting this narrative is not a small one. The continued screening of these consciously green films in cinemas and film festivals in the Global North is not a solution in and of itself but can be a very small part of aiding this wider cause. While we can and should celebrate and promote this, it is also important not to lose sight of the fact that filmmakers in other parts of the world regularly undertake their work at great risk to themselves and their careers, and they require solidary, support and reciprocal action from us. In terms of Moore’s question of ‘who should fix it’, we should not allow the responsibility for change to be shouldered by those who did the least to create the problems in the first place.

## Conclusions

Arts and culture, including film, have long been important spheres for negotiating, resisting and celebrating social change. They enable radical possibilities to be articulated and contested and for that which was previously unspeakable to be spoken and considered. As the work of Bourdieu and Butler highlights, governance of the systems that determine what is speakable is difficult to perceive and therefore sometimes difficult to challenge and change because censorship works in ways that elides its very existence. This article has suggested that theories of censorship enable the current constraints on the development of green fiction cinema in the Global North to be more clearly and precisely illuminated. In particular, the analysis has aimed to demonstrate that these constraints are not solely derived from nor exercised through the traditional hierarchies of industrial and governmental power. Rather, the roots of these constraints are diffuse and multiplicitous and explicitly shaped by the processes of informal censorship.

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