Shifting focus:

How emerging media are redefining environmental documentary

By

Sarah Ford

Department of Art History and Communications Studies
McGill University, Montreal

April 2024

A thesis submitted to McGill University in
partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

Environmental documentary was a marginal genre by the late 20th century, but in the 1990s and early 2000s, the genre's prominence flourished with a boom in the production and prestige of environmentally minded nonfiction film. After 2010, the genre seemingly declines. I argue that this shift does not signal disinterest, but an intriguing destabilization of environmental documentary. With social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram attracting over one billion monthly users, traditional feature-length documentaries screened through festivals make up only a portion of video-based environmental content. These emerging media thus present an under-explored opportunity to reimagine the boundaries of environmental documentary in the context of climate change. This project asks how unconventional formats and platforms are destabilizing, expanding, and reshaping environmental documentary. I investigate smartphone filmmaking and viewing practices, a community of environmentalist TikTok creators, and shifts within the environmental film festival sphere. I analyze how the conjuncture of emerging media and heightened environmental awareness re-imagine environmental documentary at the level of form, content, and circulation, providing new modes of engagement within shifting climate contexts.

Résumé

Le documentaire environnemental était un genre marginal à la fin du 20ᵉ siècle, mais dans les années 1990s et au début des années 2000s, l'importance du genre a prospéré avec une augmentation de la production et de la notoriété des films de non-fiction par rapport à l'environnement. Après 2010, le genre semble décliner. Je soutiens que ce changement ne signifie pas un désintérêt, mais plutôt une déstabilisation intrigante du documentaire environnemental. Alors que les médias sociaux, comme TikTok et Instagram, attirent plus d'un milliard de personnes par mois, les longs métrages documentaires traditionnels projetés dans les festivals ne représentent qu'une partie du contenu environnemental disponible aux consommateurs. Donc, ces médias émergents représentent une occasion sous-exploitée de réinventer les limites de ce type de documentaire dans le contexte des changements climatiques. Ce mémoire se penche sur la question: comment est-ce que ces formats et ces plateformes déstabilisent, font croître, et réinventent le genre? J'explore l'idée de la création et de la projection des films avec les cellulaires. Tout au plus, je me suis familiarisée avec une communauté d'environnementalistes sur TikTok et avec les changements dans la sphère des festivals de films environnementaux. J'analyse comment l'intersection des médias émergents et un niveau d'attention environnemental élevé réinventent le genre au niveau de la forme, du contenu, et de la distribution. Ce faisant, ces changements fournissent de nouvelles façons de s'engager avec des médias environnementaux dans le contexte d'un climat instable.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Environmental documentary had become by the late 20th century, but in the 1990s and early 2000s, the genre's prominence flourished with a boom in the production and prestige of environmentally minded nonfiction film (Hughes; Musser). This growth resulted from increased attention to climate change as a global threat, and the widespread belief that media was key to communicating and combating its effects (Moser and Dilling; Pinto). As Charles Musser states, "during the first decade of the twenty-first century, a host of environmental issues related to global warming, energy, pollution and our food supply became increasingly urgent" (46). Musser argues that "documentary filmmakers responded" to these growing concerns and, as a result, environmental documentary "emerged" as a prominent nonfiction genre "at least in the US and Europe" (46). An "explosion of environmental documentaries" was matched by the creation of hundreds of environmental film festivals, situating this genre at the centre of environmental conversation and engagement (46).

Paula Willoquet-Maricondi defines environmental documentary as films that "actively seek to inform viewers about, as well as engage their participation in, addressing issues of ecological import" (10). While this definition is helpful, it has also been criticized for being too narrow in its characterization of these films' goals (Aaltonen; Hughes). Hughes advocates for a broader definition of this genre, focusing not on a unified goal but a common "subject of the environment, however conceived" (5). This broadened definition encompasses a range of technical and aesthetic approaches to this subject matter.

While environmental documentary can thus encompass a wide array of documentary films, certain tendencies emerged during this genre's boom which established common forms. The rhetorical or argumentative frame is one such tendency, with the proliferation of

information-heavy, issue-driven films about climate change and environmental emergencies (Aaltonen; Hughes; Seymour). The epitome of this category is *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), in which Al Gore delivers an information-packed presentation about worsening climate change (Hughes). As Jouko Aaltonen describes, these films "seek to argue, prove, demonstrate and convince the audience" of the urgency of environmental issues (61).

Another prominent form of environmental documentary is often referred to as the nature documentary or wildlife film, characterized most clearly by the BBC's "globally celebrated" series including *Blue Planet* (2001) and *Planet Earth* (2006) (Narine 1). These films pair awe-inspiring nature footage with scientific narration of the natural processes featured onscreen. In this category, the focus on environmental duress is less prominent, but nonetheless present in references to habitat loss, extinction, and climate change (Narine). These two tendencies, which came into full form during this production boom, most clearly mark the environmental documentary genre (Aaltonen; Duvall).

While these types of films are still being produced and circulated, Musser suggests that the environmental documentary has become less influential since around 2010. While Musser states that the genre remains "productive and important," it seems to have diminished in status, being "only one of the many [genres] presently competing for our attention" (67). Writing in 2014, Musser importantly asks, "does this mean that the genre has reached a certain maturity and awaits new approaches or new crisis?" (68). Ten years later, I posit that the key to answering this question lies in re-defining the scope of environmental documentary to encompass new forms of engagement facilitated by emerging media.

Feature length films that follow the common tendencies outlined above, which I deem the "traditional" model of environmental documentary, make up only a portion of how contemporary

audiences receive and engage with environmental video content (Boykoff; Kunelius and Roosvall; Doyle). With social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram attracting over one billion monthly users, these digital hubs present a growing base for short form, highly shareable, and easily accessible alternatives for environmental communication (Boykoff; Kunelius and Roosvall; Doyle). Further, new video creation equipment, including the smartphone, provides novel formats for the production of environmental film (Schleser). In providing new distribution channels for environmental content, emerging media also disrupt the habits of traditional circuits like environmental film festivals. Within this context, this project asks: How are unconventional formats and platforms destabilizing, expanding, and reshaping environmental documentary?

To approach this question, I trace environmental documentary practices using smartphone technology and the social media platforms of TikTok and Instagram. I investigate how these emerging media enter into conjuncture with heightened environmental awareness, with much of today's audiences more aware of environmental issues than during the genre's boom. I argue that these novel formats facilitate new modes of engagement which may respond to the developing affective landscape around environmental issues. In doing so, emerging media destabilize the format, content, and distribution circuits of the traditional environmental documentary. These disruptions hold the capacity to redefine the genre towards new aesthetic and affective engagements with shifting climatic contexts.

The proliferation of novel modes of environmental communication suggest could be seen to represent an example of participatory culture. Developed by Henry Jenkins, the concept of "participatory culture" refers to the idea that new media provide affordances that lower "barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement" (3). This shift has been interpreted as a democratizing force, destabilizing hierarchies of media creation away from elites through

allowing everyday users to create content that might reach broad audiences. Jenkins argues that this dynamic "contrasts with older notions of passive media spectatorship," empowering those who would typically be audience members with the capacity to "write back" (3; Kuhne and Creel 177). This account of the democratic impact of participatory media has been criticized as overlooking the inequitable structures that persist in participatory media spaces, even as they destabilize certain media hierarchies (Barney et al).

Each of the new media practices that I outline relate to participatory structures, showcasing a heightened accessibility of media creation and opportunities for audience engagement with content. However, this thesis does not attempt to measure or adjudicate the democratic potentials of these practices. Instead, I aim to uncover dynamics that emerge adjacent to and beyond participatory frameworks, whose social, aesthetic, and political significance is not captured by this structure. My analysis concedes that emerging modes of environmental documentary and its circulation are participatory, and acknowledges that this form of participatory culture has both negative and positive democratic implications. Nevertheless, my focus remains on the affective, aesthetic, and spatio-temporal implications of the emergence of these media and their associated practices. In doing so, the thesis extends past discussions of participation and democracy with the aim of identifying specific emerging practices that respond to the complexities of our climate crisis.

Chapter Structure and Methodology

This thesis consists of three chapters, each covering a different set of practices that reimagines aspects of environmental documentary creation, reception, and distribution. Chapter 1, "Nature at our Fingertips: The Smartphone as Environmental Documentary Camera and

Screen," explores how the use of the smartphone shifts user and viewer relationships to the recording and screening of nature. The chapter establishes the concept of "nature" as a socially constructed term rife with contradiction (Cronon; Morton; Opperman and Iovino). Some currents of thought enact a binary separation between humans and nature, while others advocate for a more connective framework (Cronon; Garrard; Opperman and Iovino). Amid these contrasting viewpoints, I identify a tension in which nature becomes at once separate from and enmeshed with ourselves (Opperman and Iovino). I argue that the creation and viewing of traditional environmental documentary, particularly wildlife film, rehearses a binary division enacting an invisible filmmaker and an immobile spectator highly separate from nature (Vivanco). I ask how the affordances of the smartphone might destabilize and reimagine this dynamic.

To do so, I draw from existing literature around the character of smartphone filmmaking, published reflections from smartphone filmmakers, a case study of the 2018 film *The Reef*, and a published interview with its director. On the reception side, I review literature on the screening of nature, consult Reddit threads about the experience of mobile viewing, and conduct a case study of the Instagram account of the marine non-profit *SeaLegacy*. These investigations reveal that recording and viewing nature with a mobile screen produces both an intimacy and distance that mimics our simultaneous enmeshment and estrangement from the natural world (Baker et al; Odin; Schleser). As such, this filmmaking format destabilizes traditional environmental documentary dynamics and provides a structure that embraces and surfaces these tensions as a basis for storytelling.

Chapter 2, "Countering Climate Doom Online: An Affective Analysis of EcoTok Responses to Doomism," examines the efforts of a community of TikTok creators dubbed EcoTok in counteracting the idea that it is already too late to take meaningful climate action.

This chapter examines the complex temporal landscape of the climate crisis, and situates doomism as a coping response towards this distressing complexity (Niemanis and Walker; Norblad; Whyte). Through simplifying climate futures by making them certain, doomism artificially resolves the tensions embedded in understanding climate temporality. I ask how EcoTok creators striving to combat doomism engender an alternative affective approach to the climate crisis.

To examine the character of this approach, I draw from two interviews that I conducted with members of the EcoTok community, the content of EcoTok videos, and comments and responses to these posts. I examine how EcoTok responses to doomism reconfigure the expert interview characteristic of the rhetorical strategy of many environmental documentaries, in which climate experts signal authority through certainty and dispassionate affect (Aaltonen; Norgaard; Minster; Seymour). I argue that EcoTok creators adopt this face-to-face model to re-signify the expert away from an air of objectivity and towards the idea of experts-in-process, growing alongside incertitude. Drawing from Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunova's idea of bleak joy, referring to the capacity to recognize the full scope of the climate crisis while resisting despair, I suggest that EcoTok responses engender a bleak conviviality. Within this frame, uncertainty and tension become the affective structure within which community is formed and care is enacted. EcoTok thus re-signifies the climate expert interview to establish an affectively oriented community that subsumes doubt and tension as its structuring features.

Chapter 3, "Feeling in the Festival Sphere: Film Festival Responses to Shifts in Environmental Media," turns to the traditional distribution platform for environmental documentary to see how this sphere is changing in response to shifting media and climate contexts. The chapter begins by reviewing existing literature in film festival studies which

establishes the film festival as a nuanced terrain of contradictory agendas, experiences, and ideologies (De Valck; Wong; Johnson; Roy; Kishore). I then examine how the environmental film festival embodies these tensions in its simultaneously environmental, urban, and digital settings (Monani; Cesaro; Vallejo and Peirano; Lee; Yee). I ask how the environmental film festival space may be changing with the conjuncture of heightened environmental awareness and emerging media.

To do so, I conduct a case study of Planet in Focus' 2023 festival, drawing from my observations while attending the event, and three interviews with festival organizers. I identify an increasing sense of information overload surrounding the festival sphere, resulting in audiences who are already highly aware, and even anxious, about climate realities (Narine). I investigate how the festival seeks to respond to this growing challenge, building support and solace into the spatio-temporal structure of the event. In this context, emerging media become a model for connective experience even as they contribute to this proliferation of information. The navigation of this complex affective and media landscape presents a growing challenge for film festival organizers, who must continually renew their goals and strategies to respond to shifting audience needs.

This thesis thus aims to parse how the conjuncture of emerging media and increased environmental awareness are destabilizing environmental documentary at the level of form, content, and circulation. In doing so, these emerging media present the opportunity to redefine the character and scope of environmental documentary towards enacting new forms of engagement within a shifting climate.

Chapter 1 - Nature at our Fingertips: The Smartphone as Environmental Documentary Camera and Screen

The environmental documentary, like all forms of filmmaking, is reliant upon two entities central to its production and distribution: the camera and the screen (Baker et al; Keep; Whiel). This chapter examines what happens when these devices converge in the highly accessible medium of the mobile phone. I argue that the use of mobile devices shifts the relationships between filmmakers and subjects, and subjects and viewers, of the traditional environmental documentary. In the traditional model, both filmmaker and viewer are situated as distant and invisible observers of "nature" in ways that uphold the idea of an untouched, pristine wilderness (Chris; Mitman; Vivanco). I argue that smartphone production and viewing have the capacity to destabilize these dynamics, producing an alternative aesthetic and formal character that surfaces the tensions involved in characterizing human-nature relationships.

On the production side, I examine the potential of the mobile film aesthetic to reimagine human-nature dynamics captured in the traditional environmental documentary. To approach this idea, I first outline the ways in which "nature" has been characterized in relation to humans, describing the tendency to enact a binary separation that divides humans from a mysterious and unknowable nature. In contrast, I present the increasingly popular idea of human connection to, and entanglement with, natural forces. Amid these opposing viewpoints, a tension arises in which nature becomes both estranged from, and enmeshed with, ourselves.

I trace the tendency of the traditional environmental documentary to reinforce the idea of a human/nature divide, in which the filmmaker disappears from a seemingly pristine wilderness. To parse the ways in which mobile filmmaking challenges this pattern, I turn to literature that

addresses the character of the mobile documentary (Baker et al; Berry; Farman; Robertson; Wilson). I outline the idea that the mobile phone captures an embodied aesthetic that signals the presence of the filmmaker, while placing the filmmaker in a heightened connection to their surrounding world. This capacity would suggest that mobile filmmaking produces an alternative aesthetic more in line with the idea of human enmeshment with the natural world.

However, this potential is limited by a simultaneous sense of distance, resulting in a smartphone aesthetic that is at once embodied and detached, and that exhibits simultaneous closeness to, and separation from, the surrounding world (Baker et al; Berry; Farman; Robertson; Wilson). As a result, I argue that mobile filmmaking, when applied to an environmental context, may ultimately surface the tensions of a "nature" from which we are both separate and in intimate connection.

To examine this potential, I conduct a case study of the 2018 film *The Reef*, an environmental documentary shot entirely on the iPhone. The film brings a mobile format and environmental context into alignment, providing the opportunity to assess these aesthetic and formal qualities. I argue that the film, in both content and form, gives expression to a simultaneous proximity and distance between the filmmakers and their wildlife subjects. In doing so, the film showcases how the closeness and detachment engendered by the mobile film can lend itself to a natural context which encompasses such division and enmeshment.

Handheld mobile devices also provide miniature screens for viewing, and speakers for listening to, environmental documentaries. I outline criticism and concerns that small screens lack the immersive power of the traditional cinema screen, fostering a less immediate or authentic viewing experience (Odin; Robertson). I argue that the movement of cinema onto mobile screens does indeed disrupt traditional viewing contexts and experiences, but in much

more complex ways. To approach these changes, I turn to literature around smartphone viewing practices that suggest a simultaneous intimacy and distance invoked by the small screen (Odin; Tryon; Wilson). I place this idea in dialogue with literature that addresses the screening of nature more generally, which contests the idea that screen mediation simply "flattens" experiences of nature, and argues that human interactions with nature are always already mediated and filtered in diverse ways (Best; Odin; Safit).

Mediation is thus a necessary condition of our communication with nature. The smartphone screen, which has been described as a "dirty window," surfaces this condition (Odin). As our interaction with the screen leaves smudges and fingerprints, the smartphone screen becomes neither fully clear nor fully obscured, mimicking the dynamics of environments that are as unknowable as they are intertwined with us. A brief case study of wildlife content posted on the Instagram account of the marine non-profit SeaLegacy will consider the relationship between proximity and distance that this mode of viewing engenders. The viewer's presence, indexed by their fingerprints, disrupts the idea that there can ever be an immediate view of nature, instead centring touch as the thing that both brings us into close relation, and indexes our distance. Thus, the traditional, large, distant screen of the environmental documentary is replaced by the dirty window, which obscures as much as it reveals, reflecting our fraught environmental relations. As such, the mobile phone disrupts the traditional model of environmental documentary not by resolving or omitting its inherent tensions, but by matching these dynamics with a formal apparatus that indexes such ambivalence.

What is this Nature?

Before exploring the potentials of smartphone filmmaking to destabilize human-nature

dynamics captured through film, it is necessary to situate my usage of the terms "nature" and "environment" within contextual literature about the social construction of this terminology. The figuration of nature in the Western cultural imagination is often characterized by a binary separation from humans (Cronon; Garrard; Morton; Oppermann and Iovino). As William Cronon argues in his seminal essay "The Trouble with Wilderness," the idea of a "pristine" or "untouched" wilderness has come to stand in for nature as a sacred space that is highly distinct from humans and should be protected to remain this way. Cronon argues that while "nature" may be taken to simply refer to things like trees, landscapes, and wildlife, it has become shrouded in the concept of wilderness to serve a series of human interests. Cronon traces much of the contemporary understanding of nature back to mid-19th century romanticist movements and the writings of John Muir, which re-signified nature as a profound space of wonder, capable of renewing the human spirit, and bathed in a sense of divinity.

As Cronon outlines, these meditations hold material consequences. These ideas would reach wide audiences and fuel conservationist movements of the time, including those that led to the creation of the first national parks in the United States (Garrard). Cronon argues that, to sustain conservationist movements, "the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred" (10). The existence of these parks was thus reliant on a fictive model of *terra nullius* which subsumed these parks and the model of nature which they embraced (Cronon). Under the guise of preserving "untouched" landscapes, the creation of these parks required the active and devastating removal of Indigenous peoples who had cared for these lands since time immemorial (Cronon).

These material implications underlie the characterization of nature as innately separate from humans. As Morton describes, "nature was always 'over yonder'" and enshrouded in an inaccessibility to humans, such that "we can never actually reach it" (3; 5). Even in encounters with this so-called natural world, its divinity and sublimity escape human understanding (Cronon; Morton). In this characterization of the "environment out there," nature becomes obscured as incomprehensible to the human self (Oppermann and Iovino 6).

As Cronon argues, this idea of nature is ironically designed to erase its origins as a socially constructed category. He states, "far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, [wilderness] is quite profoundly a human creation" (7). Despite these origins, the concept of wilderness is intended to frame "nature" as a realm without and beyond human mediation, rendering it "a product of the very history it seeks to deny" (16). Nature, framed in this construction of wilderness, posits a separation from humans as an innate quality, rather than a socially constructed one.

While we may no longer cling to Muir's ideas of wilderness as a divine and sacred space, ideas of nature as regenerative, and distinctly separate from humans are still alive and well in the Western cultural imaginary (Garrard; Oppermann and Iovino). Garrard highlights how nature remains imagined as "the space of self-discovery, healing and escape" (67). Oppermann and Iovino further outline how contemporary understandings of nature depend upon binary oppositions between "nature/culture, human/nonhuman … ecology/economy" which act "as the driving force behind economic growth, political strategies, and technological development—all to the detriment of the Earth's life support systems" (4). This idea of nature thus sustains the forces that destroy environmental well-being, prompting the desire to invest in alternative frameworks for understanding human-nature dynamics (Garrard; Oppermann and Iovino).

In opposition to this nature/culture divide, a set of frameworks have emerged that promote the idea of an inherent entanglement between humans and nature (Chang; Duvall; Haraway; Oppermann and Iovino; Strathern). Rather than opposing forces, nature and humanity are seen as deeply intertwined, with humans as part of, rather than apart from nature (Chang; Haraway; Oppermann and Iovino; Strathern). This connection fosters a dynamic that both demystifies nature and turns away from "the hyper-Cartesian dream of mastery," instead promoting a "disanthropocentric" or "non-dualistic" worldview in which humans are enmeshed within broader sets of environmental relations (Oppermann and Iovino 12; Chang 225). In doing so, this perspective challenges a hierarchical and dualistic view in favour of a more horizontal one. While increasingly popular, this perspective has not replaced the idea of humans and nature as separate but exists alongside the lingering impacts of this frame (Garrard; Oppermann and Iovino).

In the co-existence of these competing ideas of human-nature dynamics, a tension arises in which nature becomes a paradoxical concept, at once separate from, and intimately connected to, humans (Oppermann and Iovino; Morton; Safit). As Oppermann and Iovino posit, nature is a "strange stranger," at once "unpredictable," and "entangled" with human life (2). Safit argues that our relation to the world of "nature" can be "framed between the terms of separation and immediacy," enacting both a distance "and the immediacy of our contact with the world as beings-in-the-world" (212). Attending to the environment as something that is both "out there" and "in here," this perspective requires an awareness of the constructed character of these categories within the Western imaginary, and a questioning of their usefulness (Oppermann and Iovino 2).

My use of the terms "nature" and "environment" in the explorations that follow recognizes the artificiality of their meaning and employs these terms as signifiers of these fraught dynamics to explore how these relations are expressed within environmental filmmaking. I examine how the mobile phone as camera may engage with these tensions to challenge, destabilize, and reframe the environmental relations rehearsed in the traditional environmental documentary.

Human- "Nature" Relations in the Traditional Environmental Documentary

A significant portion of traditional environmental documentary content is the capture of wildlife and remote landscapes, creating films that transport viewers to faraway lands and showcase the animal life that exists there (Chris; Starosielski; Vivanco). Early instances trace back to the early 20th century, with cameras being transported to remote locations, or even towards the seafloor, to capture the mysterious life that exists in these areas (Starosielski). These films would often be shown as newsreels in theatres, allowing audiences to observe these otherwise inaccessible sights (Vivanco). In more recent years, this impulse has transformed into a distinct style of nature filmmaking, characterized most clearly by the BBC's successful series of wildlife films including *Planet Earth* (2006), *Blue Planet* (2001), and *Frozen Planet* (2011) (Safit; Vivanco). In these films, wildlife appears onscreen with "no humans" present, accompanied by "didactic narration" which shares scientific facts about these creatures (Vivanco 112).

Scholarship concerning this genre of wildlife and nature filmmaking is critical of various environmental dynamics rehearsed or reinforced by these films. Filming rare animals in remote locations has been compared to a colonial desire for capture and control, in which filmmakers

bring footage back to their home countries for editing and distribution (Chris; Vivanco). Further, the presence of these filmmakers is subsequently erased, as "human interference [is] presented as minimal," and only wildlife and landscapes are visible onscreen (Vivanco 112). As such, the filmmaker becomes "an omniscient and invisible observer recording natural behaviour on film" (112). Thus, film of this kind sustains the idea of a pristine wilderness or a "sublime nature" from which humans are inherently separate (Mitman; Vivanco 111). The human fingerprint is further obscured by the narration which places these images in "close relationship with the sciences," promoting an air of objectivity and detachment, as science is often viewed as impartial despite necessarily reflecting a partial and situated perspective (Vivanco 111). The "factual nature" of such films presents an ideology of "seeing is knowing," obscuring the plethora of editing and presentation choices made in the production process (Vivanco 112). Therefore, both the onscreen images and narration minimize the presence of human subjectivity within the frame, instead supporting Romantic attitudes that risk rehearsing problematic orientations towards the characterization of "nature" (Ingram; Mitman).

As a result of these filmic dynamics, wildlife and nature film is "a prism through which we can examine investments in dominant ideologies of humanity and animality, nature and culture" (Chris xiv). These films act as a vessel for the rehearsal of these dynamics, however, as Vivanco outlines, there have been recent efforts towards shifting these tendencies, with behind-the-scenes footage being featured more prominently. Vivanco states, "as if admitting to the crafted and fictional nature of wildlife representations on screen, in recent years filmmakers have invited audiences to view the trials and tribulations involved in gaining access and filming among their subjects" (112). While these models sometimes err in presenting filmmakers as

brave and triumphant explorers transcending frontiers, they signal an impulse towards alternative storytelling dynamics (111).

These filmic shifts point to the desire for the revised capture of human-nature relations. As Doyle contends, today's environmental context "calls for a re-conception of the environment as not separate from humans, and for more reflexive forms of knowledge production and communication" (7). In an analysis of discourse around mobile filmmaking, and a case study of a mobile environmental documentary, I ask whether and how environmental filmmaking mediated by mobile phone videography rises to this challenge.

The Character of the Mobile Documentary

The smartphone camera can be located within a history of technical innovations that have produced increasingly portable, affordable, and accessible filmmaking equipment. Video recording equipment following such trends ranges from recrafted lightweight cameras to Portapaks in the late 1960s, that were battery powered and could be carried and operated by one person (Aguayo; Motrescu-Mayes). By the 1990s, there was an "explosion of inexpensive digital video and editing equipment," accessible not only to professionals, but also amateurs (Aguayo 30).

The smartphone is thus continuous with the history of an increased ease of video production, but also has certain distinct qualities. Serving several purposes separate from its filmmaking potentials, the mobile phone is often located in users' pockets even when filming is not their priority. Further, the smartphone is set apart by its connection to digital networks, and the combination of the means for production, editing, and distribution into one device (Berry; Keep). This acceleration of the ease of film creation not only allows for more accessibility, but

also introduces a distinct aesthetic rooted in the relationship between the filmmaker and their surrounding environment (Baker et al; Frankham; Schleser "24Frames").

Scholarship in the field of mobile documentary highlights how the mobile phone can facilitate an aesthetic and filmmaking practice that is more spontaneous and embodied than the traditional documentary (Baker et al; Berry; Farman; Wilson). With the mobile phone's ease of portability, filming can happen spontaneously with little to no setup required, injecting content with a spur-of-the-moment effect (Baker et al; Odin; Schleser "A Decade"). Since for many of us, "every day we carry the tools around to potentially produce feature film," filmmaking with smartphones becomes more informal, utilizing the tools we already carry (Schleser "A Decade" 157).

This accessible digital recording and storage media lowers the costs of creating, storing, and editing content, which decreases the inhibition and selectivity that constrained amateur filmmaking under previous media formats (Berry; Schleser "24Frames"). Berkeley suggests that these media fulfil earlier desires for greater ease in film creation, such as Astruc's dream of the *camera-stylo* which would allow for a filmmaking practice "just as flexible and subtle as written language" (25). Similarly, mobile phone videography evokes Agnes Varda's idea of *cinécriture* which envisaged filmmaking as part of an expressive toolkit that could be easily accessible to artists and non-artists alike (Berkeley; Frankham). The accessibility, ease, and technological capability of mobile phones equipped with increasingly high-quality cameras and microphones would appear to materialize these ideals in a filmmaking device seemingly "free of format constraints" (Schleser "24Frames" 105).

The spontaneity and flexibility afforded by this format not only facilitates the capture of images but also influences their aesthetic composition (Baker et al; Berry; Frankham). Unlike

bulkier cameras that are often paired with stabilizing equipment, mobile recording is typically

handheld, capturing less controlled movement (Berry; Schleser; Wilson). Often held at eye level,

this handheld quality follows the gaze or movement of the filmmaker, mimicking their embodied

comportment (Berry; Wilson). As such, Wilson argues that this elevated spontaneity is grounded

in "the ideological presence of the filmmaker," as if the camera stands in for this person (Wilson

291). As a result of this embodied aesthetic, the smartphone affords a heightened sense of the

camera saying "I" (Kilby and Berry; Wilson). A personal device used for various other private

tasks, the smartphone also imparts a sense of intimacy, further tying captured images to the

filmmaker's person (Baker et al.; Odin).

This sense of the "I" does not exist in isolation but is captured in relation to the

surrounding world. Smartphones can be physically transported with ease, and content shared

from one location can reach a global audience (Baker et al.; Berry; Goggin; Robertson). Despite

this seeming transcendence of geographic barriers, mobile documentary filmmaking remains

deeply rooted in a sense of place (Baker et al.; Berry; Kilby and Berry; Özkul; Schleser

"24Frames"). In capturing the filmmaker's embodied relation to their surroundings, mobile

documentaries are highly situated, highlighting an "importance of location" (Baker et al 102).

Content captured by this device is thus permeated by a sense of the filmmaker's relationship to

their surrounding world (Baker et al.; Kilby and Berry; Özkul).

Smartphone filmmaking practitioners suggest that mobile filmmaking enhances their

attunement to, and interaction with, their environments (Berry and Kilby; Frankham; Keep).

Bettina Frankham suggests that the mobile phone facilitates "moments of attentiveness to what is

occurring around me" (56). Frankham frames such an attentiveness as a felt relation, stating that

it allows her to recognize the "times, spaces and things that quicken the heart" (56). This

reflection on her practice posits a corporeal relationship between the surrounding world and Frankham's body, placing her in an enhanced connection to her environment (57). Dean Keep further frames smartphone filmmaking as a deeply connective experience, stating "inside the digital heart of the smartphone we store tiny moments, audio-visual fragments of the world around us" (43). Viewing the smartphone as either a digital cabinet of curiosities or "scrapbook," Keep argues that mobile filmmaking is a process of collecting images and ideas to be organized and used later (41; 43).

Unlike more traditional filmmaking practices which require more setup and planning, the spontaneity afforded by mobile filmmaking liberates the filmmaker from the constraints of pre-meditation (Farman; Kilby and Berry). Instead, filmmaking practice becomes a process of collecting and feeling in relation to the surrounding world (Frankham; Keep). As Baker et al. contend, smartphone filmmaking can be interpreted as a process of "becoming more engaged or reengaged with the environment, looking at the world around us more closely, and sharing our experience of it" (110). The authors suggest that this capacity creates "expectations of somehow getting closer to the world" (119). Such an enhancement is facilitated by what Özkul deems a "connected form of presence," positing the mobile phone as a linking agent between the world and filmmaker, placing these entities in a more intimate relation (227).

This capacity of heightening the relationship between filmmaker and environment has intriguing implications when this surrounding world becomes "nature". With a distinct sense of environmental relation built into this format, the mobile phone holds the potential to reimagine the dynamics of the traditional environmental documentary. An aesthetic that captures the presence of the filmmaker challenges the traditional erasure of human presence, instead infiltrating the scene with a sense of relation between people and the "nature" being captured. In

combination with the idea of an increased attunement and connection to this surrounding world, this capacity lends itself to expressing the enmeshment of humans within their environment. Thus, this format has the capacity to restage environmental filmmakers not as invisible observers, but as highly implicated and situated agents in intimate connection with the "nature" that they record.

While these dynamics constitute a promising shift in the capture of human-nature dynamics, to bolster them as characterizing the entirety of the mobile phone aesthetic would simplify the tensions that remain embedded within this filmic format. These potentials are limited by continued format constraints, and an incomplete sense of unity between filmmaker and environment, which invoke a sense of distance alongside this enmeshment.

The spontaneity and flexibility afforded by the mobile phone suggest that anything and everything can be captured, but this device does not escape continued constraints, and filmic discernment about where and what to record. As Berkeley highlights in his reflections on filming a mobile documentary, the smartphone "was able to create the feeling that it was possible to film anything at any time but … this was not the case" (32). Berkeley recalls that there was an "unwillingness" to capture images of "rowdy men" who were often in the filming location, and other events or people deemed undesirable to the filmic gaze" (32). Thus, the idea of an enmeshment between filmmaker and environment is limited by these structures of choice. Rather than being fully in connection, the filmmaker and their environment are divided by the filmmaker's orientation and selectivity.

Further, the gaze facilitated by the smartphone camera has been compared to that of the flâneur (Berry; Keep; Kossoff; Robertson; Wilson). Described by Charles Baudelaire in his 1863 book "The Painter of Modern Life," the flâneur is a person who wanders around the city in a

seemingly aimless fashion, observing modern urban life (Baudelaire). This figure can be seen as akin to the casual, observant gaze of the smartphone, able to drift through private and public space to capture "the mediated traces of the people, places and events that shape our day-to-day lives" (41). Adam Kossoff, a filmmaker and scholar, makes this connection apparent in his mobile film *Moscow Diary* (2011), based upon Walter Benjamin's 1926 work of the same name, which is commonly seen as an expression of Benjamin's role as a flâneur. Kossoff reproduces similar themes present in Benjamin's work and suggests that the smartphone is uniquely suited towards giving expression to the flâneur perspective.

Through equating the mobile and flâneur gaze, Kossoff contradicts the idea of a deep, felt connection to the world facilitated by the mobile phone. While rooted in keen observation, a key characteristic of the flâneur is a sense of detachment from the surrounding environment (Baudelaire; Kossoff). Rather than being corporeally invested and linked to their surroundings, the flâneur possesses an air of flippant distance from the city they stroll (Berry). Further, the flâneur is characteristically anonymous, able to stroll the city without being recognized or perceived (D'Souza and McDonough; Kossoff). For this reason, the flâneur role has been suggested to be available only to white men, who can observe the city without others taking notice (D'Souza and McDonough). In this capacity to observe others without being perceived himself, the flâneur figure complicates the idea of the mobile phone as a tool of enhanced embodiment. Instead, this comparison renders the mobile gaze akin to a subject shrouded in an air of invisibility, with a capacity to exist as if he does not (Kossoff). Thus, in these comparisons to the flâneur, the mobile filmmaking aesthetic becomes detached rather than intimate and disappearing rather than embodied.

The smartphone gaze is thus positioned as both connected to, and embracive of, the world

around it, and selective and distant (Kossoff; Robertson). Rather than fully belonging to either perspective, the smartphone gaze treads the line between this proximity and distance. Berry argues that the smartphone allows for this co-existence of opposing elements, pointing to "screen ecologies that merge the physical and the digital, the material and the immaterial, the tangible and the intangible" (373). The mobile phone is positioned as a device capable of holding these competing characteristics in relation (Berry; Keep; Kossoff). Highlighting this capacity to occupy a space of the in-between, Robertson situates the mobile phone gaze as "anti-binary, that is, both embodied and disembodied, both material and transcendent" (276). As such, the mobile phone is both a machine allowing us to connect with our environment, and one "that obscures us from the world" (Kossoff 43). This complex filmic aesthetic may therefore lend itself to surfacing the tensions of human-environmental relations that are at once intimate and divided. To explore this potential, I turn to content that encompasses both this technical and contextual frame through using the smartphone as environmental documentary camera.

The Mobile Environmental Documentary

In adopting the smartphone medium, environmentally minded filmmakers unlock a set of potentials for interacting with the web of human-nature dynamics, mobilizing a filmic device that engenders both closeness and distance (Baker et al.; Keep; Robertson). Leo Stillinger, a Master's student in anthropology at McGill University, echoed these ideas in an interview, discussing his experience of filming the Appalachian hiking trail with his iPhone. Leo described the "convenience" of using a smartphone rather than a "movie camera," as he "needed it anyway," and it is a lighter weight alternative more resistant to being "jostled around" and "rained on" (Stillinger, Personal Interview). Leo highlighted how the iPhone was available for use at any

moment and allowed him to tune into the world around him, filming "inchworms and little bugs" that he found along the trail.

Leo stated that recording these shots "felt like this little window into a different world, or this different scale of life that I would not have been paying so much attention to if I hadn't had the phone". Thus, Leo suggested that the iPhone facilitated an attunement to the world around him, however, he placed this awareness in the context of an "inner conflict" between filming things and simply experiencing them. Leo described the act of filming as a "sacrifice" of direct experience through choosing to inhabit a moment through the screen of the phone and "not first-hand". In his field journal, Leo wrote "the forest is wonderful – I just haven't taken the time to be with it, except through the iPhone". Leo thus framed this device as placing a barrier between himself and the natural world around him, evoking both a closeness and a distance to this environment facilitated by the mobile phone.

This nuanced set of technical and environmental relations are evident in the 2018 short film *The Reef*, directed by Sven Dreesbach, and shot entirely on iPhone cameras. Throughout the film's eight-minute duration, Dreesbach tells the story of the Maldives Whale Shark Research Programme (MWSRP), and details the journey taken to film these animals. Commissioned by Apple, the film was created within a promotional context which influences its content but does not capture its full implications. Through formal choices and in post-release interviews, Dreesbach places the film's production within the broader landscape of the iPhone camera interface and its potentials for telling environmental stories.

Dreesbach echoes scholarship on mobile filmmaking through suggesting that the smartphone affords an increased spontaneity and ease of recording. An interview with Dreesbach is featured in an article by Apple entitled "How to Make Your Own Nature Documentaries"

("Behind the Shot"). This article contextualizes Dreesbach's comments with advice on how readers can mobilize the iPhone themselves towards similar ends, highlighting the promotional intent of the film. In this interview, Dreesbach states, "the iPhone turned into a wonderful tool right in our hands that was ready for use whenever we had to capture the moment" ("Behind the Shot"). This accessibility of the device being available for use at any moment allowed Dreesbach and his team to film spontaneously without having to "worry about all the usual technicalities" ("Behind the Shot"). Dreesbach further commented on the capacity to use "several 'cameras' (smart phones) to cover a variety of angles simultaneously," and attributes this ability to the fact that using these devices does not "break bank, due to their relatively low cost" ("Behind the Shot"). These technical affordances influence the content and aesthetic of the film, mobilizing these capacities in an environmental context.

The Reef speaks to the enhanced presence of the filmmaker facilitated by the smartphone medium, challenging the traditional wildlife documentary's erasure of human presence (Vivanco). The traditional environmental documentary utilizes more costly and bulky equipment which, as Dreesbach alludes to, limits the capacity for these films to use additional cameras that might appear on screen ("Behind the Shot"). In contrast, *The Reef* frequently features shots of MWSRP researchers free diving with iPhone cameras in their hands. Many of the images of whale sharks also feature these divers alongside these creatures, in the process of filming them. Through featuring these people adjacent to their subjects, the film repeatedly reminds viewers of the filmmaker's presence and perspective that enables the capture of these shots.

The existence, and experience, of the filmmakers is further referenced in the narration of the film, supplied by one of the MWSRP researchers, Basith Mohamed. He states that free diving is "a way to connect to your body: feel your heartbeat, feel how your lungs compress" (*The*

Reef). Through featuring this commentary alongside images of free divers with iPhones in their hands, the film links this bodily experience to the filmmaking process. The viewer becomes aware that the filmmaker has undergone such a unique corporeal experience while attaining the footage that they see. This felt experience further extends to the filmic landscape, with the muffled sound of a heartbeat intermittently joining the soundscape of the film. As such, the filmmaker's presence is not only seen by viewers, but can be felt through this embodied perspective. Thus, the invisible and objective filmmaker of the traditional environmental documentary is replaced by the situated and embodied mobile phone documentarian.

This filmmaker is further placed in relation to the world around them, building upon the idea of a "closeness" to the world facilitated by the mobile phone. In the narration of the film, Mohamed describes the relationships to the reef's "inhabitants" that is fostered through researching and filming these creatures (*The Reef*). He states, "with enough time in the water, some [animals] even become like acquaintances" (*The Reef*). The narration thus suggests that the mobile filmmaking process facilitates the building of bonds between humans and their animal subjects. This connection is further implied through the resonances in movement between the whale sharks and the filmmakers. The slow, waving motion of the whale shark's tail enters into visual rhyme with the undulating motion of the divers swimming and rising to the surface, as these shots are placed next to each other. These filmic techniques thus suggest an embodied connection between the filmmakers and the inhabitants of the environment that surrounds them. The film and Dreesbach's discussion of it suggest an enhanced connection to "nature" facilitated by the iPhone's technical and aesthetic character. In doing so, the film promotes the idea of an intimacy and enmeshment with the natural world, with filmmaker and subject in close relation.

However, this proximity remains limited by moments of distance. Dreesbach posits that

the iPhone's "compact size" "is one huge plus for documentary shoots," as it minimizes the cinematographer's noticeability and imposition upon subjects. Dreesbach declares, "your subject won't feel quite as intimidated by such a small rig aiming at them, if they notice at all" ("Behind the Shot"). Thus, Dreesbach suggests that the compactness of this camera facilitates a certain disappearance of the filmmaker towards their natural subjects, contrasting the idea of a highly present and situated filmmaker. The capacity to shoot these subjects therefore relies not only on the idea of an acquaintanceship, but equally on a separation from, and invisibility to, these beings. Thus, a sense of disappearance and division is also apparent in these filmic relations.

Distance between filmmaker and subject is further referenced in the film's narration and visual techniques. Mohamed highlights the unknowability of this natural landscape, stating, "when you descend into the reef, you enter into a world that you only have very limited access to" (*The Reef*). He further refers to the filmmakers as "us outsiders," and suggests that the reef's inhabitants never "really open up" to them (*The Reef*). Further, the film uses contrasting techniques while filming the above-water work of the researchers, and the underwater world of the whale sharks. Above water, the camera movement and onscreen action is fast paced while underwater, the shots are in slow-motion, and paired with ethereal music. This filmic difference highlights the mediated relation between the filmmakers and the world of their subjects, to which they are only visitors, with specialized equipment facilitating their limited access. The onscreen presence of this underwater gear including masks, snorkels, wetsuits, and flippers, reminds viewers of this partial and limited entry.

Rather than being simply contradictory, in the film's visual language, this connection and dissonance are co-constitutive. As Mohamed discusses the ability to form acquaintanceships within the always partial access to these worlds, an image of a sea turtle appears. In the first shot

of this turtle, we see a free diver behind this creature filming with the iPhone in an underwater casing. The turtle comes impressively close to the lens of this housing, before the film cuts to the image from this camera, featuring a close-up of this turtle alone, without the appearance of the filmmakers. This featured interaction evokes a movement between the filmmaker's presence and absence, and maintains the co-existence of these opposing dynamics.

Further, the third shot of the film is an extreme close-up of Mohamed's hand, holding onto a rope that propels him forward. This image, being featured so early in the film, immediately calls attention to the hand that holds much of the footage that the viewers will come to see. However, the proximity to this hand obscures its clarity and defamiliarizes its form, making it difficult for viewers to discern it as a hand until they see the wider shots that come next. Thus, the first image we see of the divers evokes both embodiment and disembodiment, featuring and obscuring the key bodily appendage that materially controls this footage. As such, the film's visual language encodes filmmakers that are both present and absent, embodied and obscured, and whose presence is necessarily mediated, mimicking their simultaneous connection and dissonance to their surroundings.

The Reef thus surfaces these underlying tensions, allowing a dialogue to emerge between them. Max Schleser characterizes this film as belonging to the "conversational mode" of mobile filmmaking: "as mobile devices characterize the fusion of communication and lens-based media, this conversational mode is characterized by opening up a dialogue through storytelling" (*Smartphone Filmmaking* 40). *The Reef* exposes and engulfs a simultaneous connection and division between filmmaker and environmental subject, bringing these relations to the fore in visual and technical ways, and thus making them available to conversation. Dreesbach thus offers not only a how-to guide for smartphone documentaries, but a model for inhabiting the

sense of the in-between that both the smartphone and environmental relations afford.

As *The Reef* makes evident, the capability of the mobile phone to capture both proximity and distance to the surrounding world bears certain compatibilities with a human-nature dynamic that is at once enmeshed and divided. When the surrounding world of the mobile filmmaker becomes what we have deemed "nature," the potential to shift relations between filmmaker and natural subject emerge, challenging the ideals presented in the traditional environmental documentary. In exercising this potential, environmental mobile filmmaking provides one answer to Doyle's call for more reflexive media that challenge the separation between humans and their environment. Centring both presence and absence, and surfacing mediation as a condition of environmental relations, the content that can be created by this device disrupts traditional relations of an invisible filmmaker and a pristine wilderness. Instead, it gives expression to the tension-filled landscape that underlies these ideologies. In its convergent character, the mobile phone also acts as a viewing platform. I now turn to the opposite side of the device to explore a similar set of dynamics that occur in the screening of environmental content through the phone screen.

Part 2: Dirty Viewing, or Screening Nature though the Mobile Phone

The traditional context for documentary film viewing is often described as an "enclosed darkened space with a big screen" producing an "immobile spectator" (Odin 156; Wilson 299). Viewing content in this enclosed context is often described as producing an immersive spectatorial experience which amplifies the power of cinema (Odin; Tryon). As Tryon outlines, "portable media players" like the smartphone are often perceived as threatening the integrity of these viewing rituals (1).

As Baker et al contend, the mobile phone can be described, amongst its other convergent capacities, as a "viewing device for micro-movies" (101). This capability has garnered criticism around this compact viewing format, including director David Lynch's oft-cited declaration that "if you're playing a movie on a telephone, you'll never in a trillion years experience the film. You'll think you've experienced it, but you're cheated" (Ruimy). Lynch goes on to contend that it is "such a sadness" to view a film on a phone, urging audiences to "get real!" (Ruimy). Such sentiments are echoed on online blogs and Reddit threads, where users mourn the days when viewing films in a cinema was more common, claiming that phone viewing "diminishes the experience" (u/SpecialUnitt). Some users go so far as to sardonically characterize phone movie viewing as akin to the "antichrist," or declare, "bursting your retina guaranteed after five minutes" (u/SpecialUnitt; Odin 156). As such, smartphones as movie screens have been interpreted as threatening to usher "the end of cinema as we have known it," stripping it of its immersive and sacred character (Odin 156).

However, a deeper look into the landscape around mobile phone viewing reveals a more nuanced set of practices and spectator experiences. As Odin describes, "we are now witnessing the emergence of a spectator less bothered by the small screen, a viewer born in front of the television, used to playing on his mobile, and therefore ready to watch anything on the mini-screen" (159). Odin suggests that this type of viewing is often fragmented, taking place during a commute, or interspersed with other mobile activities. This willingness to engage with the mobile as movie screen does not simply reduce this content's immersive potential but may invoke a distinct closeness to this medium (Odin; Wilson). As Odin points out, the mobile screen is often held in the viewer's hand as they watch, rendering this content "more personal" and "more intimate," particularly considering that "the mobile is the most personal of objects" (160).

Wilson expands upon this handheld character as injecting this viewing experience with a haptic visuality. As Wilson describes, the mobile viewer interacts physically with the screen, tapping on it to play content, and having the ability to pause, rewind, or skip parts directly upon the viewing platform. Combined with holding the device throughout the duration of viewing, touch becomes central to mobile screening (Wilson). Wilson argues that this capacity impacts viewers' relation to the content, with this haptic nature translating into a visual one, and injecting content with this sense of touch. As the author states, "the mediating apparatus of the phone film incorporates the mediated self of the body" (Wilson 301). This link between the film's surface, its content, and the viewer's body thus complicates the supposed distance that mobile viewing creates, instead suggesting a closeness and haptic connection to the film (Odin; Wilson).

This proximity is further echoed within several Reddit threads that suggest such a connection to filmic content through the smartphone (u/DiscombobulatedLaw92; u/gennaro456). These comments contend that smartphone viewing allows for engagement with filmic media to happen more often, and be more embedded into everyday routines, fostering an ease of engagement with this content (u/SpecialUnitt). u/SpecialUnitt writes, "sometimes you're sitting in your car waiting for someone or maybe you're stuck at a gathering and just need to sit in a room and watch a movie for a bit; it's nice to be able to whip out a streaming app on your phone and watch there". Thus, rather than bringing us further from film, these comments suggest that smartphones facilitate connection to this content. Further, u/gennaro456 explains the difference between viewing on larger screens and smaller ones, stating "I also just always get distracted if I watch something on a television. I get the urge to look at my phone the entire time". When watching on a phone, this user suggests that the urge to look at this device subsides, allowing them to avoid distraction and better focus on the content. Thus, viewing on a phone does not

simply disrupt the immersion of traditional viewing contexts, but creates alternative opportunities for such a closeness to occur.

This set of viewing dynamics can be placed in dialogue with scholarship around the traditional means of screening nature. As Best describes, "the screen continues to be the primary generator of visual imagery in contemporary culture, including of the natural world" (65). When screening and viewing documentary content of entities deemed "natural," such as wildlife and landscapes, a number of tensions arise regarding the viewer's relationship to this content (Best; Safit). Best outlines the idea that viewing natural content through a screen does not truly immerse us in nature, but rather distracts us from the environment actually around us, diminishing genuine connection with our surroundings. Further, Safit describes that, at first glance, the capture, framing, and screening of natural content can be seen to "put us in further remove from nature," flattening and mediating this content, and thus rendering it "de-natured" (211). Through presenting "landscape-as-picture," these representations of nature as "two-dimensional" can be seen to exacerbate existing separations between humans and their environment (Safit 212). As Safit states, "my physical separation from my surrounding is doubled by the mediation of screened images that separate (and restructure) the sight of things from the things themselves" (213). This separation enacts a sort of "disembodiment," in which the image remains separate from the thing it represents, thus flattening our experience of this content (Safit 218). However, as Safit outlines, such a view oversimplifies experiences of "nature" and media objects themselves.

Safit highlights how the viewing of media products is always an embodied experience that does not necessarily remove us from the world any more than our experiences are already filtered and mediated. As Safit describes, the idea of media products "de-naturing"

environmental content "poses a problem only to those who fetishize first-hand and 'natural,' unmediated experience as the only legitimate access to the world" (213). Safit thus problematizes the idea that encounters with nature can ever be "pure" or unfiltered by our own perspectives, experiences, and cultural referents (215). As Best contends, "the line between technology (the coming-between of the screen and its tactile surface), and the environment (the setting-before of the image on the screen's surface) is not only blurred, but to a large extent irrelevant" (70). Thus, rather than attempting to preserve only the supposed first-hand purity of natural encounters, Best argues that mediated representations "ultimately [complicate] our interactions with physical environments rather than replacing them" (72). As Best contends, the "world is picture," and filmic representations thus enter a broader set of dynamics around our always already filtered encounters with the so-called natural world (79).

Safit and Best outline how, in some ways, filmic representations of nature can be seen as bringing us closer to experiencing this entity, even if highly filtered. Safit states that while the "cinematic image mediates the world," it also "brings us into immediate contact with a vision, with an image of the world" (213). With nature documentaries often bringing viewers to remote areas of the world, such as in BBC's *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth*, environmental cinema "enables us to see in temporal and spatial scales that are otherwise not available to us" (219). Best and Safit both contend that it would be an oversimplification to state that these programs only bring viewers closer to the natural world, as their content presents its own problematic separations between humanity and nature. Instead, these scholars argue that screening "natural" content subsumes both a closeness to and separation from nature, echoing the filmmaking dynamics outlined above.

As Best states, "our visual consumption of physical environments is both distracted and

amplified by pervasive encounters with screen mediation" (72). Safit further describes how

images, rather than obscuring the objects they represent, are often "the locus where the very

meaning of things … can be sought and found" (214). Thus, filmic representations of nature

invoke both a "separation and immediacy" that exist already in our relationship to the natural

world (Safit 212). As Safit convincingly posits, "nature screened does not remove us further

away from nature; it brings us closer into the distanceless proximity in which we are bound to

what we see" (233). The screening of nature, therefore, does not enact a novel separation, but

echoes the dynamics that exists in our "first-hand" experiences, which are always already

mediated or, as Safit puts it, "filtered through a window" (213).

This language of seeing through a window is echoed in literature around smartphone film

viewing, suggesting an intriguing compatibility between screening nature and the mobile screen.

Wilson expands upon the tactility of mobile phone screening, stating that as the user interacts

with the screen, "no trace of manipulation is left behind, except perhaps for finger smudges,

which are both a diffusing of image detail, and the reminders or tangible indications of physical

presence" (299). These finger-marks that decorate the screen's surface thus become part of the

viewing experience, obscuring and adding to the screened images. Odin remarks that, "while I

would never touch the cinema screen, my thumb starts to navigate the mobile screen, a screen

that is not a window but an opaque surface, 'a dirty window'" (160). As our tactile interactions

with the screen dirty the window through which we see, they place a filter or partial barrier over

this content. For "natural" images, such marks make visible the "window" through which we see

this entity, whether screened or "first-hand". Morton asserts that in historical and contemporary

idealizations of nature, this entity becomes "an ideal image … shimmering and taken behind

glass like an expensive painting" (5). Viewing nature on a mobile phone dirties the glass that

displays this image, complicating its idealization and instead drawing attention to our presence within our tension-filled relationship to the natural world. The obscuration that finger-marks place upon the screen only partially obscure the image, allowing for both a close observation of, and a distance from, this content.

On the one hand, the intimacy and sense of the haptic afforded by the mobile phone place viewers in a close relationship to the content they are viewing, as if they could reach out and touch these natural scenes (Odin; Wilson). Such a sentiment is made evident through the comments on the Instagram videos published by SeaLegacy, a marine conservation non-profit organization and production company. The company posts videos of animals filmed in a style akin to the traditional wildlife documentary, where majestic creatures fill the frame, providing viewers with rare close-up access to these animals. The videos are rarely accompanied by narration, and instead typically feature ethereal music. According to the comments on these videos, the effect seems to produce a sense of awe at the experience of viewing these creatures, and the idea of a connection to these animals. Viewers deem these videos "serene" and "mesmerizing," and state that the experience of viewing "feels so intimate" (@colejocelynmarie; @jaspergkphoto). Responding to a close-up clip of a bear, @kattspurr states, "thank you for allowing me to witness so closely this magnificent creature". These comments suggest a deeply connective and emotive experience produced by the screening of this nature, producing a closeness that would often be seen as reserved for first-hand experience.

However, the comments on these videos also highlight the barriers produced by this viewing practice. One user states that a video of stingrays made them "feel like I was in a sea-life aquarium," as if they were looking through glass rather than staring at a phone screen (@whoisclaudina). While this comment enacts the erasure of the phone screen, it continues to

acknowledge a barrier between these creatures and the viewer. Comparing this content to an aquarium, this user refers to the animals as if captive, where these creatures exist in a separate context to the humans viewing them, as their observers remain comfortably dry, and at a distance. This separation between animal and viewer complicates the intimacy of this experience, with spectators not entering this natural world, but observing it from behind a barrier.

The screen of the smartphone, as a viewing platform akin to aquarium glass, becomes dirtied not only by finger-marks, but also by the visible affordances of a platform like Instagram. On SeaLegacy's Instagram account, the videos of animals, when viewed, are accompanied by a series of icons signifying the capacity to comment, like, and share the video, along with a snippet of the caption, and the name of the accompanying music (figure 1). These icons and information create an additional visual layer between the screen and the content. Further, the aspect ratio of the smartphone, being optimized for portrait instead of landscape orientation, contrasts with the aspect ratio of most professional-grade cameras. Thus, the SeaLegacy content posted, which is originally filmed in a landscape orientation, occasionally becomes cut off on either side. For instance, a close-up of a wolf's face exceeds the frame when the wolf moves its head, and its snout becomes overlapped by icons (figure 2). This obscuration gives viewers a sense of limited access, inserting additional distance between them and the screened animals. As such, nature screened through the smartphone brings us both in intimate connection with, and at a distance from, this content. These dynamics produce the effect that we can get close enough to touch, yet this touch leaves marks that speak to an inherent distance.

The mobile screening of nature thus draws attention to that window which acts as a partial, but incomplete barrier to our interaction with the imagined natural world. This viewing challenges the idea of a pure or untouched nature, instead centring touch and recording the

"tangible indications of [our] physical presence" (299). Such markings implicate us within the content we view, decorating it with our touch, but this very proximity is marked by the barrier of the screen's surface. Thus, this content is viewed through an opaque surface which mimics the obscurity of our fraught relationship to nature, with our fingerprints acting as indexes of this tension-filled relation (Aguayo 34; Odin). As such, this screening shifts dynamics of traditional documentary spectatorship; rather than an immobile and distant viewer, the mobile produces a highly tactile one who marks their presence upon the screen. Mobile images of the natural world, and our smudged imprints upon them, thus mimic our always dirtied vision of the environments we inhabit but which are never perfectly transparent to us (Best; Safit).
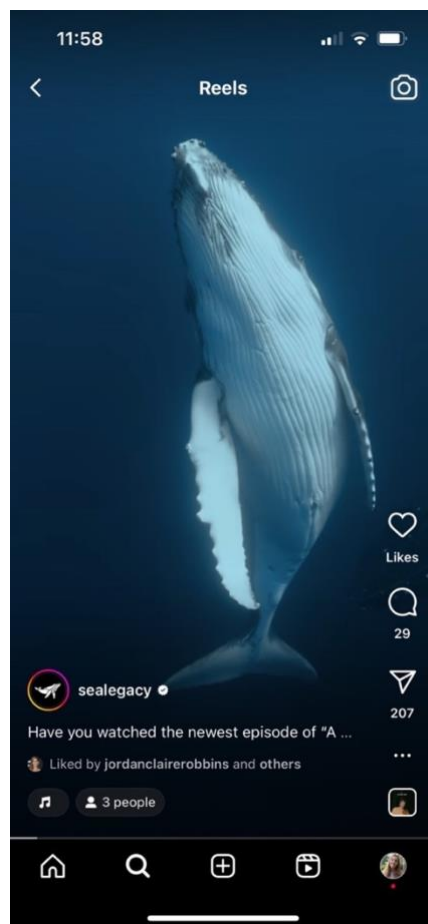
Figure 1. SeaLegacy, "Have You Watched." *Instagram*. Accessed December 18, 2023.
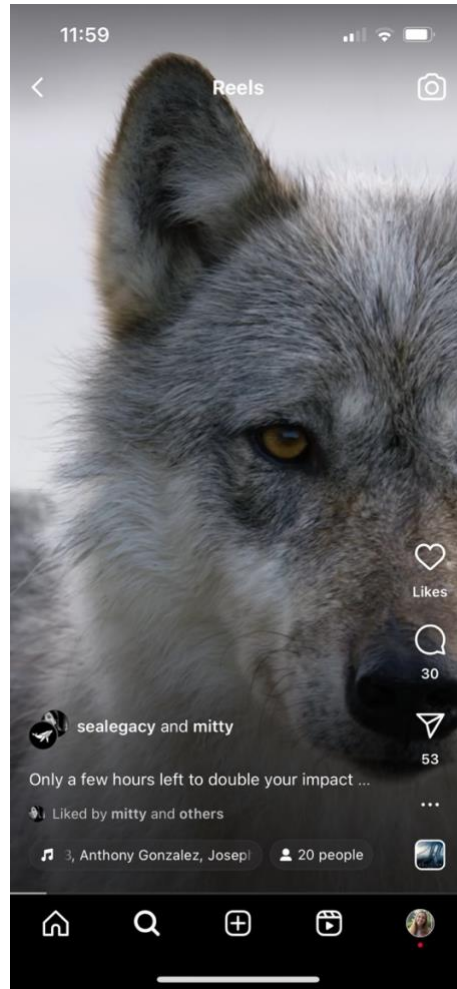
Figure 2. SeaLegacy, "Only a few hours left." *Instagram*. Accessed December 18, 2023.

Conclusion:

Viewing nature through a mobile screen, like recording it, rehearses a simultaneous intimacy and distancing from the environment that mimics our inherent enmeshment within, and the estrangement from, the natural world (Best; Odin; Safit). Mobile filmmaking produces an aesthetic that encompasses both a highly connective and distant character. For "natural" content, this dynamic mimics and showcases existing tensions between people and the environment and provides a format where these opposing relations can rise to the surface.

Similar dynamics emerge on the other side of the mobile phone, where our haptic intimacy with the device both draws us in and marks the barriers to our engagement. If environmental interactions are always akin to seeing through a window, as a result of our asserted separation and inherent enmeshment with these forces, then smartphone viewing practices render this window opaque (Odin; Safit). As a result, the display of natural content is accompanied by the indexes of our relations to these images, injecting these viewing practices with this ambivalence between proximity and distance (Aguayo 34).

Thus, utilizing a mobile phone to create or view environmental documentary shifts traditional filmmaking and screening practices. This device surfaces the tensions of characterising human-nature relations and makes these dynamics visible onscreen, in both the captured images of the filmmakers themselves, and the fingerprints of viewers. In doing so, these practices complicate and displace traditional ideals of the invisible filmmaker and the immobile spectator. Instead, these actors become highly implicated within these stories, yet also kept at a distance from the content they display. As such, nature captured and screened through the mobile phone does not simplify or flatten the experiences of interacting with nature, but instead maintains the complexities and tensions that are an inherent part of this story.

Chapter 2 - Countering Climate Doom Online: An Affective Analysis of EcoTok Responses to Doomism

As knowledge about climate change becomes more commonplace, the genre of environmental documentary not only acts as an educational vessel, but also attends to the felt experience of coming to this knowledge (Aaltonen; Minster; Seymour). The climate crisis, with its dire and pressing character, can elicit a slew of negative affective responses (Fuller and Goriunova; Mann; Niemanis and Walker). In recent years, scholars and journalists have identified a rise in the prevalence and online presence of "climate doomism," the belief that it is already too late to take vital climate action (Mann 147). While this phenomenon has resulted in the digital spread of climate negativity, it has also elicited an array of online responses attempting to counteract doomism with a more positive outlook. Particularly prominent in the fight against climate doomism is an online collective of environmental TikTok activists known as EcoTok, whose members have created a variety of rebuttals to doomist discourse. Framing this work as a re-orientation of the environmental documentary's expert interview model, I will assess how EcoTok creators engender an alternative affective experience of the climate crisis.

The chapter begins by reviewing literature around the complex temporality encompassed by the climate crisis, and the trouble with climate urgency, to establish the nuanced ground upon which climate doomism, and EcoTok responses to it, emerge. Using Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of the affective economy of fear, this chapter configures doomism as a coping strategy that responds to the inherent uncertainty of climate futures. Characterizing EcoTok as an "affective public" mediated by "affective infrastructure," the chapter asks what alternative felt experiences EcoTok engenders (Papacharissi; Bosworth). This question is approached through analysing content created by four members of this public, its infrastructural frame, the comments

and responses to these videos, and the insights of some of these creators collected in interviews. I place the work of EcoTok in comparison to the traditional environmental documentary's tendency to feature interviews with climate experts whose scientific authority is signalled by their objectivity, certainty, and dispassionate affect. I argue that this content adopts this face-to-face model of engagement to re-signify the "expert". Rather than an unfeeling and unquestionable figure of authority, EcoTok reconfigures this expert as attentive to both fact and feeling, and as always in-process, growing alongside a lack of certainty.

This uncertain frame extends to the work that these experts enact. I characterize EcoTok as a public which subsumes the creators working under this banner, and their audience members who engage with and respond to this content. While EcoTok may appear at first glance to simply promote climate optimism, an analysis of this content's inherent contradictions reveals how, rather than dissolving uncertainty, this public engulfs it as the basis of community formation and care. Drawing from Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunova's idea of bleak joy, the capacity to simultaneously recognize impending climate danger and resist despair, I suggest that this EcoTok public encompasses a bleak conviviality. Within this frame, uncertainty and tension become the affective structure within which community is formed and care is enacted. In doing so, EcoTok destabilizes and transposes the expert interview of environmental documentary towards an affectively oriented community that subsumes doubt and tension as its structuring features.

Doom, Time, and the Trouble with Urgency

Climate doomism is a pessimistic outlook that posits nothing can be done to prevent climate apocalypse (Saravanan 4). This belief that the earth will soon be inevitably uninhabitable

may cause intense emotions of anxiety and despair, but it is likely to ultimately result in apathetic resignation (5; Mann 403). As Tim Edensor et al. describe, this "new catastrophism" may lead to a "paralysing anxiety" that subsides into a "stasis" in which people "fatefully accept an inevitably catastrophic future" (256). Michael Mann argues that this doomism will not only foster individual distancing from climate issues but may fuel broader climate inaction; with the belief that there is nothing to be done, there is little point in changing the status quo (403). As a result, Mann suggests that doomism may pose a greater threat to climate action than climate denial (404). Stating that "doomism is the new fossil fuel profit protectionism," Mann argues that doomism allows current climate-destroying structures to remain intact with the belief that climate action is futile, impeding necessary changes that can prevent or mitigate climate harms (405). As Norblad contends, this "predictive determinism" leaves "no space for imagining, creating, planning, or deliberating, and this stifles political thought" (335). Instead, this doomism enacts a temporality that blurs past and future, obscuring actions that can be taken to avoid predicted catastrophes (Norblad 335). Niemanis and Walker argue that an apocalyptic view of an impending future enacts a temporal "exteriorization," in which humans become subject to the flow of time, as if it unfolds outside of our control or actions (568). As such, with the idea that we cannot prevent crisis, environmental impacts become problematically alienated from human action (Niemanis and Walker 568).

This dynamic can be situated within scholarship that seeks to address the complex temporal landscape which discussions of climate change produce. Much of the discourse about climate change mitigation revolves around the language of "tipping points" (Garrard; Marquardt and Delina: Norblad; Whyte). Presented as "points of no return," tipping points are thresholds beyond which abrupt and irreversible damage occurs (Garrard 2). Crossing these thresholds is

thus constitutive of being "too late" to prevent catastrophic climatic changes (Edensor et al; Garrard). Accordingly, narratives that invoke tipping points often call for urgent action to forestall this prospective irreversibility (Roelvink and Zolkos). As Norblad contends, tipping points posit that a crisis is "impending but still avoidable" (345). Within this conceptualization, the future remains open, but its closure is impending, invoking a call to action before it is too late (Norblad 346).

This relegation of the climate crisis to a future that is rapidly becoming unchangeable enshrouds this phenomenon within a temporality that, as Kyle P. Whyte argues, may obscure thresholds that have already been passed. Whyte argues that we need not only consider the ecological tipping point, but also a "relational tipping point" (3). As Whyte outlines, long histories of "colonialism, capitalism, and industrialization" have prevented the creation of healthy and productive kin relationships with the environment and Indigenous peoples (3). As such, it is likely too late to prevent dangerous climate harms for many Indigenous communities (4). Whyte thus problematizes urgency in the face of climate change, arguing that a rush towards preventing ecological tipping points will likely re-enact injustices towards marginalized communities (1). As Whyte discusses, "that's how colonial power has been wielded in the past, that is, by using real or perceived urgencies to mask or justify privilege, harm, and injustice" (5). While not supporting climate doom, Whyte calls for the recognition that certain tipping points have already been met, challenging the use of urgency to justify continual harm. Climate change, therefore, inhabits a complex temporality in which the sense of being "too late" exists both in the future and the past, complicating the experience of the present.

To understand the temporal relations of the present-day during climate change, it is useful to turn to Nixon's idea of "slow violence". While violence is typically thought of as an

"explosive" or "spectacular" event, Nixon draws attention to a violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight" (2). Since climate change happens over an extended period, it can be difficult to grasp or feel in the present day aside from catastrophic events like natural disasters and disease outbreaks (3). Slow violence thus offers a model of understanding the temporal character of the present crisis (Bodker and Morris; Edensor et al; Tamoudi and Reder). This violence which can be witnessed in slow environmental degradation and is often absorbed by the bodies of marginalized people in cumulative health impacts (Nixon 2).

This complex temporal landscape of past tipping points, present slowness, and future irreversibility prompts scholars like Roelvink and Zolkos to argue that climate change inherently engulfs overlapping temporal scopes. Roelvink and Zolkos describe how, in discussions of climate change, a strong and erroneous separation between "now" and "the future" is often enacted (47). Since we cannot know future events, discussions of climate mitigation have been characterized as "governing under uncertainty," due to the "deep unmasterability of the future" (Boas et al 3371; Garrard 4). While Roelvink and Zolkos agree that the future is inherently uncertain, they posit that a strong separation between present and future renders climate change a "temporal 'other'," obscuring it from our present contexts (46). Further, the notion of tipping points and the idea that "what will be prospectively irreversible remains currently avoidable" risks re-enacting narratives of human ingenuity and technological triumph that have led to the current crisis (47). The authors argue that using the conjunction of "unless" when discussing climate futures enacts an insistent separation between present and future which obscures the interweaving temporal strains of the climate crisis (45).

An emphasis on urgency thus fails to capture the time-based complexity of climate change. As Marquardt and Delina posit, "the nature of the problem goes against human's

conventional idea of linear timescales of change and development," requiring new ways of interpreting time in this climatic moment (2). Roelvink and Zolkos offer one such frame for encompassing the overlapping temporalities of climate change in viewing this phenomenon as happening in the "future anterior" (49). A verb tense that simultaneously evokes both past and present, the future anterior frames climate change as "a catastrophe that will have come" (44). In doing so, this framing attends to what Edensor et al. term "the multiplicity of the temporal processes that are entangled in climate and environmental change" (257). Roelvink and Zolkos further posit that this notion may prompt "retroactive" political action, in which we can project ourselves into the future to act and respond to the crisis as if it has already happened (51). As such, this characterization of climate temporality allows us to inhabit the pastness and futurity of this crisis (51).

As Bødker and Morris intriguingly posit, climate change can be seen as "both ephemeral and tangible, latent and erupting, continuous and disjointed. In this way, climate change is much like time itself: a set of complex and interlinked processes that are ascribed meaning through experiences of singular (mediated) events, numerical measurements, and/or broader social and cultural temporal imaginations" (1). In making this comparison between the complexities of climate change and time, Bødker and Morris point to how the temporality of the climate crisis becomes inscribed with cultural meaning. As the above scholarship suggests, this ascribing often rehearses problematic relations between people and their environments, prompting the search for more appropriate forms of temporal understanding. Therefore, many agree that a model of urgency, which simply contends that it will soon be too late, insufficiently attends to these temporal complexities (Edensor et al; Neimanis and Walker; Marquardt and Delina; Tamoudi and Reder).

An urgent call to action is thus not the antidote to climate doom, but these two responses are instead bound together as reactions to the same temporal tensions. Like urgency, doom is an inadequate response to the complexities of the temporality of climate change (Neimanis and Walker; Marquardt and Delina; Roelvink and Zolkos). Doom cannot be dismissed as mere complacency. Instead, it can be better understood when placed in dialogue with Sara Ahmed's account of the affective economy of fear. Affect refers to embodied states of felt experience. Seigworth and Gregg describe affect as "the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension … or that can even leave us overwhelmed" (1). The study of affect allows for an attention to these forces and the ways in which they may matter. Ahmed argues that affect does not reside in an object or sign, but results from circulation within an affective economy (120). In this context, Ahmed examines the workings of fear. Like other affects, Ahmed argues that fear is not contained within an object but is enacted through circulation (123). Since fear is linked to the future, Ahmed highlights its inherent uncertainty, and the consistent possibility that the object of fear may pass us by (124). Rather than being comforting, Ahmed argues that this potential of avoidance intensifies fear due to its contingency and the impossibility of containment (124). The object of our fears might pass us by, or it might not; because it cannot be fixed, it becomes a fixation. It "could be anywhere and everywhere," heightening fear's affective force (124).

From the perspective of Ahmed's theory, the uncertainty and temporal complexity around the climate crisis amplifies the fear evoked by this crisis through making it impossible to definitively locate or "solve". As such, it is possible to characterize doomism as an attempt to contain this fear through imbuing it with certainty. The doomist assertion that it is too late to

change our determined future functions to simplify, restrain, and control the object of fear. In this framework, climate doomism is not characterized as apathy or cynicism, but as a coping strategy. Doom and urgency thus constitute differing problematic responses to the same temporal complexities of the climate crisis. As a result, an effective rebuttal to climate doomism must attend to the complex affective and temporal landscape to which it responds.

The EcoTok Response

EcoTok responses to climate doomism work toward imagining an alternative affective frame to the climate crisis. EcoTok was founded in 2020 and consists of 19 TikTok creators promoting environmental activism. These members include scientists, students, activists, and civil servants, with a common goal of climate "education and inspiration" ("EcoTok Collective"). Many of these creators began their TikTok work independently, and later joined the collective which facilitates collaboration and increases visibility. The counteraction of doomism figures centrally in the collective's mission, with the front page of their website reading, "'climate doomism,' or a pessimistic outlook on the future of the planet, rivals climate denialism" in threatening our futures ("EcoTok Collective"). Under #climatedoomism, EcoTok members @Alaina Wood, @Isaias Hernandez, @Wawa Gatheru, and @Eco OG have crafted a varied array of responses to doomist discourse.

These responses take a critical stance on doomism that echo scholarship surrounding the risks of this outlook. EcoTok co-founder and scientist Alaina Wood warns of climate doomism's breeding of inaction, stating "corporations and governments that have contributed the most to climate change are so excited that y'all are saying it's too late to stop climate change" (@Alaina Wood, "Why Climate Doomism is Bad"). Highlighting doomism's facilitation of big

corporations carrying on "business as usual," Alaina critiques the dangerous potentials of doom (@Alaina Wood, "Why Climate Doomism is Bad"). Further, Wawa Gatheru exposes climate doomism as a white phenomenon, arguing that Black and Indigenous peoples have been dealing with the end of their worlds for centuries, and do not have the luxury of succumbing to despair. Wawa Gatheru states "some people, many of whom will be the last impacted by the climate crisis want to bow out? Say it's too late? If that's not privilege, I don't know what is" (@Wawa Gatheru, "Climate Doomism is a White Phenomenon"). This piercing critique of doomism centres the racialized character of this affect and exposes its unproductive and dangerous implications.

EcoTok responses to doomism not only criticize doomist discourse but devise alternative strategies for approaching the affective milieu of the climate crisis. These responses include direct rebuttals to doomist social media content, countering doom with good climate news, and providing factual accounts of what changes can feasibly be made to mitigate climate change. Further, EcoTok creators not only criticize doom, but validate the feelings that can lead to this perspective and perform understanding for those who succumb to this outlook. In creating these retorts to doomism, these users craft an alternative approach to the climate crisis with its own affective character. Rather than being individual posts alienated from each other, I treat this series of rebuttals as a corpus constituting a more cohesive movement against climate doomism. To do so, I situate this work as creating an affective public supported by affective infrastructure.

Kai Bosworth's description of affective infrastructure offers a way to understand the structured form of these EcoTok responses. Bosworth describes affective infrastructures as the "specific social and spatial settings, contexts, or conditions that generate affective forms" (13). These infrastructures, as Bosworth argues, can provide the necessary mediating means to cohere

social groups and support the spread of ideas (13). Rather than dictating the form of social movements enacted by these groups, this infrastructure acts as the underlying force that facilitates and binds this affectively oriented messaging (12). Within Bosworth's logics, TikTok and, more specifically, EcoTok can be seen as affective infrastructures that constitute the context and spatial settings for these responses to take place. The affordances of TikTok, with its short form, easily accessible, and highly shareable videos, allow this content to spread and reach disparate groups. Further, the capacity of users to respond to, and engage with, this content further facilitates the binding capacities of this mechanism. An additional layer of infrastructure is enacted through the collective of EcoTok, which serves to connect and cohere a variety of responses under a singular banner, amplifying their reach and unifying their messages under this structural principle. This doubled infrastructural frame certainly fulfils the necessity of mediating mechanisms that Bosworth argues is key to affective infrastructures.

Such an affective infrastructure can be seen to facilitate the creation of an affective public. Zizi Papacharissi devises the notion of affective publics, defining these spaces as "networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (15). According to Papacharissi, these publics mobilize the affordances of technological platforms to create a network rooted in affective qualities (16). These affects work to connect disparate strangers and bind them into an affectively oriented public that is structured by the share-ability and connective qualities of digital platforms (3). Drawing from Raymond Williams, Papacharissi argues that affective publics materialize through soft structures of feeling, as they originate from everyday feelings without definitive form and act as "connective conduits of sentiment" (23). Rooted in structures of feeling, these publics are always in flux and transition (13). Further, Papacharissi stresses that these publics should not be

seen as devoid of reason due to their affective orientation, but that feeling and thought can be balanced within this affective attunement (20).

Using Papacharissi's framework, it is possible to identify EcoTok responses to climate doomism as an affective public. Rooted in affective attunement towards climate doomism, these responses mobilize sentiment to engender connective qualities. Attracting an international audience, and with some videos garnering hundreds of thousands of views, these responses have the capacity to connect disparate groups through their affectively oriented content. Papacharissi and Bosworth both gesture towards the capacity of affective infrastructures and publics to support social mobilization and movements. While EcoTok may hold this potential, for the purposes of this paper, I am not interested in characterizing these responses in ways that qualify their effectiveness for mobilization. Doing so would present the challenge of how to measure this usefulness and imply that these affective orientations only matter if they increase mobilizing power. Instead, I use these frameworks to see how affect is used to cohere this public, and work to investigate its character as an alternative to the doomist frame.

As Papacharissi insists, this public should not be dismissed as devoid of reason or rationality due to its affective character (20). Instead, these responses balance highly rational accounts of the climate crisis with affective attunement. For instance, Alaina Wood debunks a post by @hermes.the.cynic claiming that sea level rise due to changing ocean currents could lead to "half the population of the planet dying within a year" (@hermes.the.cynic). To disprove this claim, Alaina provides a scientific breakdown of these currents, using graphics and data to reassure viewers that the outcome suggested by @hermes.the.cynic is "incorrect" (@Alaina Wood, "I'm Beyond Tired of Debunking"). Alongside this debunking, Alaina stresses the "mental health issues" that news like this can elicit and hopes that her video will assuage some of

these feelings (@Alaina Wood, "I'm Beyond Tired of Debunking"). In doing so, Alaina combines scientific evidence with affective attunement, treating both as equally important and intimately linked. As Alaina stated in an interview, "I try to go about it in a hey here's the facts but also your feelings are valid". In debunking the claims of another creator, Alaina attempts to validate climate related feelings of despair, while guiding viewers towards alternative affective responses. These sentiments can be seen as the soft structures of feeling that Papacharissi describes, as they create alternative affective strategies to climate doomism without definitive form. As such, these ideas are always in flux and developing, but remain connected within this affective public facilitated by the affordances of a digital platform.

This attunement to not only fact but also feeling holds intriguing implications when placed in dialogue with traditional environmental documentary tendencies towards the expert interview and talking-heads model. Many environmental documentaries include interviews with scientists and climate experts, utilizing "close-up talking heads" as a structuring format (Rose 210; Seymour). This technique is used to construct a trustworthy and relatable figure of authority who is positioned as if in dialogue with viewers. As Rose suggests, these experts "pose and answer questions directly to the camera so that the viewer is positioned as the one being asked and being answered" (210). EcoTok responses adopt this talking-heads style, with creators often holding their phone close to their faces and talking directly to the camera. A quick glance at Isaias Hernandez's profile reveals a slew of thumbnails featuring this creator's face positioned towards the camera (figure 1). This tendency replicates similar goals to that of the traditional environmental documentary, with Alaina stating that she hopes to be a "friendly face," and that, "when people see my face, I hope they think I'm trustworthy". Further, Isaias Hernandez's personal assistant and communications director, Maksim (Max) Batuyev, stated that the goal of

featuring Isaias' face so prominently is to lend a "personalized approach". In doing so, they hope to facilitate people's ability to "connect" and "resonate with" Isaias and the content he produces. Further, these responses make the intended engaging effect of the talking-heads model literal, as their placement on TikTok allows people to enter dialogue with these creators through comments and responses. Thus, this model of engagement sustains the trustworthy and engaging frame of the talking heads climate expert; however, it shifts key dynamics of this relation.
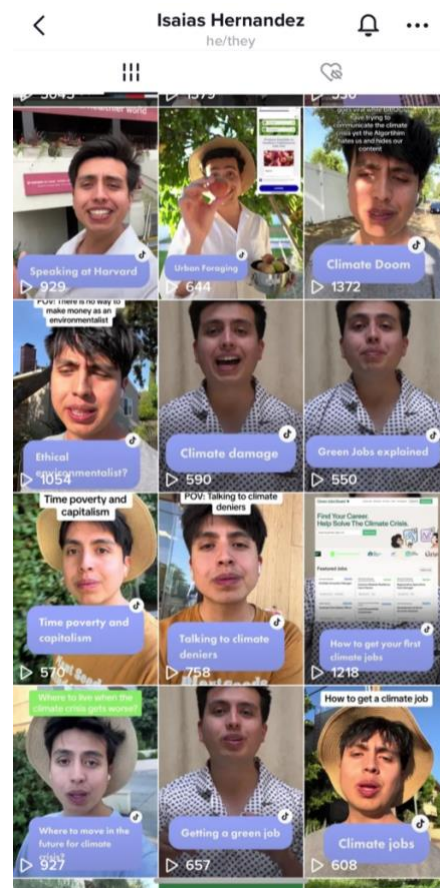

Figure 3. @Isaias Hernandez, "TikTok Profile," *TikTok*, accessed November 14, 2023.

The expert talking-heads technique can be seen as catering to the knowledge-deficit model (Norgaard; Seymour). As Norgaard describes, the knowledge-deficit hypothesis posits that people do not know enough information about the climate crisis, and this is what impedes

action (68). Norgaard and others problematize such logic, stating, "widespread public belief that climate change is happening clearly contradicts the assumption that lack of information is the key variable behind public apathy" (68). Nonetheless, this notion forms the basis of many traditional environmental documentaries, and is particularly prominent in those produced in the early 2000s, when knowledge about the climate crisis was less commonplace (Aaltonen; Minster; Seymour; Willoquet-Maricondi).

As Aaltonen describes, films like *An Inconvenient Truth* sought to impart expert knowledge onto masses of people. Rather than using the typical expert interview model, *An Inconvenient Truth* extends such a tendency throughout the entire film, with Al Gore acting as a figure of authority and knowledge while he presents facts to an onscreen audience (Aaltonen). This technique reflects and magnifies broader tendencies in environmental documentary of investing truth in figures of credibility (Aaltonen; Minster; Seymour). While these figures may be characterized as objective or authoritative, these films are not devoid of affective orientation; instead, their affective character is aimed towards cultivating belief in these people and the facts they present. Framed as "an important cosmopolitan figure and statesman," Gore becomes a "heroic" individual, "casting himself in the role of seer and savior" (Aaltonen 64-65; Willoquet-Maricondi 50). In sharing this knowledge, the film seeks to directly reach the minds of viewers, imparting them with this information (Aaltonen; Minster; Willoquet-Maricondi). As Seymour points out, we never see Gore "take questions from [the] on-screen audience members or engage in direct conversation" (48). Instead, audience members "model the behaviours that we as external audience members are no doubt supposed to mirror … they laugh at Gore's jokes, murmur their approval of his claims, and tsk-tsk along with him at the stupidity and hypocrisy of the unconverted" (Seymour 38). As such, the film reflects the goal of various environmental

documentaries that "seek to build consensus" (Minster 36; Seymour). Invested as they are in the knowledge-deficit hypothesis, the transference of knowledge from credible authority figure to receptive audience mirrors the goal of these films.

Such a mission influences the affective frame of such documentaries. As Seymour claims, "environmental documentaries, almost by definition, are didactic: they seek to impart knowledge, facts, and information, employing tactics such as scientific graphs and data and talking-head-style interviews with experts" (46). In accordance with such tendencies, "their affective stances have tended toward seriousness, earnestness, and prescriptiveness" (46). The effectiveness of such didactic transferring of knowledge is widely challenged, especially as climate knowledge has become more commonplace, and the information-deficit model reveals its fallacies (Norgaard; Rose; Seymour). Rather than feeding direct action, such information-based models may breed exhaustion and discouragement, or a "lapsing into cynicism" (Minster; Seymour 45; Whitworth; Willoquet-Maricondi). Anil Narine argues that a focus on spreading facts can result in viewers feeling "overwhelmed," even prompting them to "disengage" with the issues presented (5; 9). Therefore, new affective orientations intended to "shake off this status quo" may be needed when approaching climate communication (Seymour 47).

While EcoTok responses adopt the credibility and connection gained from the expert talking-heads model, they re-orient the "expert" away from authority and prescriptiveness and towards uncertainty and growth. Unlike Seymour's observation that Gore's audience does not actually engage with him, EcoTok is based upon a feedback model, being situated on the participatory platform of TikTok. As such, viewers can respond to, echo, or challenge the ideas of these creators. In interviews, this capacity was signalled as significantly informing the direction of content. Max described how the comments on Isaias' posts often lead to learning

opportunities. He stated that, while it is impossible to please everyone, "we aim for accountability over purity, over getting everything right all the time" (Personal Interview). Rather than imparting unquestionable knowledge to an absorbent audience, these creators recognize their own fallibilities, and centre their openness to feedback.

Alaina echoed this sentiment, stating "I'm learning with this, just as my audience is" (Personal Interview). This process is further evident in the content itself, in which creators often reference their own uncertainties and learning processes. Max emphasized how followers of Isaias' account over time "very much have seen first-hand the growth and progression of Isaias as he is seeing it himself" (Personal Interview). Thus, rather than exerting authority over his audience, Isaias can be seen as learning and growing alongside them. Further, while Alaina foregrounds her environmental science degree, she also emphasized her proximity in age and emotional register to much of her audience, highlighting how her audience may gravitate towards a figure who "may be feeling the same things as them" (Personal Interview). Max moreover pointed to how Isaias is not a trained teacher, but instead foregrounds his own "identity and story" to approach climate issues, simply "showing up as himself" without being "anyone special" (Personal Interview). Through foregrounding his experience as a queer Hispanic person, this outlook re-signifies markers of credibility as lived experience. As such, these creators are not "seer and saviour," but instead experts in process, and in dialogue with others (Willoquet-Maricondi 50). This shift creates new affective relations between this content and the audience. Rather than utilizing a talking-heads model to solve a perceived information deficit, these creators mobilize the connective and engaging affordances of this model towards enacting care.

A significant aspect of this EcoTok public's affective character is structured by, and rooted in, care. Alaina characterized care as "a huge part of my work," in providing a response to

the climate doom that proliferates online (Personal Interview). She stated, "because I have this empathy for what a lot of my audience is going through, I want to make sure that I write my scripts with care, I write my comments with care, I reply to messages with care" (Personal Interview). Alaina referenced the "doom scroll" characteristic of TikTok, in which users become entranced by a slew of negative content produced by algorithmic means. As Alaina described, "you see something bad, you engage with it, and you keep seeing bad. It's hard to look away" (Personal Interview). In discussing this process, Alaina repeatedly conflated doom scrolling and online climate doom, referencing "climate doom scrolling" (Personal Interview). As she elaborated, "climate information and doom scrolling go hand-in-hand," as news about the climate crisis is often presented in a doomist light that becomes viral due to algorithmic preferences (Personal Interview). In recognizing this tendency, Alaina's work and other EcoTok responses identify a need to break the doom scroll through counteracting this negative affective space with a caring outlook.

A key aspect of this care is witnessing doomist content and developing techniques of attunement to its circulation. Alaina stated, "I look out for that content, I'm very aware of accounts that continually post climate doomism content and I watch to see if they have videos going viral" (Personal Interview). Such careful observation of doomist spaces is a form of labour that lends itself to caring capacities. Carrie Rentschler points to this idea of witnessing as care in her analysis of onlooker practices of care. Rentschler attends to the power of onlookers as people who listen into oppression and may intervene (262). In the digital sphere, onlookers witness digital content, and sometimes choose to respond in ways that interrupt possible oppression (262). Rentschler argues that online onlooker responses often articulate a politics of care, defining care not necessarily as strong feeling for others, but as a form of relational practice

enacted even between strangers (283). While not responding to direct gendered or racialized oppression, EcoTok responses to doomism enact onlooking and this practice of collective care through attending to climate doomism online and offering support to strangers.

Alaina often responds directly to doomist tweets, TikTok videos, and news articles soon after they are released, hoping to pre-emptively mitigate their potential harms. For instance, in response to a tweet posted by @ClimateBen reporting that most of Earth's species could become extinct before 2200, Alaina states, "I want to address it before it inevitably makes its rounds on social media because it's going to freak people out" (figure 2, @Alaina Wood, "Species Extinction"). Alaina attempts to counteract the tweet's panicking character, reassuring viewers that it presents "literally the worst-case scenario" and that "we have the tools to prevent this" (@Alaina Wood, "Species Extinction"). Creating this response within an hour of the tweet's posting, this video illustrates Alaina's close monitoring of online doomism. As such, Alaina's content resonates with the power of onlooking that leads to the performance of care. As Rentschler describes, this care is not rooted in intimacy with, or strong feeling for, each other, but is characterized as a relational practice which, in this case, constitutes performing care for an anonymous audience (283).

The affective infrastructure of EcoTok further presents affordances that facilitate such a rapid and direct caring response. TikTok enables a call-and-response model through "stitching," in which users can reproduce the first few seconds of another user's post before adding their own direct response. This capacity allows users to directly call on EcoTok members for help and receive a focused reply. For instance, Isaias posted a response to user @Genevieve Schendel's direct call for support, in which she states, "I'm so sorry I have to ask you this, Isaias, but are we doomed like they say we are?" (@Isais Hernandez, "Climate Doom"). In response, Isaias

provides tips for combatting internalized climate doomism, such as becoming aware of local

solutions-based initiatives. In this instance, the structures of TikTok are mobilized as engines of

care, as @Genevieve Schendel apologetically calls upon Isaias as if he is her last hope and

receives the care she purports to need through the platform.

Figure 4. @Alaina Wood. "Species Extinction." *TikTok*, April 11, 2022.

Similarly, Alaina responds to @charlesmcbryde's confession of falling into doomism, in

which he states, "I'm calling on the activists and scientists of TikTok to give me hope" ("Dealing

with Climate Doom"). Stating, "I'm a scientist and I'm here to help," Alaina provides advice for

countering climate doom, including remembering successful climate solutions. (@Alaina Wood,

"Dealing with Climate Doom"). The stitching model here creates the illusion that @Alaina

Wood materializes out of thin air to respond to @charlesmcbryde, providing first response care

to this internalized climate doom. These affordances situate EcoTok as a community of carers

which the general public can call upon for prompt and direct guidance and support.

Such a capacity for a kind of doom first-aid implicates these creators as responders who use their own affective registers to further enact care. Alaina stated, "I feel like I'm the mom who calms the kids down sometimes," implicating her work within a maternal support structure (Personal Interview). Max further interpreted Isaias' work as providing "a nice digital hug," allowing for a safe space of comfort (Personal Interview). Such characterizations identify these creators and their accounts as bodies or vessels of this care, creating a corporeal connection that is further highlighted by their use of their own affect. Alaina claimed that, when considering what to post, "I use a lot of my own feelings," employing her sentiments and reactions as a guide to what might be useful for her audience to hear (Personal Interview). She further described projecting herself into the position of her viewers, thinking "ok I can see how just a general person scrolling on social media might feel about this," and responding accordingly (Personal Interview). Through this process, Alaina enacts a form of care that is linked to her own feelings and affective register.

This connection between creators' own emotions and that of their audiences is further visible in the affective performance that these creators present. As EcoTok creators provide support, they perform affective responses of frustration and outrage towards climate doom reflected in their tone and facial expressions. For instance, Wawa Gatheru scrunches her eyebrows in disdain as she offers her critique of doomism as a white phenomenon (figure 3, @Wawa Gatheru). Similarly, Alaina purses her lips as she characterizes @hermes.the.cynic's post as climate doomism (figure 4). These examples mobilize the video-based affordances of TikTok to create performances that guide viewers' affective experiences. Performing these affects, these creators may model the feelings that their audiences are experiencing, or provide an

affective guide, framing doomism as something not to be believed, but as worthy of repulsion and denunciation. In doing so, EcoTok creators create an affectively nuanced praxis of care rooted in their own affective performances.

Figure 5. @Wawa Gatheru. "Climate Doomism is a White Phenomenon." *TikTok*, April 6, 2022.

Figure 6. @Alaina Wood. "I'm Beyond Tired of Debunking". *TikTok*, September 29, 2022.

While EcoTok creators are critical of doomism, they extend this practice of care towards those spreading and believing this content. Alaina stated, "I've noticed a lot of people spreading

it [doomism] are those who mean well, like they're well-intentioned; they care about the climate" (Personal Interview). Rather than intentionally derailing climate action, Alaina argues that many of these people are simply succumbing to eco anxiety. As such, she is often generous towards doomist creators, even as she debunks and problematizes their claims. For instance, while Alaina exposes the doomist logics central to @trevorcarreon's breakdown of the climate crisis, she includes in the caption to the video "no hate to the creator," signalling understanding. While @trevorcarreon does not make content under the EcoTok collective, Alaina brings this content into the EcoTok conversation through engaging with his work. Alaina expanded upon her enactment of care for doomists, stating,

> "I want them to understand that it's not too late. And I know that if I go about it in a way that's like super mean or like I'm attacking them, they're not going to see the truth and that may just make them feel even worse. Because a lot of the people who believe in climate doom are the ones who are experiencing some of the worst eco anxiety out there." (Personal Interview)

Therefore, Alaina's work extends its care to those experiencing doomist feeling, as Alaina validates and attempts to reorient doomist sentiment. Alaina expressed how it is sometimes difficult to provide this, requiring her to suspend her own frustration to better enact care. She stated, "There are some times when I just want to scream like … where did you get this information from? But I have to sit there and calm down and be like ok that's probably not the tone they want to hear" (Personal Interview). This generosity towards doomists is further echoed by Isaias, who states in a video that he does not "get mad when friends say … I think we are doomed" as he understands their feeling of being "disempowered" and their positionality within unfulfilling "nine-to-five jobs" that highlight inequity and "institutional betrayal" (@Isaias Hernandez, "Climate Doom"). While Isaias promotes hope in the face of the climate crisis, he demonstrates understanding, and continues to perform care, for those who feel differently.

Moreover, Alaina shared an anecdote about a video she had posted in which she responded to a climate doomist and was surprised to receive messages questioning her critical tone, stating "she's a mom, she's concerned" (Personal Interview). Alaina stated that this response made her reconsider the tone she had used and post an apology. As such, the care towards climate doomists extends to Alaina's audience base, who ensure that she maintains this disposition.

As EcoTok creators seek to guide the affective responses of viewers, care is further enacted within the communities that form around these posts. In the comments section to the post by Alaina discussed above, one user expresses the emotional impact of climate doom, stating "I'm just always feeling hopeless and useless. I just need a break". In response, other users state, "You aren't alone in this" and "It's important to be aware but you also need to take care of your health" (@Hiro). These comments demonstrate that EcoTok responses not only constitute care but produce a space for it to take place within a broader community. Further, these comments mimic the structure of Alaina's TikTok, recognizing the validity of these climate-related anxieties, and offering reassurance. These advice-focused responses to users enact a key component of Rentschler's onlooker care of training others in how to respond to oppression. The comments on these posts speak to the entrainment power of EcoTok responses to climate doom, breeding a community that replicates the logics and structures of these posts. Thus, this EcoTok public bears witness to and mitigates harmful content, directly responds to users with guidance, and actively creates space for sympathetic care. Each of these forms of care are facilitated by the affective infrastructures of TikTok and EcoTok, with affordances such as interactivity and accessibility that facilitate this engagement.

In this characterization of community, it is useful to engage with Miranda Joseph's

critique of the idealization of community. Joseph contends that "community is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging" (vii). These positive descriptions of community, as Joseph argues, obscure the power dynamics and capitalist structures that underlie these spaces. While communities are often viewed as spaces of inclusion, Joseph outlines how exclusion is equally central to community formation, with people being excluded from communities based on factors like race, sexuality, gender, and class. As such, community formation can reinforce social hierarchies and existing inequalities. Joseph does not suggest that communities are therefore "false" or "inauthentic," but argues that the uncritical idealization of these spaces obscures the power structures that support these spaces. In characterizing the public that forms around EcoTok as building a community, I do not intend to suggest this unequivocal positivity. Instead, I use this term to draw out the mechanisms of affective binding, care, and mutual support that define the forms of engagement enabled by this public. In mobilizing the affordances of affective infrastructure, EcoTok forms a public that is deeply rooted in affect and invites audiences in to share in this affective orientation and circulation, facilitating the formation of a community.

In addition to comments sections that provide space for users to give feedback and enact care for each other, TikTok affords other capacities that facilitate collaborative practices. Users will often "tag" EcoTok creators in doomist content, commenting the username of the creator, which causes the video to appear in the creator's notifications. This tagging acts as a signal to the creator, suggesting that they take note or respond to this content. As Alaina stated, "if I'm getting tagged in the same video like 10, 15, up to hundreds of times, I'm like ok, I need to look into this" (Personal Interview). This affordance allows people to join creators in their monitoring efforts and form a community of onlookers.

Further, TikTok allows users to further join in the efforts of creators through enabling the "duet" function. With this capacity, users can appear alongside creators for the duration of the original video, allowing them to react directly to this content. For instance, Alaina's response to doomist creator @hermes.the.cynic is placed in "duet" by @showme_your mask, who appears alongside Alaina as she speaks. This video is then further placed in duet by @C.Hill, who appears alongside both users (figure 5). This multi-layered duet allows these users to interact with Alaina's content and join in her work. In addition to broadening the reach of the original video through sharing it with their followers, and increasing engagement, these users mimic Alaina's affective modelling. They nod, smile, and raise their eyebrows at the points that Alaina makes, using their own faces as vessels for the affective guidance that this EcoTok public provides. As such, this public not only enacts care, but places it within community, in which other users are trained by, and invited to share in, these practices.

The community-informed model consists not only of these responses from followers, but also in the support of fellow environmental creators under the EcoTok collective and beyond. As Max pointed out "there is a tight knit eco communicator community on the internet that we are very much a part of" (Personal Interview). Alaina further pointed to this network of "climate creators" who all "talk behind the scenes" (Personal Interview). While she highlighted that each creator navigates this community differently, Alaina stated, "I talk to probably about five regularly on like a daily basis, and probably up to 30 whenever I need to talk to them" (Personal Interview). Alaina described this community as a "soundboard," in which creators run ideas past each other, compare notes on issues, and provide feedback on each other's work. Moreover, Alaina highlighted how this community provides a structure of support to distribute the labour of climate communication. Alaina described a point in her career in which attempting to respond to

"every issue that was coming up" became "draining" (Personal Interview). Rather than trying to achieve this, Alaina highlighted that she can now rely on other creators to share in this work: "I don't have to make a video on every topic. We can still be an informed community; I just don't have to do all the work because the community is there" (Personal Interview).
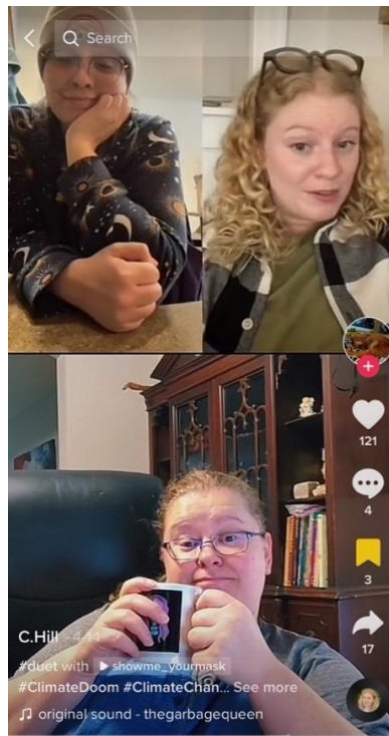
Figure 7. @C.Hill. "Duet with @showme_yourmask." *TikTok*, April 14, 2022.

In other words, this community orientation prevents "all the work" from falling onto one eco-creator, instead providing a shared structure for this labour. While much of this collaboration happens behind the scenes, it becomes apparent when creators share videos from other climate communicators, or comment on each other's posts. For instance, Alaina comments on one of Isaias' posts about climate doomism, stating that she has a similar "video drafted" about how doomism obscures the work of frontline communities, to which he enthusiastically replies (@Alaina Wood, "Comment to @Isaias Hernandez"; figure 7).

Figure 8. @Alaina Wood, "Comment to @Isaias Hernandez." June 24, 2023.

These infrastructures of support and care facilitated by the affordances of TikTok align with traditional narratives of participatory engagement. Jenkins describes participatory culture as allowing the "forging [of] communities through acts of media circulation" (40). The author further highlights how these communities "train members to produce their own media," and "offer networks through which this media can circulate" without "professional training," or "excessive capital outlay" (53). As such, this EcoTok public echoes the basic tenets of participatory culture. However, within this public, these capacities are steeped in the specificities of the climate crisis, informed by complex temporal and felt structures. Thus, this public works beyond participatory affordances towards the development of a distinct affective character.

A Bleak Conviviality

Considering the nuanced temporal landscape of the climate crisis, counteracting the pessimism of doom with optimism is often characterized as a misstep (Aaltonen; Roelvink and Zolkos). Optimism places the climate crisis squarely in the future, and hopes for its avoidance,

thus inadequately attending to the crisis' complex relation to time (Roelvink and Zolkos). Roelvink and Zolkos insist that these narratives "mask an investment in a liberal humanist idea" of subject-hood in which the human stands separate from nature and exerts a "rational and self-contained" force that enacts progressive change upon the world (47). Therefore, this model presents the risk of validating and re-enacting the same logics that have fuelled the capitalism and expansive growth that has led to our current circumstances (48).

Further, Roelvink and Zolkos reveal how, rather than being opposites, optimism and pessimism in the face of the climate crisis are connected as fear responses. Roelvink and Zolkos argue that in dominant climate discourses, fear and optimism become intimately linked, as "the repetitive naming of the fear object coincides with and cross-fuels a covert position of optimism that the catastrophe will not come to pass" (48). As such, Roelvink and Zolkos posit that optimism and fear are closely tied, and feed into each other to artificially resolve the tensions of the climate crisis (49). In doing so, Roelvink and Zolkos' analysis suggests that doomism and optimism share similar affective pathways. If doomism looks to the future, sees fear, and contains it through making it certain, then optimism looks to the future, likewise sees fear, and contains it through asserting that it will be avoided. In either instance, the object of fear is resolved in equally artificial ways.

At first glance, it may seem that the EcoTok public simply enacts this narrative of optimism in its rebuttals to climate doom. For instance, both Alaina and @EcoOG adopt the model of "good climate news," highlighting success stories meant to provide hope in the face of the climate crisis. In one such video, @Eco OG applauds an increase in Bigg's killer whale populations, new landfill regulations, and the reintroduction of species into Rio de Janeiro's forests (@EcoOG, "Happy Eco News"). These stories are certainly worthy of celebration, but

@Eco OG risks overstating their implications through using them as evidence that "things are going very well" and telling viewers, "don't even fret" (@EcoOG, "Good Climate News"). These reassuring words are matched by @Eco OG's affective performance of happiness, smiling throughout the entire video, using a light-hearted tone, and even making an "ok" hand gesture to signal well-being (figure 8). Similarly, Alaina reassures viewers that "we have the tools" to avoid the fear object of doomism (@Alaina Wood, "Species Extinction"). These assertions are further echoed on the EcoTok collective's website stating "Can TikTok Help Save The Planet? We Think So" ("EcoTok Collective"). While these instances of optimism are sprinkled throughout EcoTok, to characterize this public as simply optimistic would omit its affective nuance.

Alaina discussed her ambivalent relationship to climate optimism. She recognized the optimism present in much of her work, stating, "I've sort of built a reputation around being the climate optimist" (Personal Interview). She suggested that this reputation creates a safe space for viewers, stating "now if people see my face, they're like, 'I'm not going to freak out if I watch her video'" (Personal Interview). While Alaina at times identified herself as a climate optimist, she also expressed frustration at this characterization. She stated, "every time I talk about an issue, they're like, 'you're the good climate news lady; what are you talking about?' I'm like it's still an issue, we have to talk about it" (Personal Interview). As such, Alaina resists a wholly optimistic model. Instead, her good climate news provides reassurance that the future "is not set in stone," while resisting the assertion that catastrophe will surely be avoided (@Alaina Wood, "I'm Beyond Tired of Debunking"). As she stated, she adds to these good news segments the caveat that "it doesn't mean that we've fixed it" (Personal Interview). Moreover, assertions of climate optimism are often matched with repeated sentiments of these creators' own fears and doubts surrounding the direness of the climate crisis. For instance, Alaina states that she often

feels "scared and angry" about climate change, while @Eco OG confesses to experiencing "eco anxiety" (@Alaina.Wood, "Species Extinction"; @Eco OG, "Happy Eco News"). This outlook maintains uncertainty and doubt as central to the affective landscape of the climate crisis.
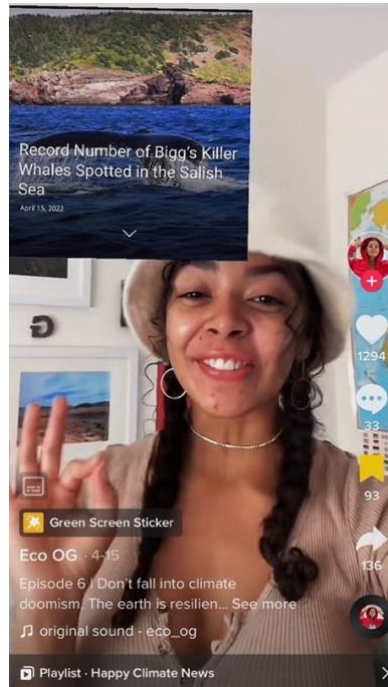
Figure 9. @Eco OG. "Happy Eco News." *TikTok*, April 15, 2022.

This breeding of indeterminacy can be placed in dialogue with Wendy Chun's conception of the productivity of uncertainty. Chun outlines that scientific models that predict climate patterns and outcomes are always only predictions, and thus "hypo-real," presenting a possibility with the impossibility of verifiability (678). However, Chun argues that these climate science models are often perceived as if they are certain and promoted as such by scientific communities hoping to warn of impending dangers (688). Chun argues that this treatment renders these models "hyper-real," as the prediction replaces the phenomenon itself despite its inherent inexactness and unverifiability (688). This assertion of certainty, as Chun describes, is tied to the idea that knowledge guarantees action while uncertainty encourages inaction (680). Rejecting

this notion, Chun insists that uncertainty is generative, as "instead of action following certainty, action seems to precede it" (678). Thus, EcoTok publics can be framed as countering doom with productive uncertainty through emphasizing the undetermined nature of the future. Climate doomism fits neatly into Chun's framework, reinforcing the idea that interpreting environmental collapse as certain will not prompt action, but resignation. In maintaining such uncertainty, rather than artificially resolving it through either pessimism or optimism, this public raises the question of what it means to live and feel in the midst of such incertitude.

Such a query can be approached through Matthew Fuller and Olga Goriunova's conception of bleak joy. In *Bleak Joys*, Fuller and Goriunova catalogue and analyse several affects associated with the climate crisis, including anguish (25). Anguish is defined in this work as an affect similar to angst, grief, and despair and is typically regarded as an unpleasant or even unbearable experience that may be triggered by the thought of environmental catastrophe (27). While Fuller and Goriunova recognize the pain associated with anguish, they complicate this characterization by pointing to how anguish is closely connected to, and bound up with, joy (35). Referencing Nietzsche, Fuller and Goriunova argue that anguish and joy constitute very similar emotional experiences (46). They further point to theoretical constructs that the void cannot exist without plenitude, meaning that negative affects are dependent upon, and linked to, positive ones (46). Therefore, experiences of anguish linked to the climate crisis can elicit great pain, but also facilitate a unique form of joy (46).

Fuller and Goriunova conceptualize the type of joy elicited by anguish as a bleak joy. Since it originates out of devastation and sorrow, it cannot be characterized as a pure joy, but is nonetheless an experience of positivity (46). This positivity may come from the fact that all is not lost yet, as the very experience of anguish is an affirmation of continued existence (45).

However, unlike optimism, this bleak joy is not meant to obscure the full devastating scope of the events causing anguish (xii). Instead, bleak joy is a way of thinking that allows people to comprehend the full force of negative impacts of the climate crisis without "succumbing to the lustre of mere doom" (xii). As such, bleak joy allows people to interpret things that are culturally figured as negative not as solely cause for deep despair, but as structures that we all share, and can productively live within (xii).

As an affective experience, bleak joy treads the line between optimism and pessimism, being both and neither at the same time. The conception of bleak joy thus itself absorbs a set of oppositions between bleakness and joyfulness and holds these contradictory components in co-existence. As such, it can be interpreted as a response to the nuanced temporal scope of the climate crisis, which encompasses both pastness and futurity. If the climate crisis exists in the future anterior, then this contradictory temporal register is matched affectively by bleak joy. This concept thus gives expression to the life and feeling that exist in the space of the crisis that will have happened.

This bleak joy resonates within the work of the EcoTok public. This affective experience is most poignantly echoed in Isaias' assertion that "it's valid to say you feel hopeless and hopeful at the same time" (@Isaias Hernandez, "Climate Doomism"). In recognizing the co-existence of these opposing sentiments in response to the climate crisis, Isaias Hernandez evokes bleak joy, and validates this experience. Emphasizing that these emotions are felt "at the same time," Isaias points to how this structure does not consist of a back-and-forth motion between bleakness and joy, but that the two are co-constitutive (@Isais Hernandez, "Climate Doomism"). This idea is reiterated by Wawa Gatheru in her validation of the emotional impetus behind climate doomism, stating "it is more than ok to feel all these complicated emotional responses to the climate crisis:

this fear, the grief, the hopelessness" (@Wawa Gatheru, "You Can Overcome Climate Doomism"). However, she adds that these responses "don't have to be dead-end emotions, especially climate doomism" (@Wawa Gatheru, "You Can Overcome Climate Doomism"). In doing so, Wawa Gatheru frames the grief and despair elicited by the climate crisis as always existing in relation to brighter sentiments related to resilience and hope (@Wawa Gatheru, "You Can Overcome"). Moreover, the celebration of "good climate news" and the confession of intense "eco anxiety" inhabit the same one-minute clip by @Eco OG, further illustrating the bonds between these sentiments (@Eco OG, "Happy Eco News").

Bleak joy is not only referenced in the content of these videos but becomes subsumed as the structure of its community formation, creating what I call a bleak conviviality. The framework of community and care enabled by this public is rooted in an ambiguity that recalls this bleak joy. Invested in validating doomist feeling alongside providing reassurance without overt optimism, the messaging of this community treads an ambivalent space characterized by a co-existence of celebration and doubt. Alaina stated, "I used to think that for every optimistic video I put out, I had to put out a pessimistic video". This reflection reveals an impulse towards showcasing the co-existence of conflicting affective registers and, rather than enacting such a literal balance, the EcoTok public subsumes this ambiguity as the basis of care. As creators model affective reactions, these performances do not provide a clear or definitive emotional stance. Instead, this content shows viewers the harbouring of competing sentiments.

This capacity further infiltrates the training capacities of this public. In the comments section to Alaina's response to @Climate.Ben, @gilgaladisactuallyprettycool states, "we need to acknowledge how serious the problem is while not being cynical to the point of nihilism," to which Alaina responds, "exactly!" (figure 9, @gilgaladisactuallyprettycool). This assertion is

highly reminiscent of the potentials that Fuller and Goriunova contend exist in bleak joy, and situates this affective space as the grounds on which this community can relate to each other. As such, this public enacts a bleak conviviality, in which ambiguity and tension become the affective structure within which community is formed and care is enacted.

Figure 10. @gilgaladisactuallyprettyrad, "Comments: Species Extinction". @Alaina Wood, *TikTok*, September 29, 2022.

Thus, the layered community of audience members and eco-creators adopt this bleak conviviality as their shared structure. As Max states, "Even when we express pain and grief in our work, I think we try to do that in a way that centres the love in it, of why we feel this grief, because we are so deeply connected, and we just love this place so much" (Personal Interview). Through this linking of pain and love, Max echoes the core concept of bleak joy. Rather than attempting to resolve such a contradictory frame, this public instead maintains this affective ambiguity as a structuring principle. When asked what he thought was the greatest success of Isaias' account, Max stated "probably the importance of it is just helping people start to think about their own life in that context," referring to the complex navigation of the climate crisis (Personal Interview). In doing so, Max frames the goal of this work not as coming to a solution or clear affective outcome, but instead helping people to see this complexity as a structuring basis of their lives.

This public thus offers an affective guide to inhabiting the complex temporal space of the climate crisis and builds a convivial community around that bleak joy. The affective infrastructures afforded by the platform of TikTok further lend themselves to such a dynamic. Like the climate crisis, this platform holds a distinct relationship to time and uncertainty. Due to the platform's algorithmic logics, users will sometimes see content that has just been posted and will sometimes be shown content for the first time months after its release. Further, Alaina discussed how her followers will sometimes not be shown her content due to algorithmic interventions outside her understanding. In reference to both climatic change and her use of TikTok, Alaina stated "it is all uncertainty". As a result, this platform can be seen as sharing the temporal ambiguity and overlapping scopes of time that the climate crisis engenders. Discussing the desire to help people navigate feelings around the climate crisis, Max stated:

> "That to me has, it has no timeframe, I'm like this is something that's going to matter now for the rest of my life. So, will we solve these crises in time? Like, hey beats me, probably not. We already aren't; we're like 20 years behind. But if we can keep up our side of it, and plant seeds, and give people an excuse to talk about it … it feels like we need that".

Far from resolving temporal complexity, this statement frames the mission of this public as something that lives outside typical understandings of time. Through stating that this goal "has no timeframe," Max suggests that this public offers a model for people to inhabit this space of temporal complexity indefinitely. In maintaining and subsuming this ambiguity, this public demonstrates a refusal towards its resolution. As such, it enacts a bleak conviviality in which people can relate to each other, enact care, and form community that embraces, rather than resolves, the affective and temporal nuances of the climate crisis.

In doing so, this public re-orients the affective landscape of environmental documentary work away from "straight-forward somberness and relentless moralizing" towards affective ambiguity (Whitworth 81). Alaina referenced the long-standing tendency of environmental

documentary to focus didactically on communicating problems and framed this habit as posing a

challenge to anti-doomist work. She stated, "It's hard to get the information that's not that

doomism out there because of that long-term communications style of issues only" (Personal

Interview). Alaina thus frames doomism as adjacent to the traditional environmental

documentary model, which focuses on educating the public through communicating issues. Thus,

EcoTok creators demonstrate a sensibility towards the need for a new means of affective

engagement with such issues and, in their attempt to provide one, enact a bleak conviviality.

Conclusion

Through re-orienting the talking-heads model away from prescriptiveness and

didacticism and towards a vessel of care rooted in ambiguity and uncertainty, this EcoTok public

offers an affective register that matches the temporal complexity of the climate crisis. In doing

so, it offers a way to inhabit this space affectively, and in community. While the traditional

talking-heads model certainly holds value and impact, its belonging to an information-deficit

approach falls short of attending to the affective scope of the climate crisis (Aaltonen; Minster;

Norgaard; Seymour; Willoquet-Maricondi). In its adjacency to doomism through an information-

heavy approach, and its calls to urgency, this model simplifies the affective and temporal

landscape of the climate crisis. Rather than resolving such complexities, a maintenance of

uncertainty and ambiguity, and an attention to this crisis' overlapping temporalities, may be

needed (Chun; Edensor et al; Garrard; Roelvink and Zolkos; Seymour).

The EcoTok public approaches such potentials, as ambiguity and uncertainty structure its

calls to expertise, its acts of care, and the platform upon which these efforts appear. As

responders to climate doom, EcoTok creators establish corporeal and affective links to their

work, employing their own registers of feeling and modelling of emotion. As such, this work exceeds information distribution and is infiltrated with affect, which binds a community through inviting others to participate in this practice. Facilitated by affordances such as stitching, tagging, and duet, these affective infrastructures enable a kind of care that is affectively attuned, but does not point towards any definitive resolution. Offering support to optimists and doomists alike, this care holds space for harbouring conflicting affects. This practice thus resonates with the conception of bleak joy, an affective register that shares the same balancing of contradictions as the climate crisis' relation to time. Bleak joy not only appears in this content but becomes the structuring principle for community and relationality to occur, enacting a bleak conviviality. Within this framework, this public creates a community that is affectively attuned in ways that do not simplify the contradictions of living in the time of the climate crisis but absorb these complexities as their shared structure.

This bleak and convivial community holds valuable potential for approaching the affective terrain of the climate crisis. While its online existence is key to these capacities, creators referenced a certain partial or incomplete nature to this digital community. When asked what the future goals were for his and Isaias' work, Max described the desire to ignite community through in-person gatherings, stating, "events are the future". This objective suggests that in-person community spaces enact something outside the scope of the digital sphere. Such reflections raise questions around how traditional venues may navigate the complex landscape of community formation that the climate crisis elicits. To approach this query, I now turn to one such locale: the environmental film festival.

Chapter 3 - Feeling in the Festival Sphere: Film Festival Responses to Shifts in Environmental Media

Film festivals constitute a complicated site of intersecting agendas, ideological frameworks, and relational dynamics (Kishore). This complexity only increases when a festival is given a specific thematic and action-oriented leaning, as is the case with environmental film festivals aiming to educate and motivate audiences in the context of climate-related emergencies (Monani). This chapter provides an overview of various tensions that underlie the environmental film festival space and explores how these tensions develop or change in today's media and climate-related contexts. Environmental film festivals are the traditional venue for the distribution of environmental documentary. However, with emerging media including social media platforms, festival screenings presently make up only a small portion of how audiences may view and engage with environmental video content (Boykoff; Kunelius and Roosvall; Doyle). Partially resulting from the online prevalence of climate content, recent years have further seen a heightened awareness of the climate crisis (Doyle; Seymour). Today's festivalgoers are thus often inundated with climate information before they even enter festival spaces. As such, festivals are presented with the challenge of how to attend to audiences who may already be highly aware, and even anxious, about these realities. I situate this affective tension within understandings of the festival landscape to investigate how this traditional distribution platform is responding to these new contexts.

To do so, I first review existing literature in film festival studies, and on documentary festivals, to establish the complexities and contradictions of environmental film festivals. I explore festivals as spaces that are both inclusive and exclusive, and which facilitate exchange

that is both community-oriented and fragmented. I then turn to literature on film festivals with an environmental theme to examine how they alter or complicate these tensions. I examine how these festivals navigate a simultaneous environmental, urban, and digital existence which complicates the character and experience of these spaces. To investigate how shifting media conditions and levels of environmental awareness are impacting the environmental festival space, I turn to a case study of Planet in Focus' 2023 festival.

Drawing from my observations while attending the festival, and interviews with organizers, I identify a growing sense of information overload surrounding the festival sphere, resulting in audiences who may be easily overwhelmed by climate content. Situating this feeling within Anil Narine's conception of "eco-trauma," I identify this sentiment as resulting from the conjuncture of heightened environmental awareness and media presence. I investigate how this context becomes evident, or attended to, in the festival's structure, its navigation of digital components, and its relations to other festivals. The navigation of this affective orientation presents an ongoing challenge that pushes the festival to continually renew its approaches and goals within shifting digital and environmental landscapes.

Major Themes in Film Festival Studies

Existing literature within film festival studies highlights the navigation of ideological tensions and the intersection of competing motivations inherent to the festival arena (Kishore). Shweta Kishore identifies one such divide between aesthetic and commercial agendas within festival spaces. While conceived primarily as a site for aesthetic appreciation and discussion of film, the film festival is infiltrated by the presence of industry (Johnson). This commercial presence can be observed in networking activities and industry-related workshops, not to

mention a festival's own economic structure with ticket sales and funding acquisition (Kishore). Marijke de Valck situates this tension historically, claiming that while in the 1970s, festival programmers could be seen as "driven by cinephile passions and an ideology of political participation," the festival director of the 1990s onward became "a professional cultural entrepreneur" (43). While the increase of industry-related motives does not dissolve the cultural and political components of a festival, it interweaves these aspects within a broader set of relational dynamics. Salma Monani attempts to trace these commercial-aesthetic tensions, attending to how different festivals lean towards one side or the other. Monani outlines how some festivals maintain an artistic and cultural impulse as their primary goal, while others become "trade show" festivals, with primarily economic agendas (258). Within this characterization, Monani highlights how most festivals exist somewhere in the middle of these ideals, identifying an always-shifting, tension-filled navigation between these competing motivations.

Cindy Wong introduces another set of contradictions characteristic of the film festival as both an inclusive and exclusive space. Wong highlights how film festivals are often celebrated as sites of democratic inclusion, with generally non-prohibitive ticket prices, and with many events adopting a model of being "open to all" (163). This impression of openness is elevated by Q&A sessions following film screenings, which encourage audience participation and engagement with films (Wong). However, Wong contends that film festivals equally breed an air of exclusiveness. These spaces often cater to, and propagate the idea of, "elite" tastes (164). While open to the masses, Wong argues that film festivals are often imagined as "high-brow," with a proper or authentic experience of presented pieces requiring an elevated cinematic fluency (164). Moreover, Wong outlines how film festivals remain enmeshed within gendered hierarchies, with

men occupying most upper-level roles (163). As such, these events do not constitute ideal democratic venues. Instead, as Rachel Johnson posits, power is "rarely far" from festival spaces (8). Johnson argues that festivals are not only subject to external structures of power, but "exercise and endow" their own power regimes, "for example through their conferment of prestige onto certain films in rituals of selection and prize-giving" (8).

As such, film festivals both transgress and enforce structures of power, leading Wong to classify these spaces as "open and closed" (165). Wong further complicates the implications of this partially closed space, arguing that it is their very exclusivity that distances these festivals from "industrial mass cinema" and marks them as alternative spaces. As such, Wong posits that this air of exclusion provides festivals with "the freedom to represent and even debate marginal, sensitive, and difficult subject matters" (164). While Wong does not defend the persistence of power structures that undermine the democratic aim of festivals, she suggests an alternative set of power dynamics at play. In this framework, the quality of being closed may provide these festivals with more space for open discussion.

These aesthetic-commercial sites of inclusiveness and exclusion further act as spaces of exchange, constituting a significant focus of film festival studies. As Carole Roy states, "unlike watching films alone at home where the knowledge is individualized, seeing films in a festival context means that this new knowledge is constructed within a community" (10). Thus, film festivals can be seen as spaces that bind viewers together through common experience and facilitate discussion and debate. Wong contends that the "buzz" of "praise, critique, scandal, and inspiration" around film festivals creates a shared landscape in which attendees connect with each other (159). Wong thus frames festivals as a somewhat democratic space where ideas often ignored in everyday contexts can be engaged with and discussed. Wong contends that this effect

is most obvious in festivals promoting social justice frameworks, where attendees are often united through common political motivations.

While this framework of community formation and mutual engagement is useful to understand the experience of festival spaces, these ideas have also been criticized for being overly universalizing, and not considering the fragmented and multiple nature of festival experiences (Lee; Roy). As Lee outlines, not all festival attendees are open to debate or discussion. Instead, festivalgoers inhabit this space with a multitude of agendas. Roy describes the film festival as "an event that welcomes a diverse group of people and can accommodate different levels of engagement, those seeking entertainment, those seeking information, those open to transforming their views, and those seeking paths of action" (78). Roy and Lee warn against a view of festivals that oversimplifies this complex landscape of engagements through focusing solely on democratic exchange and community binding. As such, festivals facilitate community formation that is both unifying and fragmented.

These dynamics attributed to the festival sphere in general are also characteristic of the documentary film festival in particular. As Aida Vallejo outlines, documentary film festivals "have proliferated globally throughout the 2000s" due to increased documentary production and less expensive exhibition infrastructures (14). As a result, a plethora of documentary film festivals have emerged, often tied to a broader social movement, such as human rights, LGBTQ+ issues, or environmental action (Damiens). Kishore characterizes the primary difference between documentary and other film festivals as laying in the chasm between "epistephilia, the desire to know," and "scopophilia, [the] pleasure in looking," with the former describing the orientation of the documentary spectator (742). While it would be an oversimplification to characterize documentary audiences as purely knowledge seekers, Kishore argues that the documentary

frame, and its claims to truth, heightens the relationship to the "life-world of the spectator" (744). As such, Roy contends that documentary viewing can be "intense," prompting an elevated need for solace and discussion around these films (83). Roy argues that, providing such opportunities, "documentary film festivals let people take in new information in an atmosphere supportive of exploration and dialogue" (79). These festivals can thus be seen as offering both knowledge and structures of support.

Roy further contends that documentary film festivals complicate the divide between aesthetics and economics through their often activist or political orientations. On one hand, the tensions between industry and festival may be elevated with a political leaning, particularly when industry characteristics and structures may contrast with the views and aims of the festival (Roy). On the other hand, Roy contends that the connection between documentary film festivals and non-profit organizations may relax the divide between the film and the corporate components that surround it, as both are at least partially linked to political and activist aims (Roy). Since these non-profit organizations may follow missions similar to that of the festival, Roy contends that there may be a renewed compatibility between the documentary film festival and the commercial organizations that surround this space. Roy further argues that activist organizations and movements benefit from the cultural profile and notoriety of the film festival through association with this venue. The author suggests that festivals may facilitate a heightened awareness and respect for activist organizations, associating important movements with a "cool event" (89). Further, Roy argues that activist attendees use festivals to curb burnout, receiving "a bit of reassurance that they are not alone" (94). Thus, a sense of education and activism infiltrates both aesthetic and commercial sectors, even as the tensions between these spheres persist.

The Environmental Film Festival

These are the nuances and contradictory conditions in which environmental film festivals are situated. As Laura Cesaro outlines, the last two decades have seen a growing number of films addressing environmental issues and have shown that "environmentally conscious cinema is a powerful tool for disseminating knowledge, raising awareness," and "stimulating public debate" (85). These motivations elucidate how environmental film festivals not only aim to form connections, but to incite action. As Monani contends, these festivals operate with "the notion that [they] can and even should make their audiences agitate publicly by 'riot[ing] in the streets' or at least mobilizing some form of environmental action" (257). Thus, in the context of environmental film festivals, the contradictions inherent to the festival sphere are largely geared towards the ideal of evoking action (Yee).

However, as Monani highlights, this environmental "festival terrain" remains "a heterogenous field of public engagements" (274). Even if they are oriented towards a common goal of action, festivals and festivalgoers vary in how they operate within this frame (Monani). The conglomeration of actors that attend festivals continue to interact with this space differently, and their diversity makes it highly unlikely that they will be roused to action in the same ways (Monani 271). Further, Monani contends that different festivals have varying capacities to incite change. For instance, festivals with government sponsorships, or private corporate funding, may not be able to present as "obviously critical rhetoric" as those without these ties (Monani 267).

An added contradiction comes to light in the consideration of the environmental impact of the operation of environmental film festivals. The term "festival ecosystem" is often employed as a metaphor to signal a festival's enmeshment within interconnected networks of agents and relationships (Vallejo and Peirano 232). Marijke de Valck and Ger Zielinski mobilize this term

towards different ends, asserting that "the time is right to bring what we are calling the festival ecosystem back into a more literal relationship with 'environmental media,' media infrastructure, and its material relations to the biological environment" (309). To do so, de Valck and Zielinski interrogate the environmental cost of film festivals. A major factor in this investigation is plane travel, with guests often flying in for the event, and some speakers being flown in for only one day (de Valck and Zielinski). Further, energy use from streaming films, and the paper use of printed pamphlets and posters, adds to this environmental impact (de Valck and Zielinski). Thus, de Valck and Zielinski expose a contradiction between the aims of environmental film festivals and their impact on climate and related ecological systems.

These authors put forth recommendations to curb these impacts, arguing that "the pandemic moment offers an unprecedented opportunity to make progress on the issue of mobility from a sustainability agenda" (de Valck and Zielinski 315). While the authors recognize that the energy use from streaming makes online attendance an imperfect solution, they advocate for the strategic use of hybridity when plane travel is unnecessary, such as for one-day attendance (de Valck and Zielinski). Cesaro also highlights potential solutions to mitigate a festival's environmental impact, pointing to protocols such as the 2022 "Green Festival Guide," a set of guidelines produced in Italy and adopted by more than 47 festivals. The guide outlines sustainable practices that can be implemented in festival spaces, from being conscious of energy usage and waste management, to promoting "environmental culture" through incorporating sustainability into the conversation during events. De Valck and Zielinski further point to several digital resources that festivals can access to measure their carbon footprint.

Cesaro outlines how an attention to environmental impact must surpass "greenwashing," a superficial engagement with sustainability that boosts the image of a festival

without making genuine changes (92). Cesaro points to the Euganea film festival as an example of a festival that avoids these "greenwashing" tactics through making genuine, material changes to curb environmental impact (92). Through using solar energy where possible and making the site accessible by bicycle, the festival aimed to zero its carbon emissions. This festival further sought to have a positive environmental impact on the surrounding area, partnering with local sustainability initiatives to plant trees in the surrounding area. Cesaro thus highlights how film festivals can creatively enact sustainable agendas. These festivals seek to address environmental concerns not only in the themes of their programming, but also in their material operations.

The environmental frame of these festivals further comes into tension with their often highly urban surroundings. Many environmental film festivals take place in large urban centres such as Toronto, San Francisco, and London (Lee). Hong-Real Lee gestures towards this urban context, stating that "the festive ambience can revitalize the 'temporarily' dormant urban vitality internalized in the festival host cities" (256). Thus, Lee suggests that film festivals shift the aura of the city towards one of festivity. In the case of environmental film festivals, this sense of festivity has an ecological flavour. Urban centres, typically seen as distinct from "nature," become hubs for engagement with environmental themes (Highmore). In doing so, these festivals surface the tensions embedded within the city's characterization as separate from environmental processes. As Highmore suggests, it is useful to challenge the idea "that the contemporary city is constituted by the wholesale erasure of nature" (Highmore). Instead, natural rhythms and phenomena infiltrate the city sphere, rendering this space a site of complex entanglements between human and environmental influence (Highmore).

Environmental film festivals disrupt the premise that cities exist separately from natural contexts, lifting the veil of urban alienation from nature through utilizing the city as a

locus for environmental awareness (Monani). Winnie Yee invokes such an effect in stating that environmental film festivals bridge the "local and the global," allowing audiences within the city to witness natural systems beyond their immediate surroundings (51). As such, festivalgoers can imagine themselves as members of both the city and the natural world (Yee). However, the destabilization of this binary opposition is always incomplete, and only temporary. Once festivals end, a dynamic of urban distinction from nature may promptly be re-enacted (Lee). Thus, rather than resolving the artificial distinction between cities and nature, festivals draw attention to this binary by temporarily suspending it.

In addition to inhabiting both an urban and environmental frame, the environmental film festival exists simultaneously in another plane: the digital sphere. In recent years, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, various festivals adopted online iterations, screening films and hosting panels through video conferencing platforms. In addition to these online events, digital means such as social media accounts have become important venues for film festivals to advertise their events, create an image of themselves, and archive their activities (Lee). Thus, film festivals adopt an online existence that co-exists with in-person components.

As Lee states, these media technologies allow organizers to "shorten the perceptual distance between film festivals and their audiences and publics" (254). The emerging online presence of festivals disrupts traditional ways of conceptualizing film viewing and festivals as events that are discrete in space and time. Jean-Louis Baudry theorizes that film spectatorship is characterized by viewing in a "darkened room" with "no exchange, no circulation, no communication with any outside" (44). As described above, the festival setting already challenges this model of individualistic viewing, but festivals themselves can sometimes become insular spaces where discussion occurs, but only within the temporal and spatial bounds set by

the festival (Kishore 741). The expansion of festival venues into the online sphere disrupts the dynamic of isolation, instead opening programming and interaction to a broader, international audience not bound by the same temporal and spatial limits of the physical festival.

Further, Lee postulates that film festivals' online presence complicates understandings of the community forming potential of this space, which often focus only on in-person components. While in-person interaction remains key, these online media expand the reach of festivals beyond a unified space and time (Lee). As such, Lee calls for a more nuanced approach to the festival's public that can attend to the "fragmented, hence multi-layered and multidirectional" nature of communication and community formation surrounding these events (255). Expanding upon this idea, Lee contends that festivals can be conceptualized as "connected and disconnected at the same time" (255). A festival's online presence does not replicate in-person experience of the event, but the advent of distributed access to online content and interaction suggest that the festival's scope can no longer be limited to its in-person elements (Lee). Instead, as Lee posits, festivals occupy both physical and digital spaces at once, each in an incomplete manner. In the context of environmental film festivals, online existence adds to the complexity of the festival's character, existing in and between urban, environmental, and digital spheres.

Many environmental film festivals that exist today were established in the 1990s and early 2000s, with a boom in the production and profile of environmental documentaries due to the emergence of climate change as a planetary threat (Armatage; Cubitt; Mitman). The digital context in which these festivals exist today would thus not have been considered in their original mandates and mission statements. This digital shift coincides with increased environmental awareness amongst festival audiences, with much of today's audiences highly aware, and even anxious about the realities of the climate crisis (Narine). Festivals today face challenges posed by

the conjuncture of emerging media and heightened environmental awareness, shifting the context in which their programming is received. To investigate how festivals are responding to these changes, I turn to a case study of the 2023 Planet in Focus Film festival.

A Case Study: Planet in Focus

The light slowly floods back into the theatre as a slightly halting applause fills the space. We have just watched the opening film of the 2023 Planet in Focus Film Festival, *Deep Rising*. It is an information-packed account of the ecological dangers of deep-sea mining. The film follows a growing company which advertises itself as providing an ecologically friendly energy alternative found at the bottom of the sea. Exposing this company's hypocrisy, the story recounts how this practice is destroying vast seabed without proper knowledge of the long-term ecological impacts. Viewers watch as a machine digs into the depths of the ocean, destroying material formed over millions of years, which likely serves ecological purposes beyond our understanding.

The applause fades out and a silence sets in as people shift in their seats. The first words I hear are from the woman seated next to me, whom I met earlier in the night. Her statement is simple and striking: "we have no hope". She does not quite direct these words to me, nor to the group of her colleagues seated on her other side, still staring straight ahead at the screen. Nonetheless, this remark begins a conversation in which others share their grief-stricken responses to the film. One young woman states, "I'm going to literally go home and be devastated," while another expresses her growing climate anxiety. Someone else places this experience in the context of a growing exhaustion, stating, "I've watched too many of these documentaries … it's just like more depressing and more depressing".

Planet in Focus (PIF) is Canada's largest environmental film festival, established in 1999 and taking place annually in Toronto. The festival aims to bring together filmmakers, activists, and community members to facilitate conversation around environmental issues. I attended the festival's opening weekend to interview organizers and observe how the festival is responding to technical and affective changes in the environmental documentary landscape. During this opening night screening, I was immediately confronted with a central tension of the environmental film festival: its potentially discouraging tone. With audience members seated in a darkened room, information-heavy, issue-driven films have the capacity to exacerbate existing climate and environmental anxiety, giving viewers a feeling of dread and isolation upon leaving the space (Narine; Seymour). This impact presents a challenge for environmental festivals which aim to create spaces where dire issues can be brought to light, without reinforcing the anxiety or complacency invoked by the climate crisis.

While PIF's opening night may have rehearsed these tensions, the festival organizers are far from unaware of these impacts. Alessandra Cannito, director of programming, expressed in an interview that "it's really hard to be the environmental film festival – like oh my god, it's tough to drag people out to feel sad". Organizers suggested that these negative emotions have increased in recent years due to the plethora of available environmental information. In the opening speech preceding the screening of *Deep Rising*, senior programmer Julian Carrington discussed the need for environmental film to address a growing level of environmental awareness amongst audiences. Carrington described that environmental documentary used to be primarily focused upon education but, in today's context, many audience members are "hyper-aware" of climate issues. As a result, Carrington's speech suggested that information-heavy films may no longer be proactive, but instead may further discourage already anxious audiences.

Rather than an information deficit, PIF executive director Katherine Bruce posited that we are

dealing with "an information overload," in which we do not necessarily need to focus on

spreading more information, but on "new ways of storytelling" that may better cater to the

emotional scope of the climate crisis (Personal Interview).

In drawing attention to these affective shifts in relation to our environmental context,

these organizers recall Anil Narine's conception of "eco-trauma". Narine argues that media

representations primarily intended to "inform" viewers "can induce a sense of passive

resignation, a sentiment that seems to be spreading" (1). The author argues that this increase

results from the "sheer amount" of environmental narratives that today's audiences encounter

(2). While these stories are "aimed at protecting our imperilled planet," Narine argues that they

"may also be so blinding in their intensity that they overwhelm us" (1). Narine defines this

phenomenon as eco-trauma, in which people become so overloaded and overwhelmed with

climate information that they "disengage," resulting in "stasis" rather than action (9; 21).

According to Narine, this information-induced panic "characterizes our age of anxiety,"

rendering education-forward models of climate communication potentially more overwhelming

than action-inspiring (2).

Katherine emphasized that a facts-first approach is not only inadequate from an affective

standpoint but makes for an ineffective business model. She outlined how, if the festival focused

only on spreading knowledge, then the drive to attend would derive solely from a moralistic

mindset that "it's good for you to go out to the Planet in Focus film festival because it's

something you should do … because you should care about the environment and you should be

doing your recycling" (Personal Interview). Katherine identified this "smug" mindset as using

the festival to signal environmental aptitude and knowledge and insisted that this is not the aim

of the organizers. She stated, "I just don't think you're going to change hearts and minds that way, and I don't think you will build an audience" (Personal Interview). Thus, Katherine highlighted the desire to transcend an information-forward approach that solely aims to educate people away from being environmentally "bad". She expressed, "People want to connect with people. They don't want to just sit in a dark room and watch a film that's good for them" (Personal Interview). The festival organizers thus emphasized the ways they attempt to avoid a moralistic and discouraging approach through building support into the structure of the event.

Alessandra described how, from a programming perspective, the team aims to select films with a slightly "uplifting" quality, such as a solutions-based approach, or a hint of hope (Personal Interview). Such an aim was reflected in the programming I attended, with *Deep Rising* being by far the most discouraging narrative. Other screened films contained climate solutions and captivating characters embarking on missions of change. Further, Alessandra stated that the festival aims to "partner with community organizations that will tie an action item into the film so that people don't leave feeling so depressed" (Personal Interview). These action-oriented capacities include signing a petition, contributing funding to a cause, or becoming involved in a local issue, enabling people to feel more capable of changing the problems they see onscreen.

Katherine further highlighted the festival's goal of building conversation into the screening of films. Several films were accompanied by a panel discussion with filmmakers, activists, and scholars, in which audiences could take a more active role of interacting and engaging with the ideas presented by a film. Viewers took advantage of this opportunity in several ways, from expressing gratitude for the film, to posing industry-oriented questions, and digging into the theoretical frameworks of a story. As Katherine insisted, "it has to be a

screening event, it can't just be a film," highlighting exchange and interaction as central to the festival's structure (Personal Interview). In doing so, Katherine echoed Roy's position that a film festival constitutes a space of "exploration and dialogue" which requires structures of support and solace (79).

Within this aim, Katherine emphasized that "venue really matters" (Personal Interview). The festival took place at Paradise Theatre, which is on the smaller side of theatre spaces. This size facilitated what Katherine deemed an "intimacy," with audience members in closer proximity to each other, the film screen, and the panellists (Personal Interview). Moreover, Katherine celebrated the affordances of the lobby area adjacent to the theatre, featuring a wraparound bar. Serving snacks and drinks, the bar functioned as a space for attendees to interact before and after film screenings. Katherine argued that this built-in socialization lessened the isolation bred by the viewing experience, as spectators knew that they could "get a drink, stand around, and talk" between events (Personal Interview).

This spatial capacity allowed for a change in tone facilitated by an easy shift in location. The aforementioned conversation following *Deep Rising* took place in the theatre space, where attendees lingered in the aftermath of the film. Upon stepping out into the lobby area, an affective shift was apparent. The same group of viewers were soon conversing on a series of lighter topics, with a more jovial attitude. People thus had the capacity to leave the venue feeling better than they did after the film, with the chance to engage in discussions both influenced by, and separate from, the film they had seen. Katherine stated that this potential "is the perfect example of what I love about a festival," facilitating connection amongst people alongside the discussion of environmental themes (Personal Interview). Interestingly, she also emphasized that this pattern is not something that they "explicitly advertise," instead building in subtle "social

cues" that enable people to discover this capacity for themselves (Personal Interview).

While the organizers drew attention to these methods as combatting the discouraging affect of an environmental festival, they were careful not to celebrate these strategies as solving this problem. As evident in the festival's continued screening of information-heavy, affectively draining film, a focus on knowledge sharing is still key to the festival space. Striking a balance between education and solace thus creates a continued tension. Organizers presented information-overload, and its affective consequences, as an increasing issue that presents a growing challenge to the festival sphere, in conjunction with other tensions that underlie this space. As environmental awareness becomes more commonplace, the ways in which we discuss climate issues are simultaneously changing, with online spaces becoming distribution channels for environmental media.

This year marked PIF's first fully in-person iteration since the COVID-19 pandemic. Katherine observed that the festival has not been as well-attended following the pandemic and attributed this trend to a shift in routine. She noted that the pandemic impeded the patterns of attendees who used to attend PIF every year, stating "that habit has been interrupted, disrupted" (Personal Interview). The festival can therefore no longer rely on being built into people's calendars. Katherine further argued that the pandemic has caused some people to need more motivation to leave the house, shifting people's willingness to go out of their way to attend an event. She suggested that the online, or partially online, format of previous years has bred the attitude of "I can just watch at home," impeding in-person attendance (Personal Interview).

While Katherine maintained that during the pandemic, "online communities were our lifeline," she defended the team's choice not to continue online programming this year (Personal Interview). She outlined how some members of the festival Board and the public expressed a

desire to continue online components, but Katherine felt "it would hollow out the audience that we already had" (Personal Interview). Though the attendance was smaller in size, organizers emphasized the strength of this audience.

Eva Stone-Barney, festival manager and industry coordinator, outlined how she recognized many of the audience members from previous years. She suggested that this familiarity resulted in "a lot of catching up" amongst spectators, alongside the formation of new connections (Personal Interview). Eva further alluded to how many PIF team members have been in their roles for quite a while, establishing their own long-standing connections to audience members and festival personnel. She stated, "people really seem to stay and that extends to the audience" (Personal Interview). Katherine echoed this sentiment, stating "Planet in Focus has always had a very loyal community and audience," and characterized this quality as any festival's "greatest asset" (Personal Interview). Even with a decrease in audience size, those who remain demonstrate commitment to the festival.

Such a core audience base affords certain moments that cannot be replicated online. Katherine described one such instance which occurred during the second weekend of the festival, during a presentation by Dr. Mustafa Santiago Ali, whom the festival awarded the title of EcoHero. During this event, Dr. Santiago Ali invited everyone in the audience to stand, and join hands with their neighbour while he guided them in a reflection. Katherine described the resulting ambiance as powerful, stating that some people who joined in were people she "never thought would have stood up and held their neighbour's hand … but people do sometimes in the right space". Such a moment can find no online equivalent, and Katherine argued that it may not have happened had there been a streamed component to the event.

Beyond incorporating online festival components in previous years, Katherine stated that

the festival admittedly does not put a great deal of effort into bolstering its online presence, mainly engaging in a sparing use of Instagram "stories" to advertise events. Katherine attributed this limited effort to a focus on the events themselves, as well as a lack of available staff, as team members are already "wearing many hats" (Personal Interview). She expressed, "Could we do a better job of putting it out in the world what the festival is all about? Yeah, absolutely" (Personal Interview). Recognizing that a more strategic use of social media may reach more people, Katherine held to the advantages of having a stable physical audience base. These considerations signal the navigation of the festival's simultaneous online and in-person existence, and suggest a prioritization of in-person connection as a means of building support and solace into the space. In this protective stance towards in-person affordances, Katherine's remarks suggest that leaning too much into the digital realm would threaten these affective structures.

The festival's limited engagement with the online sphere does not mean that the affordances and characteristics of the internet have eluded organizers' attention. Alessandra discussed how the participatory frameworks of social media have encouraged more events like panel discussions, and partnering with organizations that are part of broader communities. She stated that these are the instances "where we do tie in new media and the conversations that are happening online" (Personal Interview). Further, organizers gestured towards experimenting with varying lengths of films to cater to audiences that may have less time to spare, or more sources competing for their attention. Eva further stated that conversations often occur amongst the team as to how they can meet "the community where they are, instead of trying to create a community in a theatre" (Personal Interview). In future events, this could look like hosting screenings in bars or other local venues where people may already gather. Thus, online modes of engagement are mobilized as strategies for enhancing the festival's connective landscape. As

such, online spaces ironically provide models to combat the information overload to which these digital spheres increasingly contribute.

Organizers highlighted how PIF has to devise strategies to gain attention in a media saturated landscape. Carrington reflected upon these challenges in his opening speech, stating that you would think that programming films would have gotten easier over the years with so much more content being made available. He contended that this abundance actually renders this task more difficult, with so many potential approaches and conversations coming to the fore. Much of this buzz becomes apparent in online spaces, where a plethora of environmental content and conversation is shared. As such, festival spaces are no longer the primary means for the distribution of environmental film, existing amongst a multitude of video strategies, and competing for the attention of audiences. One might think that the in-person character of PIF would allow it to stand apart from this online proliferation of content. However, PIF does not escape this abundance and competition through being held in-person, but this noise is only elevated in the festival setting, being matched by a multitude of festival choices.

Katherine highlighted how an abundance of content continues to infiltrate events even within a niche, local, and in-person sphere. She characterized Toronto as "a city of cinema," with festivals like Reel Asian, ImagineNATIVE, Reel World, and TIFF, taking place in the city all within a few months' time (Personal Interview). Further, several festivals have absorbed an environmental component in their programming. As Katherine pointed out, both TIFF and HotDocs now have an environmental program. The niche area that PIF occupies is thus becoming less distinct while, as Katherine puts it, "everyone screens some kind of environmental material" (Personal Interview).

Katherine positioned this trend as a shift in general environmental awareness, stating that

these festivals did not originally have an environmental frame because "they weren't interested. Now they are because everyone is. And that's a good thing" (Personal Interview). While Katherine characterized an elevated level of public interest in environmental phenomena as a positive change, she also described the challenges that it presents, stating, "TIFF is getting the biggest environmental films in the world before we do" (Personal Interview). As a result, Katherine reflected, "you start to wonder whether you're redundant, or how do you set yourself apart" (Personal Interview). Such questions present a continued challenge to the environmental film festival going forward, as public awareness and forms of engagement continue to develop and shift. Environmental content distributed through festival circuits and digital spaces contribute to a sense of information-overload, limiting both the size and emotional capacity of the audience that festivals manage to receive.

The challenges faced by festival venues thus speak to broader currents in environmental documentary around a heightened sense of awareness and anxiety about climate issues, and a proliferation of these facts and feelings in the online sphere. Katherine reflected upon a balance needed to attract audiences while maintaining the integrity of the festival, stating, "I think people will leave their house if it's going to be fun … on the other hand, it can't be a dance party every night" (Personal Interview). When asked what she would like to see in the future of the festival, Katherine stated, "I'd love to see it as a hub for these conversations, a place where you can come to find community and support, solace when you need it, inspiration, excitement, and enthusiasm for this shift that we all need" (Personal Interview). In listing this slew of affects, Katherine points to both the potentials afforded by this space, and the challenges posed by encompassing all these intersecting sentiments. As such, Katherine's insights imply that the environmental film festival needs an affective character as multifaceted and complex as the festival landscape itself,

and that navigating this emotional nuance is necessary to face our current climatic contexts.

In this quest, Alessandra expressed a degree of "frustration" at the idea that the film festival should be a vessel for so much. She stated, "people overestimate the fest sometimes … we are not politicians, we are not lobbyists" (Personal Interview). Alessandra highlighted the limited potential for the festival itself to make change and outlined that the idea is that you "come here, you learn something, you find out how to create a change" (Personal Interview). While highlighting the action that can be undertaken, Alessandra contended that "sometimes there can be some frustration around how much change are you really creating with a film?" (Personal Interview). She concluded that "it's not quantitative," and spectators, audience members, and organizers who "get it" will be able to mobilize the affordances of the festival space without over-estimating its action and solution-oriented capacities (Personal Interview).

Conclusion:

The film festival sphere encompasses a set of competing dynamics, being both open and closed, community-driven and fragmentary. In an environmental context, this landscape is geared towards spreading knowledge and driving action. These already lofty goals are further complicated when audiences are in a state of hyperawareness. While still providing new knowledge, festivals can adapt to such shifts through building support and solace into the structure of the event. The digital sphere informs how this connective framework can be enacted, while also exacerbating the issue through contributing to information overload. A proliferation of information extends to the in-person festival landscape, even when festivals do not have an explicit environmental theme.

Planet in Focus, while not representative of all environmental film festivals, provides

insight into how the complex festival terrain is responding to these shifting conditions. The case study reveals how this festival is being challenged by audiences who are easily overwhelmed and discouraged by emotionally and cognitively challenging content. Organizers respond not by abandoning the festival's educational mandate, but by balancing this information with opportunities for conversation and a shift in tone. As a result, information overload continues to be experienced by audience members, but can be processed in a shared space structured by solace. In interviews with organizers, shifts in the digital sphere were interpreted as both threats and opportunities for the festival space. Online affordances, such as the capacity to respond to difficult content, inspire strategies for audience engagement which can further curb the potentially discouraging tone of the festival. At the same time, organizers adopt a protective stance around the in-person atmosphere as enabling distinct experiences, and thus limit digital access to the fest. Meanwhile, themes inherent to the festival sphere, such as the competition between industry and artistry, and the environmental impact of these events, continue to infiltrate this locale. The environmental film festival surfaces these social and material contradictions and adopts always-adapting strategies to sustain its mission of providing a thought-provoking and collaborative space for exploring environmental issues.

The environmental film festival is no longer the primary distribution platform for environmental documentary content. As the character of environmental documentary shifts and changes, so too must the festival landscape, attending to the conjuncture of heightened environmental awareness and emerging media. Such phenomena present a growing challenge to festivals already experiencing the effects of these changes. These in-person festival spaces provide distinct affordances and experiences that need to be continually renewed to deal with the set of affective and media-related tensions enacted by our changing climate.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined how emerging media are destabilizing and reimagining the aesthetic, affective, and contextual landscape of the traditional environmental documentary. Through an investigation of smartphone filmmaking and viewing dynamics, I explored the compatibility between a mobile aesthetic that indexes proximity and distance, and a human-nature dynamic defined by both enmeshment and estrangement. In a group of environmental TikTok creators, I identified an affective community formation marked by a bleak conviviality, in which uncertainty and tension become the basis for engagement and care. Turning to the traditional circulation model for environmental documentary, I investigated how the environmental film festival is responding to audience needs amidst shifting digital and affective landscapes.

To return to Musser's question, this thesis has provided material and a framework to approach whether "the genre has reached a certain maturity and awaits new approaches or new crisis" (68). If we broaden the scope of environmental documentary to include emerging media practices, we find that new approaches and new crises are central to the genre's growth and character. Environmental documentary today faces heightened tensions in the characterization of human-nature relationships, problematic affective coping strategies like climate doomism, and proliferating information overload. Emerging media, while contributing to these issues, provide the means for devising new approaches that redefine the scope and character of environmental documentary.

From smartphone practices to bleakly convivial online communities and shifting festival landscapes, emerging media are re-imagining environmental documentary at the level of form, content, and circulation. These approaches destabilize key tendencies in traditional

environmental documentary, including the objective expert interview model of the rhetorical form, and the human-nature split enacted by the wildlife film. As such, the habits developed during the genre's production boom are being challenged and re-signified in the context of new crises and media landscapes. The resulting approaches that I identify maintain, rather than artificially resolve the tensions involved in these storytelling practices.

Thus, the environmental documentary did not reach "maturity" or degrade after 2010. Instead, the genre has shifted to encompass new platforms and approaches that respond to changing affective orientations towards the climate crisis. Of course, more traditional approaches are still actively undertaken, and enter into conversation with these emerging practices that have re-signified how environmental documentary can look and feel. As our climate contexts continue to develop and change alongside our shifting media landscapes, this genre faces continued challenges and opportunities that arise at the intersection of environmental affect and media affordances.

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