THE HUMAN FACE OF GLOBAL WARMING: VARIETIES OF ECO-COSMOPOLITANISM IN CLIMATE CHANGE DOCUMENTARIES

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Abstract

Paul Lindsay's *Before the Flood* (2004), Briar March's *There Once Was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho* (2010), and Michael Nash's *Climate Refugees* (2010) all focus on the consequences of climate change for the common people in different parts of the world. This article investigates the ways in which the three documentaries promote ecologically conscious forms of cosmopolitanism and how they unveil what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martínez-Alier have called "the environmentalism of the poor." Lindsay, March, and Nash approach their topic in different ways and make use of different filmic techniques to raise awareness, concern, and sympathetic solidarity. Foregrounding local perceptions of nature and global interdependencies, their documentaries give viewers an emotionally charged glimpse into the human drama of climate change in order to then remind them of their own role and responsibility in it.

Key words: Climate change, documentary film, eco-cosmopolitanism, emotion, *There Once Was an Island*, *Before the Flood*, *Climate Refugees*.

Resumen

Tanto *Before the Flood*, escrita por Paul Lindsay en 2004, como *There Once Was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho*, de Briar March (2010), y *Climate Refugees*, de Michael Nash (2010), se concentran en las consecuencias que tiene el cambio climático en la vida de la gente común de diversas partes del mundo. Este ensayo investiga de qué forma estos tres documentales promueven formas cosmopolitas de concienciación ecológica y también cómo desvelan lo que Ramachandra Guha y Juan Martínez-Alier han denominado "el ambientalismo de los pobres." Lindsay, March y Nash tratan estos temas de diferente manera, utilizando para ello técnicas fílmicas diversas para conseguir despertar conciencias y así lograr la solidaridad de la compasión. Captando muy bien las percepciones locales de la naturaleza así como la interdependencia global existente, sus reportajes hacen que los que los visionen tengan una primera pincelada emocional del drama humano que el cambio climático conlleva, para luego recordarles el papel y la responsabilidad que tienen en él.

Palabras clave: cambio climático, reportajes documentales, eco-cosmopolitismo, emoción, *There Once Was an Island*, *Before the Flood*, *Climate Refugees*.

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Global warming has, quite literally, become a "hot" topic in recent years, hot enough to become the subject of a number of American blockbusters and theater-released documentary films. Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), Michael Taylor's *The Great Warming* (2006), and Nadia Conners and Leila Conners Petersen's *The 11th Hour* (2007) all fall into this latter category, and Guggenheim's film, at least, has been remarkably successful at the box office.[1] Whatever their stylistic and rhetorical differences, the common denominator between these films is that they combine scientific data and opinion on climate change with celebrity appeal and an emotional plea to the audience to become politically active and change their own lifestyles. Some of them, like Daniel Gold and Judith Helfand's *Everything's Cool* (2007) and Randy Olson's *Sizzle* (2010) use humor and satire to lighten up the seriousness of the topic and to avoid coming across as overly didactic. But in the end they, too, try to convince their viewers that climate change is a serious problem and that humans all over the world must take personal and political action in order to mitigate it. Governments' attempts at global environmental governance have largely failed so far, and thus it is perhaps not surprising that documentary filmmakers address themselves primarily to individuals, encouraging them to become more ecologically aware citizens of their respective countries and the world as a whole. Their rhetoric strategies, however, often lead them to ignore or minimize environmental justice issues as well as the perspectives and rights claims of people who are already affected by the economic and ecological consequences of climate change.

In this paper, I will be concerned with three documentaries that try a somewhat different approach: Paul Lindsay's *Before the Flood* (2004), Briar March's *There Once Was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho* (2010), and Michael Nash's *Climate Refugees* (2010) all focus on the consequences of climate change for the common people in different parts of the world, and they all discuss some of the human rights and citizenship issues at stake. Rather than depicting the matter from a more or less exclusively western point of view, the three filmmakers from the UK, New Zealand, and the United States give voice to the citizens of Bangladesh, China, the Sudan, and the tiny islands of Tuvalu and Takuu. Global warming, their films make clear, is already having some very serious effects on the lives of people who, for economic, political, and geographical reasons, are disproportionately exposed to its impacts. With various degrees of emotional charge, they tell of these people's struggle for survival. However, none of them is content with solely raising their viewers' awareness and compassion for disenfranchised humans in distant locations. Rather, they aim to make them aware of their own *involvement* in the causes as well as in the inevitable consequences of these people's plight. Michael Nash's *Climate Refugees* is the most drastic example in this regard, as it appeals, sometimes shamelessly, to

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[1] According to Box Office Mojo, *An Inconvenient Truth* has earned $24,146,161 in the United States and $25,610,346 in international markets, amounting to a total lifetime gross of $49,146,161. This makes it the 6th highest grossing theater-released documentary film of all times.

viewers' fears about the potentially negative effects of large-scale climate migration on their own comfortable lives.

While none of the three films speaks expressly of climate justice and cosmopolitanism, this is precisely what is at stake in them. In recent years, scholars like Ulrich Beck, Andrew Dobson, Patrick Hayden, and Ursula Heise have attempted to reconfigure the concept of cosmopolitanism from the perspective of environmentalism and environmental justice. In an era of environmental degradation, they have argued, the provision of ecological security and equity needs to become a core component of responsible global citizenship. Beck and Hayden both believe that global environmental risks will facilitate the development of cosmopolitan attitudes and practices. In Hayden's understanding, "world environmental citizenship ... arises from... a recognition of our global responsibilities for the human condition in light of humanity's connectedness with the environment" (147). Beck makes clear that negative emotions such as fear also play their part in the emergence of that recognition. He believes that the unsettling realization that in what he calls the *world risk society* humans are connected across national boundaries through shared risks will lead people to understand that they must either collaborate or perish (7). In this view, it is not so much our compassion and ethical concerns for human and non-human others that bring about ecological cosmopolitanism. Rather, the frightening knowledge of present and future transnational repercussions marks "the end of the other" because it collapses the distance between those who are victims and those who are privileged and safe (Beck 7). And while Dobson, like Heise, insists that it is our understanding of material "chains of cause and effect that prompt[s] obligations of justice rather than sympathy, pity, or beneficence" (Dobson 178), these two scholars, too, acknowledge that affect and emotion do play an important role in our sense of obligation toward strangers.

Given that films are uniquely suited to engage viewers' emotions—film scholar Ed Tan has described them as "emotion machines" (120)—climate change documentaries potentially play an important role in raising not only awareness but also what Robyn Eckersley has called "sympathetic solidarity" (190). Such emotionally charged forms of solidarity, Eckersley has argued, are central for the development of more cosmopolitan stances toward environmental victims in distant locations. In what follows, I will approach these issues through readings of *Before the Flood*, *There Once Was an Island*, and *Climate Refugees*, which all promote ecologically conscious forms of cosmopolitanism while at the same time unveiling what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier have called "the environmentalism of the poor" (xxi). As I will show, Lindsay, March, and Nash approach their topic in different ways and make use of different filmic techniques to raise awareness, concern, and sympathetic solidarity. Foregrounding local perceptions of nature and global interdependencies, their documentaries give viewers an emotionally charged glimpse into the human drama of climate change in order to then remind them of their own role and responsibility in it.

WATCHING THE PLIGHT OF OTHERS: *BEFORE THE FLOOD*

Paul Lindsay's 2004 BBC documentary *Before the Flood* opens with beautiful images of the tiny South Pacific island of Tuvalu and the solemnly spoken words of Lisa (no last name is given), who has spent her life in this lush environment: "Those who don't know where is Tuvalu, how big is Tuvalu, what type of people are the Tuvaluans—I'm sure they don't care about us." Lisa's somber statement points to one of cosmopolitanism's age-old problems: humans tend to be less concerned about people they do not know and care more for those with whom they have close connections, be they biological, ethnic, religious, national, or economic. However, as Kwame Anthony Appiah points out in his 2006 *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, this natural tendency must not necessarily preclude a cosmopolitan concern for strangers because such engagement "is always going to be engagement with particular strangers; and the warmth that comes from a shared identity will often be available" (98). According to Appiah, mediated encounters play an important role in such intercultural engagement. "I care about *some* people in other places," he writes, "people whose oppression would engage me particularly, just because I have read their philosophical writings, admired their novels, seen them play spectacular games of tennis on television (98, emphasis mine). Or, we could add, because we have seen their faces and watched them fighting for survival in a documentary film.

The purpose of Lindsay's *Before the Flood* is exactly such mediated encounter. Through a sympathetic representation of Tuvalu and some of its inhabitants, Lindsay hopes to widen the circle of people who feel connected enough with both of them to care about their future destiny. The first minutes of his film show us shots of turquoise waters and palm tree-lined beaches as we would expect to find them in a travel show, suggesting the kind of Pacific paradise most of us would want to pick for our next vacation trip. After these carefully chosen opening shots he presents us with the close up of Lisa, who believes that people who do not know the island or its inhabitants will probably not care about its future. She is looking straight at the camera, thus breaking down the fourth wall and addressing the viewer directly, when she goes on to assert that "those people in countries that *have had* some connections with Tuvalu, I'm sure they worry, and they *do* care about us and our future." While this may be just a casual statement or one of her personal beliefs about befriended nations, it assumes a more profound meaning through its positioning in the film. Only a few minutes later it is complemented by historical footage from the 1997 Climate Change Conference in Kyoto, in which the Tuvaluan Prime Minister Bikenibeu Paeniu reminds world leaders that his country is "the most vulnerable of the most vulnerable countries" and that for his people "the whole issue of climate change... is not [of] economics and politics, but it is of life and death." Between these two statements, the Tuvaluan perspective on the cosmopolitan responsibilities of the world community is firmly established.

In typical BBC fashion, Lindsay uses a matter-of-fact approach, trying to keep his presentation of the issue as objective and impersonal as possible. Nevertheless, he does provide occasional voice-over narration, wondering as he does about "how

... you feel when you are about to lose the land beneath your feet." To convey these feelings he relies on two kinds of evidence: interviews with the affected islanders and visual evidence of the changing landscape. The first kind of evidence gives the viewer insight into the way in which the locals experience their changing environment. The people of Tuvalu talk about their way of life and how it has begun to change over the past few years as a result of global warming. They also share their personal thoughts and feelings, their uncertainty and fear about the future, and their sadness about the loss of land and livelihood they are already observing. By way of illustration, the film captures the changing environmental conditions visually, showing footage of flooded low-lying areas, of damaged trees along the coastline, and of withering pulaka plants that cannot grow properly because of the rising salinity levels in the island's soil. In addition, we are shown some of the smaller neighboring islands that have already lost their tree population and others that are now completely submerged by the ocean. Lindsay uses little or no music to set the tone and his editing is slow-paced and unobtrusive. Unlike the other two films I will discuss, he hardly uses any emotionalizing film techniques, and he also does not bring in the voices of outside scientific "experts" to support the views of the islanders.

Despite this relatively restrained approach, however, Lindsay's film is not "objective" in any literal sense of the word. As film scholar Dai Vaughan reminds us, just like the directors of fiction films, documentary filmmakers consciously shape and control their films (see 84). As creative film texts, documentaries are inevitably the product of directorial choices; their special appeal lies, as Jasmine Cobb and John Jackson have pointed out, in their power to "seduce" us into believing that we watch an "objective" account of the events presented to us (263). Out of what must have been hours of footage, Lindsay carefully selected the images and statements he wanted to have in the film. And so it is no coincidence that viewers are confronted with individuals who show a clear understanding of the larger ecological context of their situation. Despite their remote position in the Pacific, the Tuvaluans in Lindsay's film are well aware of the fact that the sea level rise that might soon force them to leave their island is not just a freak of nature or some inexplicable act of God. Neither do the Christians among them expect a benevolent God to help them. As Lisa explains, they know "from BBC world news that thousands of people perish in one go. So why do we have to believe that... God will just look after the people of Tuvalu?... No, I think *we* have to do something." If they want to save themselves, all of the interviewees agree, they will either have to migrate somewhere else or get those most responsible for global warming to start caring about them and change their emission policies. At the very least, they want some kind of recompense. As one of the politicians on the island puts it, "we are on the frontline of climate change through no fault of our own. And it is only fair that people or industrialized nations and industries take responsibility for the actions that they are causing. It's like the "pollute or pay" principle: you pollute you pay."

Any serious eco-cosmopolitan project will have to engage not only with colonial legacies but also with contemporary social and environmental inequalities. Guha and Martínez-Alier have argued that the "empty-belly" environmentalism of the South is substantially different from the 'full-stomach' environmentalism of the

North (xxi). Not only is the former often driven by destitution and despair in the face of "visible ecological degradation" (17), but it also insists on the close relation between environmental problems and post-colonial globalization and its resulting inequities. Lindsay is paying attention to these problematic interconnections, but he is not interested in portraying the Tuvaluans as disenfranchised victims of globalization processes. He includes information about their "striking gold" with the selling of their internet country's "tv" address at the height of the dotcom boom and their subsequent decision to spend 1.5 million dollar per year for a seat in the UN—a choice that signals their determination to become political actors on a global scale. He also reminds viewers of the island's colonial legacy and shows contemporary efforts at nation building and the development of (disaster) tourism infrastructure. The film makes clear that despite their precarious situation and the gradual westernization of their society the Tuvaluans are attached to their island and their culture, and that they do not want to pack their things and move elsewhere. Nevertheless, they must all get prepared for a mid-term departure and relocation. Lindsay ends his film with Tuvalu's eagerly-awaited 25th Independence Day celebrations. It happens to coincide with the onslaught of the latest cyclone, and so the undeterred musicians, marchers, and audience seem to nearly drown in the rain and floods. The director of a Hollywood disaster flic could not have come up with a more effective foreshadowing device.

Lindsay offers his British viewers an unromanticized glimpse into the daily life of a young and proud nation that in all likelihood will cease to exist in part because of these viewers' unrestrained overconsumption. The fact that said nation used to be a British colony only increases the bitter irony. Lindsay's relatively unemotional approach to the issue of climate justice resonates with Andrew Dobson's notion of "thick cosmopolitanism." Like Hayden and Beck, Dobson believes that globalization and global environmental risk can help strengthen cosmopolitan attitudes and politics, but, unlike Beck, he is not convinced that emotional processes make a good source of obligation for cosmopolitanism. In "Thick Cosmopolitanism" (2006), he argues that an "appeal to the mechanism of empathy," will not be enough to motivate people to act in the interest of strangers (170). To produce a cosmopolitan "nearness," Dobson argues, one needs "less empathy" and "more causal responsibility," because "causal responsibility produces a thicker connection between people than appeals to membership of common humanity, and it also takes us more obviously out of the territory of beneficence and into the realm of justice" (172). Dobson fears that it will be quite difficult for the citizens of affluent societies to empathize with the people who suffer from floods in distant parts of the world; however, "if those very same floods are in part a result of the lifestyle of (some) members of those very same affluent societies, then 'sympathy' and 'identification' are anyway redundant responses" (174). For Dobson, cosmopolitan solidarity is not an issue of emotions, but of obligation and (environmental) justice.

While this is a valuable point, I think Dobson makes a mistake when he dismisses notions of empathy, solidarity, and identification altogether. As Robyn Eckersley has argued, "it is impossible to arrest the growing gap between those who generate ecological problems and those who suffer the consequences, along with the increasing dis-embeddedness brought about by the processes of economic globalization, without developing sympathetic solidarity with environmental victims wherever they may be located" (190). This need for "sympathetic solidarity" is one of the reasons why the two other filmmakers I want to consider include strong emotional appeals to support their rational arguments for environmental justice and cosmopolitan responsibility. It is also the reason, I believe, why their documentaries have won numerous awards and recognition from influential organizations such as the UN.[2]

FEELING WITH THE OTHER: *THERE ONCE WAS AN ISLAND*

Briar March's *There Once Was an Island* opens with a shot from a camera that is half-submerged in sea water. It is followed by a sequence of stunningly beautiful shots of the South Western Pacific at sunset filmed from a traditional fishing boat and accompanied by soft music and the sounds of a male voice singing in what to most ears will be an unknown language. A small island appears on the horizon, and a text insert informs the viewer that what we see is Takuu, a small atoll 250 kilometers North East of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. Furthermore, we learn that "a Polynesian community of 400 live on Nukutoa, the atoll's only inhabited island. It is 0.5 kilometers long and 1 metre above sea level." The community on which March's film focuses thus is even smaller than Tuvalu's population of 10,000. The next text insert, however, suggests that the small size of the community does not mean it is insignificant: "The Taku people have lived here for more than 1000 years. They are now experiencing some of the first effects of climate change." The implication is that the islanders have been able to live on this low-lying island for millennia, and that it is only now that, because of anthropogenic climate change, their existence is threatened.

The first person who speaks in the film is Satty, a 30-year-old farmer and fisherman who relies on Takuu's traditional farming and fishing methods to bring food on the table for his wife and their five children. That, he says, "is all I do here." March lets the three people who are at the center of her film—Satty, Endar, and Telo—speak for themselves and uses no other narration than that which is provided by the occasional text inserts. The personal information her protagonists offer in interviews and voice-over commentaries helps the viewer to develop an interest in them as individuals, rather than just seeing them as providers of information about environmental changes on the island and their effects on their lives. Furthermore, March's directorial discretion is also an expression of her respect for the isolated islanders and their unique culture. To protect their indigenous practices and religious sites, the people of Takuu have been highly restrictive about foreign visitation. Only

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[2] While it is perhaps not quite fair to compare a television documentary with two theater-released films in the latter terms, I believe that such a comparison is helpful in a consideration of the films' respective rhetorical strategies and their potential as mediators for sympathetic solidarity.

in recent years has their policy become a little more liberal, which is why March and her team were allowed to visit the atoll twice, once in 2006 and once in 2008.[3]

One reason for the loosening of visitation restrictions was the increasing influence of younger islanders who have spent time on the Papua New Guinea mainland. Endar, the second person who introduces herself in March's film, is one of them. She is married to a Papua New Guinean in Bougainville and has returned temporarily to the island to help take care of her elderly father. A converted Christian and the first woman of Takuu who has gone overseas to work, Endar admits without hesitation that it would be "worse for [her] to stay on this island compared to [her] life in Port Moresby with [her] husband." She is a staunch advocate of the Bougainville Government's plan to relocate the Takuu people to the mainland, asserting that "the sea level is rising and destroying the whole island." March visualizes the problem by including shots of the eroding shoreline and of Endar standing on the waterfront and describing the individual rooms of her old house, which used to stand where now there is nothing but water. When Endar asks her sister's children where they will go when the sea has taken away all of Nukutoa, they name the neighboring island of Amotou and look lost when she answers that that will be no solution "because Amotou will be destroyed, too." The magnitude of changes ahead of them is beyond the powers of their imagination.

The third protagonist to introduce himself is the fisherman Telo who, as a father of six, embraces the traditions of the community. Telo is distraught by the fact that the high salinity of the soil is killing the community's vegetables as well as the giant taro, a plant that plays a central role in the island's traditional ceremonies. Despite his awareness of the changing ecology of the island, however, Telo cannot see himself moving away unless relocation becomes absolutely necessary. "It is not right for us to move to another place," he explains, because "it is going to be very difficult for [us] to take our culture with [us]." Like others in the community, he has become convinced that they need to invite more scientists to the island who, based on their research, will be able to tell them what they should do.

Through the three people she has placed at the center of her film, March offers viewers insight in various indigenous perspectives on climate change, sea level rise, and their consequences for the Takuu people. Even the most traditional among them understand that their local knowledge of the island is of little help in addressing the problem and that the seawalls they have been building of stone and netting will eventually be washed away with everything else. Whether they like it or not, they will have to rely on help from the outside, and only few of them believe that this help will come from a benevolent God. Their trust in the Bougainville Government, which has been exceptionally ineffective in its support, does not seem to go much farther. Most of them think, like Telo, that bringing in international scientists is their best option to get a better understanding of the larger dimensions of the problem and of possible solutions. Because of its dire ecological problems and its gradual opening to outer world, the formerly secluded community thus has begun to develop what Ursula Heise has called "eco-cosmopolitan awareness" (90). It is expressed in their increasing attention to the complex interferences of the global with the local and their willingness to combine concrete experiential and abstract scientific knowledge in order to address ecological problems. Like postcolonial thinkers, proponents of eco-cosmopolitanism insist on "the inseparability of the current ecological crisis from historical legacies of imperialistic exploitation and authoritarian abuse" (Huggan 702). At the same time, however, they insist on the possibility of less traditionally bounded forms of exchange, engagement, and solidarity between people from all walks of life.

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[3] Another filmmaker who has recently been working in Takuu is Lyn Collie.

We can see such solidarity developing in the second half of March's film. When she returns to Takuu for her second shoot in 2008 she is accompanied by the Australian geomorphologist Scott Smithers and the British-Australian oceanographer John Hunter. Her film also shows the return of Endar to her native island, who is hoping that the scientists will be able to convince her people that they have to accept the offer of the Government and relocate to Bougainville. Smithers and Hunter plan to provide the community with "some fairly simple, easy to understand resources" as well as "some advice... on what some of their options are." At their first community meeting, Hunter explains that the world is heating up because "other people in the world are burning things like diesel fuel in large amounts" which "cause[s] the world to warm" and raises local sea levels. Satty tells them about the local practice of building seawalls, only to learn that, in the long run, these will actually impede the island's ability to cope with sea level rise because they prevent natural build up by washed-up sand. The information he receives changes Satty's perspective and gives him a new understanding of the local problems. The same is true for Telo and many other islanders whose trust in the expertise of the two scientists grows quickly.

Both the filmmaker and the scientists are still on the island when it is hit by an extreme high tide that washes away many of the houses, including the community's only schoolhouse. March captures the event in striking images. Without a storm cloud in sight the sea seems to suddenly climb up the island, covering with several feet of water what minutes before was dry and solid ground. It is an impressive and frightening sight, and it communicates better than any scientific report ever could Takuu's perspective on the problem of global warming. Few viewers will remain unmoved by these images, and they can hardly fail to notice that they are among the "other people in the world" who are indirectly responsible for this local disaster. As Jacob Powell points out in his review of the film, *There Once Was an Island* "successfully connects the viewer to the plight of Takuu by highlighting our part (insignificant though it may seem) in its slow but steady submersion" (Powell). Since the Takuu people have no dotcom domain to sell, they can not afford, as the Tuvaluans now can, a seat in the UN Assembly. All the more important is a film that raises awareness and sympathetic solidarity.

In one of the last scenes of the film one of the scientists asks viewers to imagine how it would feel to them to lose the places they hold dear and to then "magnify that impact by ten times because this is all these people know... This is it. This is their world. And their world is being destroyed." March connects this appeal for empathetic identification a more rational call for a global reduction of emissions. The last words, however, belong to the fisherman Satty, who believes that "somebody big must not look down. Somebody big should say: let's see what you've got. Let's get together and do something... No matter how small you are ... you are still part of the world. If you lose something small in the world, you lose a lot." Satty's solemn appeal for cosmopolitan ethics and practice is followed by peaceful and idyllic images of the island reminiscent of the opening shots, which give the viewer time to think about its implications.

March's remarkable documentary has been showered with awards and prizes, and it has been lauded by critics for its stunning photography and its effective linking of local and global concerns. While it provides comparatively little political and scientific context, its major strength is that it depicts the environmental perspective of the poor. March has explained that the people of Takuu "feel that they do not have a voice and we hope that through this film we will be able to give them one" (March). However, her aim is also to raise sympathetic solidarity for the people she portrays. She believes that her documentary "has wide appeal because the issue of climate change affects all of us, but also because it shares the characters' life experiences in a way that people everywhere can relate to and respect" (March). Although at first glance this approach might seem similar to that of David Lindsay in *Before the Flood*, there are important differences. Where Lindsay uses a relatively objective, journalistic approach to the topic, March offers "a character-driven story told in an observational cinematic style" (March). Her decision to focus on the drama of individual lives is highly effective in that it enables viewers to empathize and sympathize with the people she portrays. This approach does not make her film any less of a documentary, but it is bound to involve audiences much more deeply in the destinies of strangers than a more distant and detached approach would.

The third and last film I want to consider, Michael Nash's *Climate Refugees*, employs an approach to the topic that is very different from those of both March and Lindsay. While the possible necessity of migration is the specter that haunts *Before the Flood* and *There Once Was an Island*, it is mostly depicted as a threat or tragedy for the local people they portray. Viewers are asked to feel empathy and compassion and they are also prompted to reflect about their own share in the creation of the problem. Nash uses a different strategy. He, too, confronts his audience with the faces and stories of affected people, but his rhetorical emphasis is on the possible consequences of climate migration for the *host countries*. In addition to Tuvalu he visits Bangladesh, China, and the Sudan, where much larger groups of people are affected by climate change, as well as New Orleans and other vulnerable parts of the American Gulf Coast. Through this change of perspective and emphasis, the American filmmaker succeeds in bringing the seemingly distant problem of climate-change related migration "home" to the United States.

FEARING THE PLIGHT OF OTHERS: *CLIMATE REFUGEES*

While it is a matter of debate whether people who are displaced by climatically induced environmental disasters should be called “climate refugees,” Nash has chosen the term as title for his film precisely because of its provocative power.[4] This strategy seems to have paid out, since Nash was invited to premiere his film at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. He also screened the film to the U.S. Congress and has since shown it at dozens of film festivals around the world. Among the reasons for this success are certainly the global scope of *Climate Refugees* as well its choice of perspective; another reason for it may be the fact that Nash uses an approach we see in many recent American documentary films in that he relies on emotional engagement at least as much as on evidence and rational appeals.[5]

Opening his film with a shot from outer space on planet earth, Nash—who, like Lindsay, narrates his own film—shares with his audience that when he looks “at our planet and realize[s] that this is the only place that we will ever call home, [he] can’t help but think about the crossroads that civilization now finds itself in.” Evading the American debate over the *causes* of climate change, Nash shows footage of recent disasters—including hurricanes, floods, fires, and droughts—and states that whatever the causes “the fact remains [that] our climate is changing and it’s affecting millions and millions of people.” If this already seems to let American viewers off the hook as far as their eco-cosmopolitan responsibilities are concerned, a text insert with a quote by Navy Vice Admiral Lee Gunn gives further indication of Nash’s rhetorical strategy. “Addressing the changes in the Earth’s climate,” Gunn has said, “is not simply about saving polar bears and preserving the beauty of mountain glaciers. Climate change is a threat to our national security.” That particular threat, it will soon become clear, is the threat of large-scale climate migration to the United States and other countries in the wealthy North.

Despite its problematic opening, however, Nash’s film is interesting because it raises awareness about the problematic legal status of environmental refugees and pays attention to the fact that the privileged few will also be affected by climate change and be it only indirectly through increased migration, armed conflicts, and water and food shortages. Nash deploys an impressive lineup of expert talking heads, including politicians, scientists, environmental activists, and aid workers to provide this information, and he combines these interviews with footage from affected areas around the world. Unlike Lindsay and March, he does not show much interest in the individual life stories of people in affected areas, but he, too, is lucky enough to have found interviewees who stand out because of their eloquence and remarkable insight in the global context of their local problems. Siaosi Finiki, a Tuvaluan fisherman, is one of them. He complains about the fact that Tuvalu's disproportionate affectedness by climate change as well as other countries' unwillingness to take in climate refugees is "not fair." In his view, such countries have an obligation to help because "we are the same. Whether you live in [another] part of the world, we are all human beings. No difference." His words are echoed by Rajendra Pachauri, chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, who states that "we are part of one family. Anything that happens to the human face of another part of the family anywhere else in the world is something that is a slap on our face. And I think you have to be aware of that."

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[4] The term is contested mostly because defining someone as a “refugee” has important social and political implications. Nash has explained his title choice during a public discussion following the screening of his film on May 2, 2011 at the Gasteig Cultural Center in Munich, Germany.

[5] In addition, Nash has produced several versions of the film, tailored to specific audiences. The version I will be considering here is the version for American viewers, which offers the most striking examples of Nash’s rhetorical strategies.

This call for cosmopolitan solidarity is linked to what is perhaps the most important issue addressed by the film: that, unlike people who are persecuted on account of their race, nationality, ethnic origin, or political opinions, environmental refugees are not, currently, granted any special protections under international law. As the Stanford law Professor Tino Cuéllar points out in this film, "there is a gap between what the law provides and what the world needs. And the only way we're going to make some headway toward closing that gap is either increase the human empathy and smart practical thinking what the law can actually accomplish or to decrease the needs of the world." A continued lack of sympathetic solidarity, combined with blindness toward the future implications of climate change, Cuéllar suggests, will have disastrous consequences for people around the world, likely leading to large-scale destabilization and armed conflict.

Like the two other films I have discussed, *Climate Refugees* does not suggest that the problem is only one of sympathy and solidarity. In the last 20 minutes of his film, Nash turns to issues of justice. Andrew Simms suggests that "either a country like the United States is going to have to offer up some of its space to take climate refugees or ... they should be offering up financial and other resources to enable other countries to be able to absorb climate refugees." The German climatologist Hans Schellnhuber goes even further, suggesting a quota system that would require countries "to welcome refugees according to the quota of past emissions. So if the United States has contributed 25 percent to the change of greenhouse gas concentrations, [it] would have to take up 25 percent of... the refugees." Whether or not such a quota system would be practicable or enforceable is debatable, but Schellnhuber does make the logical link between causation and liability, and Nash's film at this point has long left behind any doubt about whether climate change is human-made. And since it *is* human-made, addressing it is presented as a vital part of any response to the "problem" of climate refugees. Through the voice of Andrew Simms, *Climate Refugees* advocates "rapid, dramatic cuts in green house emissions in advanced industrial countries like Britain and the United States." Should any viewer still think that the plight of people in distant lands does not concern them personally, they are reminded by environmental analyst Lester Brown that they are mistaken if they believe that it is only "someone else's house that's burning," because in the case of a global environmental issues like climate change "everyone's house will be on fire."

Nash's film has been lauded for raising awareness about the complex and interrelated humanitarian, economic, and social consequences of climate migration; it has also been criticized for its nationalist lens, alarmist tone, and fear-mongering tendencies.[6] To this one could add a problematic tendency to exploit the tragedies of the affected people he interviews for cheap emotional effect.[7] However, while we might object to some of the film's rhetorical strategies and emotionalizing techniques, the fact remains that it raises important issues and that its focus on the potentially scary long-term consequences of climate change might affect some viewers more lastingly than a plea for sympathetic solidarity. After all, Ulrich Beck believes that "the exodus of eco-refugees and climatic asylum seekers" who will sooner or later flood "across the wealthy North" will force the latter into more eco-cosmopolitan forms of governance because it is the only way it can protect itself from the negative effects of large-scale climate migration. In Beck's view, the utter lack of a safe spot, even for the rich and powerful, equalizes people in fundamental ways, and the resulting fear—a fear that is emphasized in Nash's film—might very well be the starting point for a new kind of political engagement. This is why, for Beck, the world risk society marks "a social epoch in which *solidarity from anxiety* arises and becomes a political force" (49). Masao Miyoshi has made a similar point. "For the first time in human history," he writes, "one single commonality involves all those living on the planet... Whether rich or poor, in the East or the West, progressive or conservative, religious or atheist, none of us can escape from the all-involving process of ... global warming" (295). Like Beck, Miyoshi sees potential in this commonality, but he believes that "by far the most difficult task" will be "to invent a way to *persuade* [people], culturally as well as politically, that there is no other future for any of us" (295).

Aristotle famously insisted that we can be persuaded by evidence (logos), by the character and authority of the speaker (ethos), or by an appeal to emotion and shared values (pathos). The climate change documentaries I have considered here rely on all three modes of persuasion, but the filmic medium's unique ability to appeal to the emotions might in the end be its greatest rhetorical strength. The cognitive film scholar Dirk Eitzen has argued that documentary films can have "a kind of immediacy and emotional form that no fiction film has" because "their power to arouse a pleasurable or engaged response is closely tied to an implied entreaty for special attention and concern" (184). Building on the insights of ecological psychology, he asserts that a felt inclination to *intervene* is what makes our engagement with documentary film special (see 186). This inclination, he explains, is the direct result of our cognitive understanding that what we see on the screen is not fiction but a filmed mediation of the real world. The real world today is warming at an alarming pace, and our growing awareness of a common, all-pervasive threat (such as the UCL

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[6] In his review of the film for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Justin Lowe writes that "production values are solid throughout" but criticizes "a rather alarmist tone pervading 'Climate Refugees' and a tendency toward repetitiveness compromise its message."

[7] His voyeuristic close up—accompanied by melodramatic music—of a Bangladeshi woman who mourns the loss of her drowned child is only one of several examples.

Lancet Commission's statement that global warming will be "the biggest global health threat of the 21st century"[8]) might indeed help produce the kind of "nearness" that seems necessary for the development of cosmopolitan solidarity.

The films I have considered all tie the engaged responses they produce in viewers to an appeal for sympathetic solidarity with the victims of climate change, while at the same time reminding viewers of their own causal responsibility and resulting obligation. This, I believe, makes them an important cultural force that helps advance the public discourse on climate change. However, we have to be careful not to overestimate the power of film. In the final chapter of *Reel Nature* (2009), Gregg Mitman writes that "many of us would like to believe that by going to the movies we are helping to save the world" (216) and reminds us that unless the energy created by a film "is mobilized into action, the power of film as a force of environmental change will remain ephemeral at best" (216). This is unfortunately true, and if we want to strengthen the effects of climate change documentaries on the real world, we need to strengthen educational efforts and community activism that can build on or work in concert with the emotional power that film can exert. Only when people understand emotionally as well as cognitively that their own lives and futures are inextricably linked with their environments and the destinies of people elsewhere in the world will they begin to comprehend what is at stake.

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[8] This is stated in the first UCL Lancet Commission report, published in the May 16 issue of *The Lancet* journal, which immediately—in fact 2 days before its official publication—received huge media coverage in the local and national press <http://download.thelancet.com/flatcontentassets/pdfs/climate-article.pdf>.

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