

Eco-documentaries: Cognition, Emotion and Narrative Ib Bondebjerg



Megacities, Michael Glawogger, 1998 © Fama Film AG - Paul Thiltges Distributions

Documentary images can document our reality in numerous ways. They almost always have this fabulous quality of showing us a reality in ways we may have seen or not seen before, they can both confirm and surprise. However, images do not just show us facts about reality, they also touch emotions in an often-strong way, emotions in people in the reality documented, but also emotions in us viewers. This is also the case with documentaries about our common earth, of the diversity of nature its plants and animals, the environment we live in locally and globally. Before 1900 images of a global earth were few and scattered. Although explorers with cameras started documenting life on our planet in a broader sense as soon as moving images were invented, our more global media culture from the 1960s and on has had a much deeper impact on how we see the globe we live on. Astronauts on Apollo 8 in December 1968 have described the emotional experience of seeing 'the blue planet' from space, the first images ever to be transmitted globally.

In [*An Inconvenient Truth*](#) ([Davis Guggenheim](#), 2006), which is in many ways a very authoritative, fact based lecture documentary, with Al Gore as centre figure, the Apollo 8 picture from 1968 opens the film. Images of planet earth continues through the film, and as the documentation of our ecological crisis gets heavier and heavier, the images of the earth change: we can literally see the ecological change in global images of our planet from 1968 and on. Factual information and visual documentation combine and speak to both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of our mind. [Davis Guggenheim](#) and Al Gore's ecological disaster documentary is connected to another very global series of nature documentaries produced by BBC and [David Attenborough](#) and his crew since 2001. For twenty years, in fact during the whole period in which the ecological crisis has become more and more dominant in public debate, these nature documentaries have fascinated a global audience. They document the diversity of our planet, the way everything is connected and shape our life, but also the way in which this diversity and life on the planet is challenged and threatened.

[*The Blue Planet*](#) (2001) - filmed from 1996 to 2000 - shows life in the oceans, and already this spectacular documentary, celebrating the beauty of our planet, ends with a special episode called "Deep Trouble" in which the rising crisis of our oceans is pointed out. This critical, ecological crisis dimension increases in [*Planet Earth*](#) (2006) and [*Planet Earth II*](#) (2016), where the natural wonders of the world meet the more and more deep changes occurring. In [*Planet Earth*](#) the last episode, "The Future," illustrates the problems by using both visual documentation, narrative sequences and expert explanations. The argument put forward is, that we need to understand our planet as an integrated eco-system: saving the diversity of species, of what we see as wilderness is the condition for saving our planet. It is about living together with each other and the whole natural eco-system, again demonstrated with stunning images of our earth in space. [Attenborough's](#) nature films speak to all aspects of our embodied mind: it is not just about facts and reason; it is also about the emotional power of images and narratives, and it is about using documentary genres and aesthetic forms in creative ways that underline the factual arguments. Watch for instance the fascinating episode 6 of [*Planet Earth II*](#) ("[*Cities*](#)"), in which the film demonstrates how animals adapt to the life in the big cities created by problematic growth. It is pure comedy with a serious message, and as we all know: humour and irony can often turn our mind on, where morality fails. [Attenborough's](#) films are also powerful documentary storytelling with melodramatic, comic and scary dimensions.

Documentaries and our embodied mind

Documentary filmmakers have probably always been aware that making films about reality in various ways is about combining factual evidence, arguments, documentation, and elements of narrative, visuality, creativity, imagination, identification etc. Documentaries like all other forms of film use structures, forms of rhetoric, and narrative structures that appeal to both cognition and emotion.

Factual information and careful documentation are essential in issue-related documentaries appealing to the public and to political decision-makers. It would however be wrong to assume that factuality cannot go hand in hand with emotional dimensions, and that rhetorical structures makes narrative structures impossible. Narrative strategies and emotional dimensions are on the contrary something that enhances our understanding of complex issues. Humans are, as many cognitive theoreticians have argued (Turner 1996, Bruner 2002, and Gottschall 2012), storytelling animals, and stories do not just belong to the realm of fiction, they are a central part of our understanding of the world around us. In Mark Turner's book *The Literary Mind. The origins of Thought and Language* (1996) he defines our ability to use image schemas and narrative structures as essential for our thinking and reasoning:

Story, projection, and parable do work for us; they make everyday life possible; they are the root of human thought; they are not primarily - or even importantly entertainment. To be sure, the kind of stories we are apt to notice draw attention to their status as the product of storytelling, and they often have an entertaining side. We might therefore think that storytelling is a special performance rather than a constant mental activity. But story as a mental activity is essential to human thought.

When narrative structures enter documentary formats, they sharpen our attention, they direct us towards important connections between separate actions and human characters appearing. Even if the narrative structure is not particularly strong in the documentary film, we apply narrative schemas because they are built into our everyday mentality and way of understanding things. The same goes for image schemas, and the visual side of narration and rhetoric, which is so strong in all visual media, including documentaries. Just as reasoning is about drawing conclusion from facts and arguments, narrative is about seeing connections between reality 'actors', their way of speaking and appearing and the connection between them and between them and the actions they are part of. Our image schemas at the same time on a very basic level contribute to the combining of factual reasoning, narrative understanding of actions and character, and a more emotional and bodily reaction to the documentary world presented. As Bruner points out, imagination is among other things tied to our ability to match and test general image schemas to a concrete visual input: "(..) we categorize events according to shared image schemas and actions according to shared image schemas" (Bruner 1996: 30). Just as documentary filmmakers use creativity and blending when combining characters, actions, images, narrative and rhetorical structures, sound, music etc., viewers do the same. Our embodied mind is made to read and react to filmic structures based on their everyday reality and competences and their genetically and culturally shaped mind.

So reasoning and factuality is tied to narrative schemas, image schemas and basic emotional structures in humans. Despite the fact that also emotions are an

extremely important dimension in documentary film making, and in audience responses to documentary, research in documentary have very rarely included theories of emotion. As Belinda Smaill points out in *The Documentary. Politics, Emotion, Culture* (2010), there seems to have been a silence around or a downplay of the role of emotions, desire, pleasure: documentary has been seen as primarily a 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols 1991). There seems to be a general opposition between thinking and feeling in our culture, and when dealing especially with documentaries, who are often seen as factual voices of reason.

Common sense clearly tells us, that emotions *can* make reasoning and debate problematic: we tend to dismiss people who become *too emotional*. However true this is for the pragmatics of communication, both classical theories of rhetoric and modern cognitive psychology and neuroscience tell us that emotions are intimately connected with reasoning. This is the main point in Antonio Damasio's book *Descartes' Error* (1994):

Certain aspects of the process of emotions and feelings are indispensable for rationality. At their best, feelings point us in the proper direction, take us to the appropriate place in a decision-making space, where we may put the instrument of logic to good use. (...) Contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other perceptions. They are the result of the most curious physiological arrangement that has turned the brain into the body's captive audience.

Already the ancient rhetorical tradition knew about the relation between ethos (personal credibility), logos (the power of arguments) and pathos (the power of emotions). Where fiction has an indirect relation to reality, nonfiction claims different forms of more direct relations to reality. However, emotions in real life, in documentaries and fiction serve similar purposes. Characters and events in nonfiction can be imbedded in either a rhetorical or a narrative structure, but in both cases, emotions play a crucial role. The 'reality effect' of nonfiction does not in itself remove emotional dimensions and impacts equal. Arguments and the documentary reality often have a very strong emotional effect. This is not least the case with eco-documentaries and the way they document serious changes to our nature and environment. The difference between non-fiction and fiction is not a question of emotions as such. It is more a question of how emotions and narratives are used, and the different kinds of identification viewers have in documentaries and in fiction. On the whole, we have to accept that film theory in general and until recently - and especially documentary theory - has paid too little attention to emotions and their role in film narratives. In his book *Moving Viewers* (2009), Carl Plantinga says:

A strong strain of Western thought has considered emotion to be antithetical to reason and an obstacle to (...) critical thinking (...) Emotions are intimately tied to our cognition, inferences, evaluations and all of the other mental

activities that accompany the viewing experience. Emotions and affects have implications for ideas (...) they play a role in the creation of both cultural and individual memory.

According to the already mentioned neurologist Antonio Damasio and the cognitive linguists George Lakoff & Mark Johnson (1980), this link between reason and emotion has to do with a very deep connection between images, metaphors and narrative structures as central elements in factual knowledge building, reasoning and decision making. Polemically George Lakoff explains this in his book *The Political Mind* (2008) where he analyses the use of metaphors and images in American, political debates, he clearly goes against the traditional western philosophy, where reason was assumed to be universal, disembodied and almost void of emotion:

Language gets its power because it is defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions. Part of its power comes from its unconscious aspects: we are not consciously aware of all that it evokes in us, but it is there, hidden, always at work. If we hear the same language over and over, we will think more and more in terms of the frames and metaphors activated by that language.

This has implications also for how documentaries argue, how they tell stories about reality, because even when documentaries may try to avoid using images, emotions and narratives, our mind constantly works on all those levels. Metaphors, images, narrative structures and emotions are not just elements in the construction of documentaries, they are part of our everyday reality and the way are embodied mind work with this reality.

Images are not just elements in film (documentaries and fiction), they are in fact a basic element in how we perceive reality and mediated communication. Images are a form of thinking and a form of memory and come in different forms:

- *Perceptual images* – images formed by inputs from visual observations, sounds, words etc.;
- *Recalled images* – images coming out of our memory bank or which are formed as a biproduct of perceptual images;
- *Future images* – images that we construct when we imagine or plan a future action or event.

So images, visual input are part of the way we thing, and in dealing with images and visual narratives our embodied mind connect reason and emotion:

Feelings offer us a glimpse of what goes on in our flesh, as a momentary image of that flesh is juxtaposed to the image of other objects and situations; in so doing, feelings modify our comprehensive notion of those other objects and situations. By dint of juxtaposition, body images give to other images a quality of goodness or badness, of pleasure or pain.

Our mind, like our verbal language and the visual and verbal language of films therefore works in line with how films work, and narratives are central to the way we experience reality:

Complex narratives – the kind we find in anyone's life story, as well as in fairy tales, novels and drama – are made up of smaller narratives with very simple structures. Those structures are called frames or scripts. Frames are among the cognitive structures we think with (...) The neural circuitry needed to create frame structures is relatively simple, and so frames tend to structure a huge amount of our thought (...) The same event structure circuitry can be used to live out an action or narrative, or to understand the actions of others or the structure of the story (...) narratives and frames are not just brain structures with intellectual content, but rather with integrated intellectual-emotional content.

The theory of the embodied mind found in cognitive theory and by now widely developed in film studies and the study of documentary (Brylla and Kramer eds. 2018, Bondebjerg 2014 and 2017) clearly tells us that we need to understand the basic dimensions of narrative and images, of the link between reason and emotion, when we deal with documentary genres, including the eco-documentary. We cannot narrowly define documentary genres as rhetoric, factuality and reason. They do in fact play on all dimensions of our embodied and creative mind.

A typology of ecological documentaries

The history of documentary film in general and the specific genre of nature-and ecology-documentary show a stunning aesthetic and thematic diversity. The typology suggested by Bill Nichols (2001) is perhaps the most well-known, but I have suggested a simpler typology in my book *Engaging with Reality. Documentary and Globalisation* (2014). The definition of four very fundamental modes (see fig. 1) or prototypes of documentaries, which can appear with variations and can be combined in individual documentaries, suggests that there are many ways of relating to reality and of creating narratives of reality.

| Expertise | Observation | Théâtralisation | Poétisation-Introspection |
|--|--|--|---|
| Expertise épistémologique | Ouverture épistémologique | Cadre épistémologique hypothétique | Cadre épistémologique esthétique |
| Explication ou analyse | Observation ou identification | Théâtralisation d'une réalité factuelle | Réalité vue au travers de formes esthétiques |
| Linéarité, causalité, structure rhétorique | Structure épisodique, en mosaïque, vie quotidienne | Reconstruction, narration, mise en scène (docufiction ou fiction documentaire, documentaire satirique) | Montage symbolique, mét-niveaux, formes expressives et/ou subjectives |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| Question/réponse, entretien, témoignages, experts, voix-off de personnalité experte | Axe piloté auteur d'un acteur, univers de vie humain et/ou institutionnel | Mise à l'épreuve des limites entre la réalité et la fiction | Expérience de la réalité avec axe piloté par la forme, poétique de la réalité, construction de la réalité |
| Information, critique, propagande | Enregistrement documentaire de la réalité vécue, ethnoscioologie | Axe piloté par la construction d'un récit, axe narratif guidé par la réalité. Réflexivité médiatique | Mise en question des concepts de la réalité et des formes documentaires traditionnelles |

Fig. 1. Basic modes of documentary

Based on this typology I will deal with some concrete examples: *The authoritative ecological documentary* exemplified by *The 11th Hour* (Leila & Nadia Connors, 2007) a film using a rhetorical structure, strong, fact-based arguments, visual illustrations, but also strong emotional, ethical effects. A sub-category is *the corporate critical documentary*: where the authoritative social critic and investigative approach is used to attack specific social institutions related to our eco-system and the effects of such institutions behaviour and production on ordinary people and the environment. My example here is *Food, Inc.* (2008, Robert Kenner), a fundamental attack on the industrialised American food production. It is obvious that the authoritative format dominates in many of the eco-documentaries, since they are dealing with huge amounts of data and documentation, that involves investigative journalistic methods and use of expert witnesses. Many such documentaries combine scientific lecture formats, and investigative journalistic formats with underlying narrative structures and a stunning and chocking visual documentation, often speaking to our deepest emotions.

However, there are amble examples of other forms using more dramatic and advanced reflexive-symbolic formats. I am going to deal with two other types here: *The dramatized ecological documentary* with *The Age of Stupid* (2009, Franny Armstrong) as my main example. Here you find a mixture of rhetorical structures with strong subjectivity and observational elements, and the whole construction of the narrative is based on a science fiction set-up. A curator of The Global Archive (played by Pete Postlethwaite) is looking back from a future in 2055 on a dead civilization and is trying to come to terms with how the catastrophe could happen. Here a documented factual reality meets a hypothetical reality.

The last type of eco-documentary is the reflexive, poetic documentary in which climate issues are dealt with in a much more performative and reflexive way, and where the visual side of the narrative plays a strong role. I will deal with *Michael Glawogger's Megacities* (1998), which basically consists of twelve episodes shot in the slum areas of Mumbai, Mexico City, New York and Moscow. The subtitle of the film is "Twelve Stories of how to Survive", and it investigates the life among the poorest people in big cities around the world, the proletariat suffering from global

inequality and the severe consequences of the global industrialisation and undermining of the quality of life. They are the first to be hit by our global eco-crisis.

The power of arguments and strong images: the authoritative eco-documentary

An Inconvenient Truth (2006) won an Oscar, and there is no doubt it was one of the first eco-documentaries to really reach a global public sphere, not least through Al Gore. It is a lecture by a global political icon, combining spoken words to an audience on and off screen with visual and narrative elements. The film presents massive scientific facts in the form of climate-data and climate-models, archive media clips, inventive visual sequences, cartoon illustrations and films etc. Like for all authoritative eco-documentaries, the rhetorical structure is important: the core of the film is based on social, political, and scientific arguments. It was a film made to convince and to activate politicians, corporate elites, scientists and ordinary people. However the personal ethos dimension was also important: the likeability and political credibility of Gore as public figure was central, and in the film, he also used his personal background and memories to create pathos and emotional reactions. The visual dimensions of the film underlined and combined facts, arguments and emotions: there are nature images and stunning earth pictures remining us of the qualities of life as we know it, eliciting feelings of memories of a past tranquillity, but also a feeling of our earth and form of life being threatened. Images of catastrophes meet with scientific images and models telling us the same, and more subjective, narrative and visual sequences showing us how it used to be or could be. Reason and emotions going hand in hand.



Leonardo DiCaprio en tant que narrateur du film *The 11th Hour*
Capture d'écran du film

It is in many ways the same rhetorical, narrative and visual structure we find in *The 11th Hour*, produced and narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio for Warner Independent Pictures. A political persona with global charisma is replaced by a Hollywood icon. Mankind's negative impact on earth is demonstrated by the film poster: a huge foot imprint on our globe. During the first two minutes of the film we are exposed to a rapid montage of eco-catastrophe images: pollution from industry, hunger, poverty, natural catastrophes, poles melting, war and terror, huge class differences, species disappearing etc., all underlined by dramatic, complex music. It is a strong emotional rollercoaster to start with. After that two expert statements sum up the message of the film: it is all about the balance between two complicated systems: human society and nature, it is all about finding a balance or our civilisation will die; our bio-sphere is sick, it is warning us that we are committing suicide. In the following sequences, DiCaprio on or off screen presents the film as a wake up call to all humanity to start moving in a new direction if we want to save our globe, the only home we have.

The film clearly follows a rhetorical structure where we - guided by experts, by graphs, images, data visual documentation of human life and nature - are urged to use all our creativity to find a solution in the 11th hour, before it is too late. We start in an overall perspective, we move on to climate change, then biodiversity, then corporate and political responsibility, then potential solutions and forms of new technology that may recreate our eco-system. There is also at the end of the film a clear intention of civic mobilization, of not just political action, but also voting through your consumer behaviour. DiCaprio specifically in his closing remarks speak to the new eco-movement as a powerful organisation behind the change that has to come. There is an optimistic appeal to technological creativity, to eco-design, to new ways of constructing cities, to sustainable design and to using nature as a model for production, instead of the damaging high cost energy use we now see.

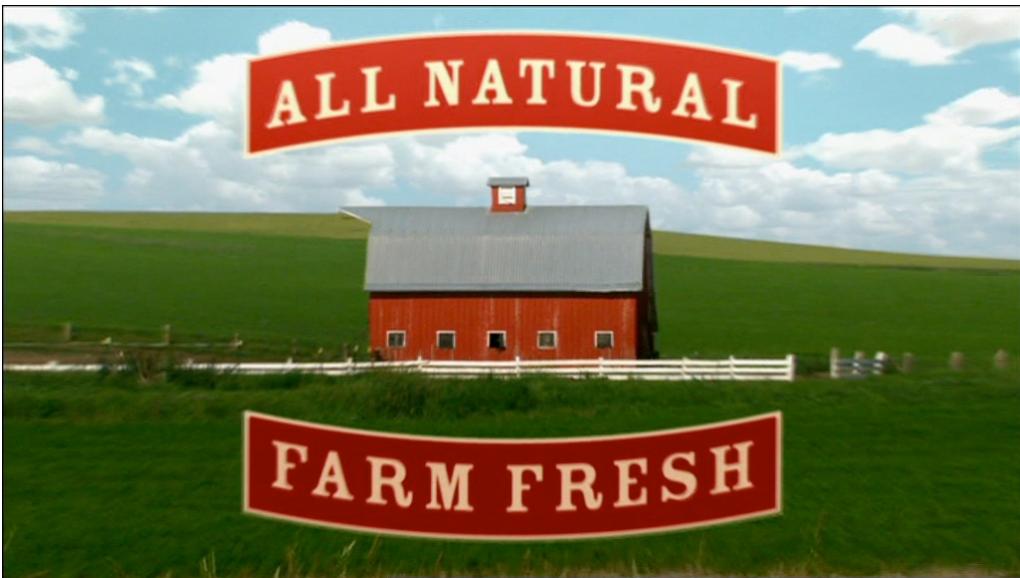
Besides using DiCaprio's star quality, a clear emotional identification dimension, the film actually uses scientific experts extensively, for instance Stephen Hawkins. The film also gives a very cognitive and mind-oriented explanation of man's relation to nature. It offers a definition of life itself in relation to a quote from Hawkins in the beginning of the film: life on earth, the nature and environment is not external to us, it is in our body and genes from the very beginning. We are a product of the whole evolution. Humans arrived late in evolution, and we should perhaps more modestly think of ourselves as a third kind of chimpanzee. Installing this metaphor of the relation between man and nature, is a good example of imaginative thinking: we are placed in a complete dependency of the nature which we are trying to dominate. Our creative mindpower is threatening to destroy our surroundings and thus ourselves. Our selfish belief in exponential growth is threatening the very ground we live on.

Very complex historical and scientific arguments are expressed through metaphoric language and visuals. The factual arguments and data presented are thus also inserted into more perceptual images that help us understand reality in a more concrete and embodied way. This embodied, emotional and visualised dimension also emerge from the visual sequences that accompany or follow rhetorical, factual statements. The graphics illustrating many of the arguments are often very strong visual statements in themselves, just as video-clips illustrating disasters, pollution, declining bio-diversity etc. are very emotional statements. The continuous use of graphic images of a changing earth points in the same direction, they visually clearly underline the grave consequences of data put forward and explained.

There is also another use of visuals and nature which we might call lyrical emotion breakers: all arguments just stop, music sets in, and what we see are just images of nature as it could be or dying nature. One example is (37 min. from start) is a moving camera passing forests, mountains, oceans, while we hear music and song. This visual sequence follows just after we have been told of similarities between what is happening to our earth now and the end of the Perm Era, where 95% of the species on earth disappeared. This emotion breaker is not just lyrics, it prepares the viewer for the following political sequences: this is serious, see what we could lose, and prepare for action. Continuous growth, corporate and individual greed is threatening our earth and very civilisation, and this is once more underlined by Hawkins statement - illustrated by globe images - of a very changed earth.

We are what we eat: Eco-documentaries and Corporate criticism

Images play a very strong role in Robert Kenner's film *Food, Inc.*, a film delivering a damaging critique of fast food culture and the general food industry in America. The opening sequences says it all through a form a deconstruction of the images that sell American food in chains like Wall Mart. While farming and food production has become big industry, controlled by a few dominating corporations, the image on food boxes and wall posters show us the traditional farm and food culture: red house and wooden barns, green and yellow pastures, and animals roaming free in gorgeous landscapes. It is the romantic image of the natural, home like countryside and all-natural processes. But as the narrator of the film says: If you follow the food chain, from the romantic image presented to the consumer, you find a completely different reality. It is an industrialised reality, in which everything is made with industrial brutality and speed, where animals are fed to grow fast very quick, and where artificial, chemical methods add to the ecological disaster.



From the opening shots of *Food, Inc.* - the romantic myth
of how American food is made.

Screenshot from film

The structure of Kenner's film is very clear, and in fact the structure in itself explains the rhetorical construction of the film. There are - besides the opening sequence - 8 parts, all presented with a title: 1. Fast food culture, 2. A cornucopia of taste, 3. Unintended consequences, 4. The dollar menu, 5. In the grass, 6. Hidden costs, 7. Frozen seed to supermarket, and 8. Shocks to the system. What the rhetorical structure reveals is, that Kenner starts with the historical development of fast food, the concentration of the whole food industry to a few very big companies, and the fact that farmers and consumers become slaves to a system, nobody seems to be able to control or change. In part 2, 3 and 4 he then digs into the consequences today of this historical development. He first demonstrates that cornucopia is far away, in fact all products are made the same way by the same producers. Furthermore the quality of food is so low it becomes dangerous for consumers. E-coli bacteria, salmonella and anti-biotics resistance are haunting the production and killing consumers. Furthermore the very low cost of fast food compared to more healthy food, makes it almost impossible for low paid consumers to afford other food.

In the last part of the film (part 5-8) the agenda is dramatically changed, now it is about going deep into the background of this whole fast food system and at the same time presenting alternatives and opposition. This is done by first taking us to an ecologically, natural driven farm in Virginia, a farm that actually looks like the farm on the food packages. From here we go back into the industrial food industry, into the hidden costs, the political dimensions of this (the patenting of gene-manipulated crops, among other things), and finally into potential ways of changing the system. The last parts directly imply that it is time to change the system by political means, by law-suits and by public protest. The alternative to mass industrialized artificial food production, to concentration on a few gigantic

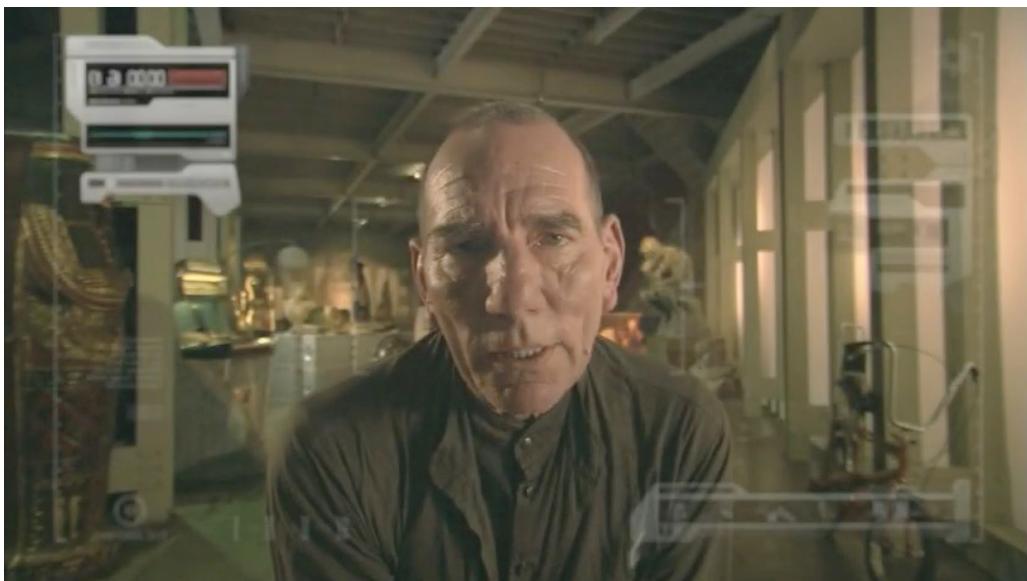
and completely dominating corporations, is very clearly demonstrated in part five, "In the grass", where we visit a farm completely based on ecological principles, one of several farms in Shenandoah Valley, Virginia. Here animals live freely, and they eat their natural food, in fact the images of the farm look like the fake romantic farm pictures at the beginning of the film - only this is living reality.

The farmer has had to fight hard for his independence, both corporate powers and the local government has tried to shut him down. His statement on industrialized food in many ways express the voice and message of [Kenner's](#) film : "A culture that regards a pig as a soulless meat structure to be manipulated by what ever creative human design they can impose on that animal will probably regard other cultures with the same kind of contempt, lack of respect, and controlling mentality." As if this sentence and the experience of animals roaming free is not enough, the film jumps directly to Smithfield Hog Processing Plant in Tar Heel, North Carolina. It is the world's largest pig slaughter-house, a huge and scaring machine that 'processes' 3200 pigs a day, and where the workers there are carefully selected among the poorest Mexicans, illegal workers driven to the farm in big groups and living under terrible conditions. Humans are treated only slightly better than pigs, and the corporation behind the plant even control how many the policy can arrest as illegal immigrants. The state and big corporations work hand in hand, just as lobbyist from every corner of the food industry make sure everything remains as it should to protect corporate interests.

It is pretty obvious that [Kenner's](#) eco-documentary demonstrates the rhetorical and factual power of documentary, the power of presenting a coherent and very clear ecological message. It is just as clear that the film also demonstrates the way in which narrative and visual structures enhance and deepen the rational arguments. It is done through the confrontation of images from the corporate realities under criticism, and those ideological forms of imagination connected with them. It acts as a form of visual documentation and deconstruction at the same time. The actual, visual reality of the industrialised food industry is simply completely out of tune with the images used to sell and brand it. It is also visually demonstrated by contrasting ecological farming and food processing and industrialised mass production. It is finally also done through case-stories that run through the film. Most importantly the case of a 12-year-old boy who dies from salmonella infection in less than a week, and whose mother embark on a year-long and costly law suit against the big corporation responsible. It is the individual against the system narrative, which appears already in part three and is still not quite finished at the end of the film. Arguments, factual documentation and experts are very important in this film, but so are the visual and narrative sides and the elements of emotion and identification, which arise from that.

Dramatizing the ecological disaster: *The Age of Stupid*

Franny Armstrong's documentary *The Age of Stupid*, is just as fundamental in its criticism of all the factors that have created our current climate crisis, but it uses another form than the films we have dealt with so far. The authoritative voice and the rhetorical structure are less dominating, and instead the film creates a hypothetical future narrative in 2055, from which it looks back, and it bases its documentation very much on a series of observational narratives with ordinary people - stories from the past. The opening online screen statement of the film reads: "The future climate events portrayed in this film are based on mainstream scientific projections. Everything from the present day and the past is real news and documentary footage." The whole film is thus a combination of a constructed reality, a scary fiction from 2055, and real images and footage from around 2008-09, before the catastrophes, that ended the world as we know it. As dramatized documentary the film projects the consequences of our present day reality into distant future, only to make us act to prevent the projected reality to become reality. All that we see is fragments of a past reality shown to us by the last living person on earth, this curator of the Global Archive. He has access to all forms of reality saved electronically: films of ordinary people's lives, news broadcasts, scientific data, scientific observations etc.



The curator (Pete Postlethwaite) in his isolated Global Archive holding all the stories and information of the destroyed human civilisation on earth.
Screenshot from film.

Despite the narrative construction, elements from the more traditional, authoritative form of eco-documentaries are still there: the fictional character of the curator is the master voice of the film and the narrator, who selects what to see for the viewers. He is the Olympic eye and mind of the film guiding us through historical clips from the past, or trying to document what happened. But there are also very strong images, images of global disaster, digitally constructed images of

the birth of civilisation and earth, from Big Bang to present days. The opening of the film is in itself a visual tour de force: We go 13 billion years back in time to Big Bang, the very creation of the Universe, and through virtual reconstructions we pass through all the stages of that to the creation of earth and finally man, until we arrive in 2055, where London has been flooded, Las Vegas is a total desert, Sydney in flames, the Arab peninsula completely dead, and the Arctic areas melted. Those images are quite moving and scaring at the same time, and so are the final scenes of the film. Here the curator condenses all the history of mankind and sends it out into the universe, in the hope that some still existing civilisation will find it and learn from our mistakes. Then he turns his back to the viewers and disappear. The civilisation he is appealing to is of course also us the still living, who may change the situation.

Inserted into this catastrophic future scenario, this constructed frame of the film by the last human living, we also witness observational slices of life stories from around the world, supplementing or even contradicting the voices of official factuality: the news and science discourses. We hear voices from our global diversity, not just traditional Western voices: an Indian business man, a French glacier guide, an oil worker from a hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, two Iraqi Children, and a Nigerian woman. "We could have saved ourselves, if we had acted in time on the knowledge we actually had" is a motto often repeated by the curator. The stories we hear from ordinary people often underline this, but so does the clips from experts on many different topics: oil vs. alternative energy sources, private vs. public transport, war, poverty and class differences, the role of ideologies and religion etc. So despite the film's dramatized and constructed form, there are plenty of authoritative arguments, statements and documentation. There is a very deep historical perspective, a wide global context. The curator is the authoritative voice of the film, the one that selects what we see, and he also has an opinion and a lesson he wants to share. He speaks in the film about what he calls the change in our idea and development: it used to be an idea in which progress and development should leave the world a better place for the next generation, but our generation has broken this basic rule of progress.

As a dramatized documentary *The Age of Stupid* is structurally quite complex, not just because the authoritative centre of the film is hypothetical/fictional, but because it uses a much stronger variety of visual and narrative formats that the films we have dealt with so far. The observational stories in the film are just as central as those belonging to the hypothetical frame, they carry a lot of the reality-narratives where concrete, actual individuals appear in their own life. Their stories point in different directions. The Indian entrepreneur, Jeh Wadia, is in the process of starting a low-cost Indian airline, allegedly so that the poor can also fly. However, his story also becomes a story of a growth philosophy, which has negative consequences for our climate. The French mountaineer and guide, Fernand Pareau (age 82), is on the other hand a witness to the enormous climate changes affecting the glaciers in the French Alps. We also have witnesses in New Orleans giving us

first-hand information on and images from hurricane Katrina; an African women who tried to start schools and health clinics, fighting with Shell Oil that has polluted the area; a family in Jordan fleeing from Iraq after the father has died; an English family in Wales trying to live ecological. Observational, human stories make us get much closer to real people, they are opening a path of identification and a more emotional understanding of reality.

The last dimension adding to the complexity of the film and its appeal to rational understanding, experiences through human stories and deeper emotional layers is the very creative use of images. The opening Big Bang sequences, the constructed images of a world gone under, and the Global Archive site in itself are central elements in a visual narrative running through the film. Another aspect of this is a recurrent use of real images combined with animation, something we see throughout the film, especially in short historical narratives or explanations. It is used for instance in the history of oil and what is led to; it is used in sequences on the history of war and colonialism; and it is used in a longer sequence explaining ideologies through time and the development of capitalism, consumption of growth. Use of animation is on the one hand an element in a rhetoric of pedagogics, but it is also a way of creating a more visual form of narrative, which creates a special attention in viewers.

The Age of Stupid is not just a generic experiment among the many documentaries dealing with the ecological challenge, is was also an experiment in production and distribution. To secure the filmmaker's independence, the film was crowdfunded by more than 1000 people, and many volunteers working for low wages and for free to make the film and bring it out to a global audience. The film's world premiere from Leicester Square was secured by solar power, and following that Indie Screenings coordinated more than 450 UK screenings. At that time the film also started a political action (Not so Stupid Action) in collaboration with many NGO's and in September 2009, the team launched 10:10 from Tate Modern, urging all institutions and people to cut the CO₂ emission in 2010 wit 10%. Finally the film had a global premiere (September 21/22, 2009) from New York, translated into 31 languages and reaching more than one million people in 63 countries. So it is not just an experimental film in itself, also the way it was financed, made and distributed, the kind of filmic and political actions it was combined with, points in new directions for the eco-documentary.

Civilisation on speed: reflexive and symbolic images of global cities and inequality

"If the 20th century saw the city as a utopian space – a dream place where everything was possible – the megacities of the 21th century may well turn out to be our nightmare or nemesis." Those words come from the makers of the Danish Series of films called *Cities on Speed* (1-4, 2009). Big cities indeed often carry many of the problems connected with our ecological challenge: strong global migration

trends, huge problems of infrastructure, environment, energy, slums, inequalities. Stories dealing with big cities can illustrate global problems in general.

Austrian director [Michael Glawogger](#) is a very prolific documentary filmmaker, who has made several films about life in big cities. In [*Workingman's Death*](#) (2005), [Glawogger](#) shows us that hard physical work still exists, but is invisible due to being outsourced to developing countries or to low-wage immigrant workers in our own backyards. [Glawogger's](#) documentary shows the cruel realities of manual labour all over the world, and by doing so that he shows the backside of capitalist growth and the global inequality it creates. He addresses problems of migration, the environment and work in some of the biggest cities in the world, where people are moving to seek a better future. The two other films, [*Megacities*](#) (1998) and [*Whore's Glory*](#) (2011), are not about one particular national context, but about life in a transnational era, where work, the economy, politics and everyday life in one part of the world is directly linked to and dependent on conditions in other parts of the world. [*Whore's Glory*](#) tells the global story of the most widespread, degraded and hopeless 'work' for women – prostitution – and is shot in Bangladesh, Thailand and Mexico.



The visual beauty of a gloomy world. Russian female worker
in the Moscow episode of [Glawogger's *Megacities*](#).
Screenshot from film.

[*Megacities*](#) tells a global story in twelve episodes shot in the slum areas of Mumbai, Mexico City, New York and Moscow. It is a film about the global proletariat and their fight to survive and rise above the hardest conditions

imaginable. [Glawogger](#) himself has called it a film about how to survive in a global reality, but he has also pointed to the fact that even though the film shows people living a terrible life in sometimes very gloomy parts of the global reality, it is also a film that wants to change our attitude and image of 'the rest of the world.' As [Glawogger](#) himself states, behind the "mostly bad news, or from our colonial tourist perspective, we do not see the reality, the real people living here, and we do not see them having some of the same fights with or dreams of reality as we all have" ([Glawogger](#), in press release of film, DVD-cover, my translation). Appropriately, the subtitle of the film is 'Twelve Stories about Surviving.'

The structure and visual form of the film is lively, almost chaotic and far from just gloomy realism. The Mumbai sequences for instance take us through neighbourhoods, city squares and neighbourhoods, and we experience different activities, music performances, family life, street scenes, train rides full of people and finally focus on a man making a living by showing films on a very primitive hand-cranked film projector. In most parts of the Western world, people live in an advanced digital media culture; here we are confronted with almost premodern technologies and forms of work, for instance, the street shopkeepers selling their few items from small, very primitive stalls. Work is done manually with ancient tools and machines. The images from Mexico City are just as chaotic and bustling with forms of life and work that are quite different from that found in modern, Western societies and big cities.

The sheer physicality of work, the dirt and lack of safety and control of working conditions is striking in the film's portrait of global realities. This is also the case with the Moscow sequences that confront people living under normal circumstances, waiting at the train station and those living on the street. Work is not the only theme here, although it is a central one and is represented by different forms of work for men and women. The film deals with work in a broader context of everyday life circumstances and there is a poetic dimension in the film's use of visual and aural forms. Many sequences in the film deal with dreams and hopes, just as other sequences from other megacities actually focus on aspects of everyday life connected to love, happiness and joy. Harsh realities in the world's megacities meet with voices and images of human hope and joy.

The form used in the different stories vary. In the Moscow sequence called 'The Fairytale', the focus is on the characters' dreams of a better life, illustrated by a voice over reading of a story while workers are working at an assembly line, by the lyrical, classical music contrasting heavy industrial work, or family scenes with television images, that indicate another kind of life, a world of stories, dreams and hopes. What [Glawogger](#) accomplishes by contrasting the concrete work situations with a poetic, symbolic dimension is a critique of the kind of monotonous industrial work these people in Moscow do, pointing to their dreams of a better work and life, perhaps even another and better society. [Glawogger](#) is a master in making contrasting layers in his film. Another example of this layering is the hectic New

York sequence called 'The Hustler' about people begging or trying to sell something on the street. The sequences focus on Black-Americans making hustling into a rap tune and dance performance. A naturalistic representation is combined with a creative poetic strategy of expression. Another example, in one of the Moscow sequences dealing with alcoholic men, **Glawogger** has women literally singing out their disappointment with men while we see the men being taken to prison or medical treatment.

Seen as an eco-documentary, **Glawogger's** film is not just thematically rather special, it also combines a rather observational form of global big city life with dimensions pointing towards hidden hopes and dreams in the middle of a life at the absolute bottom of society. The film thus takes on a rather symbolic-reflexive form, showing imagined realities and hidden dreams. Although the film in many ways use a basic observational form, letting us experience different forms of degraded global realities, it also uses forms of reconstruction and dramatization. This is for instance the case in some of the New York sequences getting us very close to the life of prostitutes and hustlers. **Glawogger's** films are not just aesthetically a special form of eco-documentaries, they also have a special thematic perspective. It shows us the global backside and human costs of western capitalism, the misuse of human work, the pollution of the environment far away and out of sight of western consumers. It is a drama of a global human exploitation and pollution, of the huge gap between those enjoying consumerism and those paying the price for securing it for us.

Conclusion

Documentary genres in general and thus also eco-documentaries reflect the fact that humans are genetically, biologically and socially story-telling animals. Narrative structures are a fundamental way of experiencing, exploring and thinking about reality. Stories come to us with an invitation to both cognitive and emotional responses and activities and those two dimensions are linked intimately in both real life, fiction and documentary forms. Non-fiction genres have different variations of rhetorical and narrative structures and they follow patterns of social and psychological involvement that are also used in real life experience and interaction. Emotions cannot be separated from reason and rationality, although emotions can of course have a negative impact on communication and reasoning. Emotional layers in documentaries appear through narrative structures, through character identification, through visual and auditive effects, but they are also directly connected to content and themes with links to real life, to our decisions to act directly or indirectly when confronted with human and social problems.

The eco-documentaries analysed above show that all of the four basic modes of documentary in various ways combine a rhetoric of facts and documented reality, combined with narrative and visual strategies that add emotion and identification to the viewer experience. A part of documentary reasoning is also letting us see

and feel reality and the problems addressed from different angles. Seeing is not just believing, it is also understanding better. Visual proof, observational sequences from real life, or symbolic dimensions of reality are not necessarily better than expert-statements, graphs, curves, diagrams etc. They just entail a different experience of the problem addressed, and combined in one or experienced through several different films about our global ecological challenge, they make just make our understand of the problem better and deeper.

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