

## PLANET IN FOCUS

Environmental Film Festivals

*Kay Armatage*

### Case Study: Planet in Focus

On opening night, 13 October 2010, Planet in Focus (Toronto) kicked off its eleventh environmental film and video festival with an unprecedented splash.<sup>1</sup> The opening film, *In the Wake of the Flood* (2010) was accompanied by its director, documentary stalwart Ron Mann, as well as its subject, Margaret Atwood – a Canadian literary star of international magnitude. Atwood and her husband Graeme Gibson, known for their long dedication to the environment and particularly the protection of birds, were there in person to receive the festival's 2010 Eco Hero award. After tumultuous applause for the film, The Echo Choir performed songs from the original film score, bringing one hundred women's voices to the stage. It was a rapturous occasion, with a sold-out audience alongside representatives of the event sponsors, Random House Publishers and Lush Cosmetics.

Random House supported their bestselling author, Margaret Atwood, on her eco-friendly book tour promoting her futuristic environmentalist allegory *The Year of the Flood*. Criss-crossing the U.K., North America and Europe, Atwood not only travelled by ocean liner and train to reduce the tour's carbon footprint, but she also worked with local community groups on musical theatre productions based on the novel's ecological hymnary – songs that praise the new-millennial patron saints, including philosopher Henry David Thoreau, environmentalist Rachel Carson and naturalist Euell Gibbons.<sup>2</sup> In each location, the grassroots approach involved inspirational figures as narrators, accompanists and choirs, theatre volunteers on costumes and props – all local – and the composer and conductor who travelled with Atwood. Her conception of the live version of the book was to go beyond identifying environmental and social ills such as climate change, pollution, economic inequity and racism. Rather, Atwood sought to inspire her audience into awareness and civic action.

The other sponsor was Lush Cosmetics, a Canadian retail chain of products made from organic vegetarian ingredients with little or no preservatives or packaging and no animal testing, which – like The Body Shop – claims to use its buying power to effect positive change in the world.<sup>3</sup> In addition to partnering with regional and national groups to lobby for new green regulations, Lush supports hundreds of environmental groups through its direct action ethical campaigns. Shortly after the gala screening, Lush donated CAD \$10,000 to one of Margaret Atwood's favourite bird sanctuaries. Balzac's Coffee ('Artisanal, Sustainable, Local and Natural') joined in by featuring displays of their shade-grown coffee (friendlier to birds) and partnered with Atwood to produce a Smithsonian Institute certified 'Bird Friendly' blend, pledging CAD \$1.00 from every pound sold to be donated to the Pelee Island Bird Observatory.<sup>4</sup>

As the Planet in Focus festival got rolling, participants repaired to a nearby martini bar to celebrate their new standing. No longer an event attended only by the committed few, Planet in Focus (PIF) had arrived. With funding from a variety of governments and foundations, sponsorships from corporations and foreign consulates and support from dozens of community partners, the festival is thriving.

In the ensuing five days of the festival, one hundred films screened in four venues on a wide range of topics. As Artistic Director Kathleen Mullen put it, 'environmental issues can mean just about anything: genetically modified food, climate change, human rights, social issues, indigenous rights, innovation, farming, health, wildlife and so much more' (Mullen 2010: 3). Festival events included panel discussions on topics such as 'Reaching the Unconverted' and 'The Green Pitch', a photography exhibition, school programmes, children's day, spotlights on biodiversity, and post-screening discussions with filmmakers. A one-day festival sidebar, The Green Market, was established in 2007 with a mandate to advance exposure and marketing opportunities for environmental films and videos. The full-time festival staff of three (augmented at the time of the festival by many volunteers) is justifiably pleased with their success.<sup>5</sup>

Ten years into their operation, PIF is currently undergoing major changes, moving away from a uni-dimensional festival organisation to becoming a year-round environmental arts corporation.<sup>6</sup> As with other topical, politically committed festivals, the challenge is to reach beyond the core audience of self-described environmentalists. To this end, the Mixed Greens programme, a monthly screening series that supports the festival through audience expansion strategies, is entering its third year. PIF tours the 'best of the fest' to museums and schools in other

parts of Canada and coaches teachers and students in high schools on how to produce their own mini-festivals, augmenting the educational initiative with a two-week summer day camp teaching young people how to make films sustainably (with results exhibited in the festival).

In fact, most sizable festivals carry on auxiliary programming throughout the year, keeping their brand in the public eye while simultaneously accessing a variety of funding opportunities. PIF also runs a charitable foundation that distributes donations from corporations and individuals to environmental causes. Sarah Margolius, PIF Executive Director between 2010 and 2012, suggests that the auxiliary programming supports the annual festival, rather than the other way around.<sup>7</sup>

Remarkably for a small festival, PIF also maintains an archive of all film submissions, whether selected for screening or not over the past ten years, and routinely lends out copies for preview or research to other aspiring groups, exhibitors and newly founded festivals in other locations. The archive is remarkable because what Dina Iordanova (2012) calls 'social concern' festivals rarely have either continuing staff or space, as often such festivals are run by volunteers working from home or temporary offices, with directors changing regularly. Thus, valuable documents – catalogues and other historically useful records, in addition to the visual material – tend to disappear. PIF, in contrast, is privileged to work in a municipally subsidised heritage complex, with sufficient extra space to archive the collection of more than four thousand titles, the largest resource of its kind in North America.

The most far-reaching of the PIF programmes is Green Screen, which works with industry stakeholders to 'establish standards, guidelines and resources that will keep the industry at a competitive advantage by establishing the most advanced green protocols in the creative industries'.<sup>8</sup> Margolius (2011) explains that their mission is not just to showcase films but also to attend to environmental production practices.<sup>9</sup> To reduce the footprint of film and television production, the pan-industry Green Screen initiative involves collaboration among trade associations, unions and guilds, production and postproduction facilities, suppliers, distributors, festivals, service providers, industry associations and government.

The Green Screen Toronto Environmental Impact Calculator, developed by PIF, enables comparison to a 'business as usual' industry baseline to determine environmental savings, as well as to identify the production's overall environmental footprint. In this initiative, PIF aligns itself with other similar projects, such as the online Code of Best Practices for Sustainable Filmmaking developed by the Center for Social Media, American University, Washington, D.C. This code

supplies online ‘carbon trackers’ that assist in calculating the amount of emissions a production is likely to create. After the initial calculation, steps are taken to reduce the footprint to a minimum at every production level – fuel for transport, aviation and generator use, as well as paper consumption, electricity use, film stock and related items – and the tracker can also assess the actual reduction of energy and resources used during the production’s lifecycle (Center for Social Media 2009). There are many different offsetters available, with different online calculators, a wide variety of elements addressed and slightly different formats for inputting data. The data calculation instrument that PIF is developing to measure impact differs from many in its calculation of waste as well as emissions, and has already been in successful use with local feature film and television productions. In its fourth year, the programme is well on its way to becoming a sustainable social enterprise.

## Environmental Film Festivals in Long View

Planet in Focus is just one of many environmental film festivals around the world, most of which have been established since the 1980s, the decade of the florescence of film festivals on a global scale (Stringer 2001: 135). Although small new festivals in multiple centres populate the institutional environment, there are some long-established exceptions. Ekofilm – International Film Festival on the Environment and Natural and Cultural Heritage (Czech Republic) is the oldest European film festival on the environment. Founded in 1974 as a contribution to the World Environmental Day declared by the United Nations, it runs annually over a week-long period, and as such is not only the oldest but also one of the largest specialised festivals in the world, exhibiting upwards of two hundred titles, including feature films, television-length documentaries and shorts. Such a wide selection is, perforce, eclectic (a characteristic of most of the festivals, no matter how many films are exhibited). In 2010, Ekofilm included films on hot peppers, the gardens of Delhi, and the great grey shrike, advocacy/educational documentaries and popular titles such as *The Fabulous Story of Poop – In the Name of the Throne* (2008).<sup>10</sup>

The Grenoble International Nature and Environmental Film Festival, founded in 1976 and thus one of the oldest in Europe, was the first film festival in France dedicated to wildlife and environmental themes. It was begun by FRAPNA (Federation Rhône-Alpes of Nature Conservation), itself established in 1971. Within a few years, the Grenoble festival was

flanked by the Festival International du Film d'Environnement and the Green Lifestyle Film Festival, both founded in 1983 and located on the Ile-de-France, and Rencontres Cinéma-Nature located in Dompierre-sur-Besbre, founded in 1989.<sup>11</sup>

Wildscreen Festival, founded in 1982 in Bristol, England – a centre for wildlife filmmaking – was another early entry. Running every other year, it has become one of the most important environmental festivals in the world, attracting hundreds of delegates who work in film, television and the global press, as well as those actively involved in working to conserve the environment.<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that there is often a blurring of boundaries between environmental film festivals, such as PIF, and wildlife film festivals, such as Wildscreen, as Mullen contended above. Wildlife films, especially of the sort honoured at Wildscreen, rarely espouse a political agenda regarding animal rights or conservation.

Wildscreen exhibits approximately one hundred films over a five-day run – an average title count for the larger festivals but at this juncture the scope of the Bristol event far exceeds most other environmental festivals. With Sir David Attenborough as principal spokesperson, it attracts major sponsorship from Animal Planet, BBC Earth, National Geographic and the World Wildlife Foundation, as well as industry leaders such as Panasonic. Festival sidebars include a substantial market for world sales, multiple workshops and master classes, myriad networking opportunities and demonstrations of the latest technology (3D in 2010, as well as underwater filming and digital manipulation). Wildscreen's Panda Awards in twenty-three categories, including sound, music, script, editing and cinematography as well as specific targeted awards (new media, newcomer, popular broadcast), are touted as the 'the "Oscars" of the wildlife TV and film industry'.<sup>13</sup> And like the Oscars, the Panda Awards tend to go to works from major producers, including Animal Planet, National Geographic Television, Disney, WNET (U.S.A.) and the BBC. This list of prizewinners may understandably raise sceptical eyebrows; dominant producers such as Disney, National Geographic and BBC Television are frequently critiqued from within ecocriticism and human-animal studies for their problematic environmental politics, as I will summarise a little later on.

From the early 1990s to the present day, hundreds of environmental film festivals have been established all over the globe. In the south, a prominent example is the Reel Earth film festival in Palmerston North, New Zealand. In its seventh iteration in 2011, the week-long festival offered prizes in categories such as Environmental Sustainability, Science Communication, best New Zealand film, best feature and best

'Ultra Short'. In 2011 the festival found a thematic concentration in films about mining, and continued its practice of offering filmmaking seminars and a 'sustainability expo' featuring a range of products and ideas. Its major sponsors are home-grown institutions (the city council and the local university) and MWH, a New Zealand engineering and environmental consultancy.<sup>14</sup>

Earth Vision–Tokyo Global Environmental Film Festival is typical of many festivals in major cities. Established in 1992 to coincide with the Tokyo Earth Summit, Earth Vision was the first international environmental film festival in Asia. Like the majority of speciality festivals, it runs over a weekend and features many local films. Dozens of such small festivals are known from Italy to Iceland, from Brazil to Bali – non-profit events organised by local governments, environmental groups, schools and other community organisations. Paralleling PIF's touring and schools project, Earth Vision boasts a similar practice, lending out a programme of the top films, including award winners from previous Earth Vision festivals, for non-profit screening/exhibiting events at various locations.<sup>15</sup> Kevin McMahon (2011), director of multiple award-winning *Waterlife* (2009), has said that his film has been exhibited on an ongoing weekly basis in environmental film festivals in both large and small centres around the globe.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of the twentieth century, environmental film festivals comprised a movement of global reach. In acknowledgement of such growth, Ecomove International was launched in 2002 by five European international film festivals and Earth Vision Tokyo as a network of such festivals across the world. Ecomove International organises and supports environmental media events on a world scale and, every second year, stages a festival where the world's best environmental films are shown and awarded. The member festivals, many from the eastern European block, are among the premier institutions in Europe.<sup>17</sup> With outreach partners in South America, South Asia and Asia, Ecomove has offered summer university courses on the communication of sustainability (from polar bears to new images that might trigger changes in consumer behaviour or in the structure of our energy supply) and conferences on media, climate and energy. In addition, Ecomove is an active producer of media packages on topics such as climate change and water as well as offering a variety of support services to European organisations involved in environmental projects.

In North America, there are several significant festivals as well as many smaller ones – 'pinpoints on a vast, sprawling map of trans-cultural film exhibition and consumption' (Stringer 2001: 134). Mark

Haslam laid out the contours of such social concern festivals: in contrast to the major festivals, which rely heavily on stars to draw in audiences, and in turn, revenue, and corporate sponsors, minoritarian festivals rely primarily on funding from 'arts councils and other government sources' as well as volunteer labour, 'which often exceeds the value of all other contributions' (Haslam 2004: 49–50). Of the small festivals in small centres, the American Conservation Film Festival (ACFF) could be considered typical. Located in Shepherdstown, West Virginia (population 5,951 and with 'a vibrant arts community'), its mailing address is a Post Office box, indicating that it has no permanent office space and that its organisers are volunteers who probably change frequently. The website announces that it was started by a 'group of volunteers who shared both a devotion to film arts and a commitment to sound environmental science'.<sup>18</sup> Over four days, it showcases fifty films in government and university venues. Well-known productions that have travelled the circuit of major festivals and have even opened commercially in major centres are exhibited alongside local productions. *The Cove* (2009), for example, was shown in Shepherdstown in November 2010, after having played in mainstream and documentary festivals in 2009 (Sundance, Hot Docs, Seattle, Sydney, Amsterdam, and many others) and having won the Academy Award for best documentary in February 2010. Others, such as *Toxic Soup* (2010), were doing the rounds of second and third tier U.S. festivals (Atlanta, New Jersey, Twin Cities, Louisville).

*Waterlife*, a wonderful film that documents the industrial pollution of the Great Lakes and the threat to North America's drinking water, has played at countless such smaller festivals, in addition to major international festivals and large documentary and environmental film events. In recounting the dedication of both organisers and audiences at these small festivals, McMahon (2011) augments Lewis Lapham's contention that environmentalism amounts to a new secular religion with his observation that environmental film festivals bring together the new congregation (Lapham 2010). Even if the film is exhibited on a temporary screen from a DVD in a community centre, with the audience sitting in uncomfortable folding chairs, McMahon says, they stay there not only for one hundred or so minutes of the screening, but remain engaged for up to two hours of discussion afterwards. For filmmakers, he says, these discussions are extremely rewarding, and many of the participants remain engaged long after the screening. He gestured towards a box on his office shelf that contained clippings, poems, information and artefacts – materials received from audience members for future environmentalist projects.<sup>19</sup>

## Interested Communities

McMahon (2011) suggests that the hundreds of small festivals are filling a gap that people perceive, not unjustifiably, in mainstream media. Although much of the insight available in the films shown at these festivals can be gleaned by assiduous information gathering through newspapers and the Internet, the environment is not a priority on television – the source of most people’s information, especially in North America. On the other hand, in Australia, the debate around climate change and green issues is very present in the media. Previous Australian politicians and governments have been toppled by advocating green platforms, but former Prime Minister Julia Gillard has come out firmly on the side of science, and a carbon pricing scheme, commonly referred to as a carbon tax, was introduced by the Gillard Government on 1 July 2012. It requires businesses emitting over 25,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions annually to purchase emissions permits. The scheme directly affects approximately 300 ‘liable entities’ representing the highest emitters in Australia.

Yet in the west, as opposed to other minoritarian causes such as gay issues, which have increasingly become part of the mainstream, the environment has diminished in priority even with public broadcasters, who increasingly cite ‘green fatigue’ as a deterrent to environmentalist programming. Although *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) sparked a surge of interest, theatrical revenue for such documentaries dropped off rapidly, leaving television as a main outlet for environmental content. And as Kevin McMahon points out, because automobile companies largely underwrite television the polar bears, sharks and big cats – ‘charismatic mega-fauna’ – tend to dominate western broadcast media of this type.

Haslam emphasises funding or sponsorship as another nodal site of ideology, as most of these festivals have charitable status thereby allowing private as well as corporate donations to be written off as tax deductions. Focusing on funding, Haslam points to the ways in which different festivals interpolate donors, as diverse citizens or merely as consumers, as well as to curatorial aspects: corporate sponsorship generally leads to exhibition of ‘big’ films, allowing less space for local productions or community interests. Thus he urges programmers, curators and festivals, ‘to play a more deliberate role in presenting critical images and ideas in counterpoint to the increasingly dominant ideologies of the mainstream media juggernauts’ (Haslam 2004: 49).

In support of such a sense of interested community, ACFF makes a point of showcasing local (Appalachian) and independent films.<sup>20</sup> In this practice ACFF reinforces Haslam’s second major edict for social



concern festivals, 'fill the gap, don't reproduce the pap'. On one level this has curatorial implications:

[I]t means giving preference to works that will not have a commercial theatrical release or be broadcast in the same geographical region. But deeper than that, it means scanning the contemporary and historical media environment for the voices that have been excluded, the genres that have been marginalised, the topics that have been suppressed, the filmmakers whose contributions have been undervalued, the audiences that have been ignored or underserved. This should be the ground from which our curatorial vision and *raison d'être* emerge. (Ibid.: 52)

These values are essential to understanding Haslam's larger concept of niche film festival culture. As he puts it, '[i]n order to resist potential contamination of one's aspirations, festivals and programmers should clearly articulate their programming and curatorial values' (ibid.: 50).

Resistance to contamination and its oscillating alternative positivist component fuel environmental film festivals, as well as many other nature or single-issue environmental festivals that show films only as one element of the event. Here, Benedict Anderson's (1991) concept of 'imagined communities' comes into play; the production of such communities is, indeed, one of the principal functions of festivals. As Stringer (2001: 134) argues, '[f]estivals function as a space of mediation, a cultural matrix within which the aims and activities of specific interest groups are negotiated'. McMahon puts this concept another way by inflecting Anderson's imagined community with a more active notion of an interested community. He suggests that the audience comes away with a sense that they possess an underground knowledge that is not otherwise widely available – like *samizdat*, he says – unfolding information that is perceived to be suppressed by the mainstream. Stringer also nods in this direction in his contention that film and festival scholars need to consider the exhibition site as 'a new kind of counter public sphere' (Stringer 2001: 136).

## **Aesthetics: Art and Advocacy**

Although Margolius eschews any hints of competition among environmental film festivals, claiming collaboration as the principal mode of connectedness among the global players, the emphasis on premiers in the catalogues of most festivals, and the claims of the large ones, such as Wildscreen ('the most influential and prestigious'), belie such a simplistic, although laudatory, view.<sup>21</sup> Environmental film festivals, like the major international festivals (Cannes, Berlin, Toronto, etc.), as Stringer

notes, constitute a coalition of the state, local government, corporate sponsors and intellectuals who are making an intervention into the festival scene by bidding for audiences and titles. The contradictions of such a position are obvious, as festivals must work in two directions at once. 'As local differences are being erased through globalisation, festivals need to be similar to one another, but as novelty is also at a premium, the local and particular also becomes very valuable' (Stringer 2001: 139).

Here we come to the crux of the aesthetic issues that such festivals juggle. On the one hand, as Haslam indicated, the emphasis in many green festivals on local issues and local productions, as well as on films unlikely to secure theatrical distribution or television broadcast, tends to prioritise content and advocacy over cinematic quality. This is not always the case, but it is possible to characterise the dilemma of the issue-specific and committed festival in this way. Films by local activists and young filmmakers are often the most passionate and even the most convincing, even if lacking in cinematic quality.

Indeed, for some audiences and critics, professional cinematic qualities – 'slickness' – may even cast the advocacy agenda into doubt. Formal or conceptual films with environmental agendas are also unlikely to play at environmental film festivals, as these films usually screen in forums specifically geared towards art rather than advocacy, such as galleries and cinematheques. Films by Rose Lowder and James Benning – two filmmakers featured in *Screening Nature* – are examples of films that are now being considered for their environmental content as well as their formal structure, although they have rarely – if ever – been showcased in eco-festivals. Exceptions include the award-winning films of the Greek Ecocinema International Film Festival, which have often been formally inventive: in 2006, for example, Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Our Daily Bread* (2005) won the festival's top prize.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, the influential Oberhausen International Short Film Festival 2011 featured a special programme, 'Shooting Animals: A Brief History of Animal Film'.<sup>23</sup> Oberhausen is a particularly interesting case: as a largely experimental festival, formal innovation usually trumps advocacy, yet this recent move suggests that environmentally engaged themes are gradually making their way into nonspecialised festivals as well.

One of the selections that got a lot of attention on the eco-festival circuit was the 2009 YouTube hit *Plastic Bag*, by Ramin Bahrani of *Man Push Cart* (2005) fame. Premiered at the prestigious Venice International Film Festival, *Plastic Bag* has been shown at renowned film festivals such as Telluride, as a result of its impeccable cinematic

credentials, before migrating to YouTube. *Plastic Bag* is the everlasting autobiography of a plastic bag; it is witty, cinematically accomplished, and narrated by festival darling Werner Herzog as the voice of the so-weary-of-immortality plastic bag.

While local and special topic films may address the 'interested communities', it is important for advocacy festivals to interpolate new audiences as well. Thus most green festivals show a wide variety of programming, precisely to reach beyond the ranks of self-described environmentalists.

Wildlife and nature films bring in the families. In these films we find vast differences in levels of cinematic sophistication. Substantial budgets, specialised production crews and advanced technologies have been hallmarks of the study of animals, insects, nature and the atomic world since the earliest days of cinema. *Microcosmos* (1996) was in a sense an endpoint for microcinematography, rather than something new; in 1908, scientific films made with advanced equipment revealed the Brownian movements of the molecular structure of matter (Landecker 2005: 903–37). Through the use of slow and accelerated motion, as well as underwater and infra-red cinematography, 3D, and now digital manipulation, 'nature' has been cinematically revealed in a wide range of subgenres – travelogues, documentaries, instructional programming and reality-based television, to name a few – and these films have been created by a heterogeneous group of filmmakers: hunters, animal rights activists, ethnologists, professional film crews, committed conservationists and commercial exploiters (Chris 2001: 431–32).

Wildlife films especially have become a new area of scholarship over the last decade. Many studies reveal extreme scepticism about the intentions or capabilities of such films to persuade audiences about the environmental dangers we presently face. On the contrary, for some scholars, the cinematic qualities (beautiful images, invisible editing, overarching narrative structure, compression of time, lighting of night shoots, and so on) are the very qualities that obviate this potential. This is certainly the case for Derek Bousé, who castigates nature films as riven by cinematic convention and artifice to the detriment of their value as scientific observations; he declares them docudramas rather than documentaries (Bousé 2000). Finis Dunaway ('Hunting with the Camera', 2000), Cynthia Chris (*Watching Wildlife*, 2006) and Barbara Crowther ('Viewing What Comes Naturally', 1997) alert readers to the presence of sexism and racism in nature films, while Allen Feldman (1998: 494–502) warns that films that purport to be scientific or ethnographic can be 'sheer propaganda, ethnographic realism in the service of the state'.

David Ingram concentrates on representations of environmental issues in Hollywood-style theatrical films. He reveals a substantial shift in representational practices, from the pre-1960s tendency to represent wild animals as malevolent to the dominant representation of the last fifty years, of animals as benevolent and endangered. Ingram points out, however, that these recent representations of wild animals and of conservationists are ambivalent at best and often reveal immense cultural contradictions. 'Hollywood environmentalist movies', he concludes, 'are ideological agglomerations that draw on and perpetuate a range of contradictory discourses concerning the relationship between human beings and the environment' (Ingram 2000: viii).

Such arguments may come as no surprise to people trained in cultural studies or late-twentieth-century film theory. Perhaps a more alarming critique comes from Greg Mitman, who demonstrates that the proliferation of animal images has not only failed to educate the public about conservationism, but instead has created a wide-spread fascination with a few charismatic species, such as the dolphin, increasing rather than counteracting their exploitation as performers, in military service, in sometimes dubious scientific experiments and by the pet trade (Mitman 1999). Louie Psihoyos's *The Cove* begins with this premise. Mitman's arguments could well lead to the conclusion that, as opposed to inducting new converts into the congregation, environmentalist agendas may be undermined by the exhibition of mainstream wildlife films. Ralph H. Lutts (2001: 634–35) offers a more acerbic view of the issue in his review of wildlife cinema scholarship: 'Films about wildlife tell about much more than just wildlife . . . Each is shaped, for example, by the capabilities of cinematic technology, the filmmakers' objectives and biases, the economics of the entertainment industry, prevailing concepts of nature, and the perceived tastes of viewers. In other words, they are socially constructed representations of nature.' The only positive comment he can offer is that they are 'useful sources for environmental historians'. As these scholars suggest, the art and advocacy dialectic is an ongoing conundrum for environmental film festivals.

## OMG: Politics and Effectivity

While for Lapham environmentalism is the new secular religion and for McMahon the environmental film festival audience is the new congregation, for Slavoj Žižek such 'greenthink' is analogous to soccer fans cheering at their television screens. Žižek could be describing Margaret Atwood's tour when he writes:

The typical form of fetishist disavowal apropos ecology goes like this: ‘I know very well (that we are all threatened), but I don’t really believe it (so I am not ready to do anything really important like changing my way of life).’ But there is also the opposite form of disavowal: ‘I know very well that I cannot really influence the process that can lead to my ruin (like a volcanic outburst), but it is nonetheless too traumatic for me to accept this, so I cannot resist the urge to do something, even if I know it is ultimately meaningless’ . . . What is really hard for us (at least in the West) to accept is that we are reduced to the role of a passive observer who sits and watches what our fate will be. To avoid this impotence, we engage in frantic, obsessive activities. We recycle old paper, we buy organic food, we install long-lasting light bulbs – whatever – just so we can be sure that we are doing something. We make our individual contribution like the soccer fan who supports his team in front of a TV screen at home, shouting and jumping from his seat, in the belief that this will somehow influence the game’s outcome. (Žižek 2010)

So, can these festivals actually effect change? *Plastic Bag* could not be more innovative, entertaining or informative, and in many parts of the world (for example, Ontario, some European countries, New Zealand, and some states in Australia) legislation is in place to limit the use of plastic bags. Obviously, films like *Plastic Bag* have not initiated such moves, and yet media representations of environmental issues are clearly one of the ways through which the environmental agenda can be conveyed to environmentalists and the non-converted alike. Ingram’s chapter on *An Inconvenient Truth* in this volume is an interesting discussion of the function of rhetoric in converting the yet-to-be converted. And yet, can the environmental film festival have an effect beyond convincing the ordinary consumer to ‘green up’ (in futile ways, as Žižek would have it)? Would Žižek be happy if environmental film festivals could move governments to regulate the plastics industry? Or even acknowledge the human impact on global warming? Could that happen?

Washington, D.C. Environmental Film Festival is the largest and the oldest of the U.S. environmental film festivals. Founded in 1993, the festival takes place over twelve days in March, exhibiting over 150 films (including many premieres) in fifty-six venues around the city. Most of them are free to the public. As one blogger put it, comparing the Washington festival to Sundance: ‘Not in freezing, old theatres in some overrun city in Utah, the Environmental Film Festival takes advantage of the great wealth of resources in the District of Columbia, including prime screening venues like The National Gallery of Art, American History Museum, seven different embassies, Georgetown University, and the National Museum of Natural History among many others’ (Prediger 2010).

The national embassies typically exhibit films from their own countries; for example, the Canadian Embassy hosted the screening of *Waterlife*, produced by the National Film Board of Canada. McMahon, who attended the screening, brought intelligence, rationality and career-earned sophistication to his analysis of the potential impact of such festivals on policy and regulation. He said that in the U.S. capital, the audience consisted of government bureaucrats, rather than politicians – one ‘could smell the difference’. He recounted a heated discussion in which he argued Canada’s position on proposed U.S. legislation concerning environmental control of the St. Lawrence Seaway: ‘While interested and engaged, nevertheless the bureaucrats ultimately could only educate themselves and spread the word; they are inevitably held back by the politicians and policy makers’.<sup>24</sup> As Prediger put it, the audience in Washington is composed of, ‘[e]co-movie buffs who had eschewed the beauty of the outdoors to watch the beauty of the outdoors indoors in the form of a wellspring of eco-conscious cinema’ (Prediger 2010).

Yet even in the face of reactionary governments – yes, even so-compromised Obama, and let’s not talk about Canada (the tar sands, asbestos, potable water for First Nations) – we must not despair. As the small ‘congregations’ in local sites nurture their own activist agendas, the Internet opens new possibilities. With *Plastic Bag* at more than 478,000 hits on YouTube the film rivals attendance of many mainstream productions, while the cutting-edge *Waterlife* interactive website now clocks at more than three-quarters of a million viewers.<sup>25</sup> As environmental film festivals increasingly hone their skills in social networking, YouTube, Vimeo, blogs, sophisticated websites and other new virtual tools, the potential reach of even a small local film event is global.

Oh Žižek, I know you do not agree.

## Notes

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- 1 A useful resource on environmental, and other, film festivals, is the Film Festival Research Network (FFRN) founded by Marijke de Valck and Skadi Loist. The website contains a bibliography of existing literature, and serves

- as a hub for researchers in the field. See <http://www.filmfestivalresearch.org>
- 2 For details of the green mandate of Atwood's tour, see <http://www.yearoffheflood.com/us/tour/greening-the-tour> (accessed 28 January 2011).
  - 3 The Body Shop was known for its activist global agenda and no animal testing. But in 2006, The Body Shop was bought by L'Oréal, which does test its other products on animals.
  - 4 See [www.balzacscoffee.com/](http://www.balzacscoffee.com/) (accessed 18 January 2011).
  - 5 Sarah Margolius, unpublished personal interview, 12 January 2011; hereafter, Margolius interview.
  - 6 For up-to-date information on Planet in Focus and the changes it has undergone since the time of writing, see the festival website, <http://planetinfocus.org>
  - 7 Margolius interview.
  - 8 <http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/initiative/> (accessed 18 January 2011).
  - 9 Margolius interview.
  - 10 <http://www.ekofestival.cz/404.php> (accessed 15 January 2013).
  - 11 See [www.iledefrance.fr/festival-film-environnement/](http://www.iledefrance.fr/festival-film-environnement/) (accessed 10 April 2013).
  - 12 <http://www.wildscreenfestival.org.uk> (accessed 18 January 2011).
  - 13 <http://www.wildscreenfestival.org/index.php?pageid=371&parentid=0> (accessed 21 April 2013).
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