

Book Review: The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century by John A. Duval

In The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century, John A. Duval offers a comprehensive survey of recent environmental documentary films, covering such topics as climate change, peak oil, food and water politics and animal extinction. This is an accessible introduction to the genre, with a passionate commitment to the environment that makes it a work of activism in itself, writes [Reina-Marie Loader](#).

***The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century.* John A. Duval. Bloomsbury Academic. 2017.**

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John Duval's book, *The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century*, presents the reader with a comprehensive catalogue of environmental films ranging from well-known documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) to lesser known activist films such as *Garbage Warrior* (2007). The selection of films included in the book's 320 pages is impressive, making it a valuable resource for any researcher or film enthusiast seeking an introduction to the environmental documentary genre. As such, the author succeeds in fulfilling his intentions, which are clearly set out in the introduction – namely, to survey 'many of the outstanding examples of recent environmental documentary films' and to prompt readers to 'take the next step and actually watch some of these informative and important films' (2).

The book is structured according to the overarching issues dominating environmental debates. These include topics such as climate change, peak oil, pollution and waste, food and water as well as animal extinction. The first chapter presents a basic introduction to documentary as a genre. Although remaining on the surface of documentary debates, some of the major concepts are highlighted. John Grierson's famous definition of documentary as the 'creative treatment of fact' is, for example, briefly highlighted in relation to the genre's 'privileged relationship to reality' (7-9).

This is followed by a summary of the decision-making processes of the documentary filmmaker. Although this section of the book at times reads as very basic material, it offers learners useful information as to what it takes to produce a documentary film. This is followed by a discussion of what it actually means when we talk about the environment. Here, Duval traces the historical development of environmental concerns. In this way the author illustrates that, contrary to popular belief, environmental awareness has always been part of the US social and political landscape. The environmental concerns of Thomas Malthus are mentioned, while the effects of the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression, the two World Wars as well as the increased reliance of the United States on fossil fuels and corporate interests all draw a clear historical outline of the issues within which environmental documentary has found its activist niche.

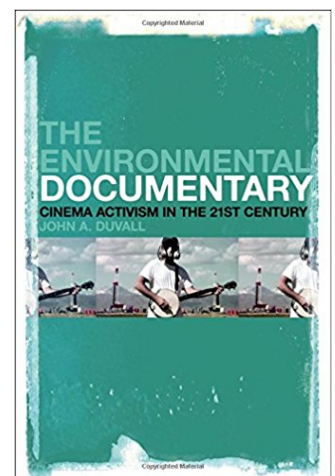




Image Credit: Still from documentary *Historias del Chapapote*, Stéphane M. Grueso, 2003 ([Stéphane M. Grueso CC BY SA 2.0](#))

Following on from this, the second chapter presents the reader with the development of so-called 'ecocritical perspectives', which seek to situate environmental films as a central tool for the environmentally conscious activist. 'Ecocinema' as a concept is appropriately highlighted at this point, thereby underscoring the multifaceted nature of the environmental filmmaker as researcher, film practitioner and environmental activist. In this regard, Duval aptly invokes the words of Paula Willoquet-Maricondi that ecocinema:

overtly strives to inspire personal and political action on the part of viewers, stimulating our thinking so as to bring about concrete changes in the choices we make, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies, locally and globally (26).

This chapter offers the reader a more detailed overview regarding the genre's relationship to scholarship – a dimension that becomes less apparent in subsequent chapters.

The third chapter focuses on the development of environmental documentary within the historical framework set out in Chapter One. Duval briefly traces the development of the genre prior to the turn of the century. Films such as *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), *The Living Desert* (1953) and *Animal Farm* (1981) receive special mention as canonical texts paving the way for the development of a recognised documentary genre.

The following chapters are all structured according to the various environmental concerns prevalent in the twenty-first century. Before discussing the specific films grouped within the scope of each chapter, Duval briefly introduces each relevant issue by contextualising it in the contemporary political climate. In this regard, his discussion on climate change is particularly engaging and strongly reflects the author's activist spirit. Here, one of the most influential environmental films of our time, *An Inconvenient Truth*, receives specific attention, with the discussion of Al Gore's documentary notably spanning seventeen pages (on average, the discussions of other films range from two to six pages).

Duval's approach is intended to give an outline regarding the key themes in each film as well as its critical reception by audiences and reviewers; it is not intended to engage with existing scholarship or filmic debates dominating discussions of the canon nor offer detailed sequence analysis of key moments with regard to *mise-en-scène* or decision-making processes. The value of the book is rather that of a chronicle illustrating the development of the genre within popular reception, with each discussion concluding with an overview of critical responses to the films on popular websites, in journals and in newspapers.

Particularly interesting is the tenth and final chapter entitled 'Direct Activism and Community'. Given the subtitle of the book, some readers would expect this chapter to be included earlier so as to centralise the filmmaker's role as activist in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it highlights in a thought-provoking fashion how the production of environmental films can, despite claims to the contrary, make a concrete difference to the environmental causes they support. This is significant since, as Duval rightly notes, the impact of environmental film is often dismissed by its detractors as a genre based on fear-mongering that fails to offer possible solutions to the problems uncovered. The films discussed in this section include the original work of filmmaker-activists such as Oliver Hodge, Scott Hamilton Kennedy, Ryan Mlynarczyk and Emily James.

At times, Duval would have done well to pay more attention to academic conventions: for example, by not making a habit of using titles – on several occasions, Duval refers to 'Mr DiCaprio' or 'Mr Gore' when discussing their contributions to their respective films. This distracts from the author's otherwise consistent writing style. Using Wikipedia as a resource also does not adhere to the standards of what are usually regarded as legitimate academic resources quotable in a monograph of this nature. Finally, both the introduction and conclusion of the book are extremely short, which does not entirely do justice to the extensive range of research Duval clearly demonstrates through the rest of the book.

On the whole, however, Duval makes a complex and thoroughly controversial genre accessible in a way that would prompt young scholars and students to seriously consider the destructive impact of consumption and neoliberal ideologies on the environment. Teachers may also find Duval's overview helpful in selecting films for classes dealing with environmental issues. Significantly, the author's highly commendable passion for the environment clearly shines through. As such, the book itself functions as a piece of activism, raising awareness not only of our responsibility towards our environment, but also putting a spotlight on a genre that has not received as much attention as it should within the discipline of film studies.

This review originally appeared at the [LSE Review of Books](#).

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About the reviewer

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Reina-Marie Loader completed her PhD in 2011 on the representation of trauma memory on screen at the University of Reading. She subsequently also lectured at the University of Exeter as well as the University of Vienna, while producing an environmental documentary about rhino poaching. The film went on to win a number of awards, including a Humanitarian award for Outstanding Achievement from IndieFest. HORN was also nominated for a Rhino Conservation award for its contribution to raising awareness about rhino poaching.