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The Romantic View of Nature and the Conspiracy Theory in Environmental Documentaries

by

Olga Orda

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES IN

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Romantic View of Nature and the Conspiracy Theory in Environmental Documentaries" submitted by Olga Orda in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Arts.

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Abstract

This project argues that environmental documentaries of the 2000s promote harmful Romantic views of nature and produce overly simplistic knowledge about the causes of global environmental degradation through the use of the conspiracy theory. By analyzing the rhetorical and ideological features of environmental documentaries through the tradition of scholars who write on the Romantic views of nature and the conspiracy theories, this project's methodology will allow us to see how environmental documentaries frame nature and environmental problems in ways that are overly simplistic and even harmful to the advancement of the environmental movement itself. Ultimately, this project contributes a unique analysis not only of environmental films, but more importantly, the types of definitions of nature and environmental problems that circulate and that are perpetuated in popular culture and environmental movement circles.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Environmental documentaries of the 2000s have reinvigorated the environmental movement and thus represent an important cultural and historical moment. These films have been important insofar as they have engaged audiences beyond the environmental movement, stimulated an appreciation of nature and brought to light the scale of environmental problems that we face today. Yet, at the same time, they appear to only repeat facile conceptions of the environment and may, in spite of their critical nature, be doing more damage to nature at worst or absolving individuals from taking environmental action at best. This project seeks to address the more problematic aspects of environmental documentaries in an attempt to argue that Western culture could benefit from viewing nature and environmental problems from a more nuanced and critical perspective.

Critical environmental scholar Dryzek (1997) defines the environment as the intersection of ecosystems and human social systems (p. 8). This concept, in turn, articulates nature as an ecosystem that is relatively unchanged or undisturbed by human culture (Johnson, Ambrose, Bassett, Bowen, Crummey, Isaacson, Lamb, Saul, and Winter-Nelson, 1997, p. 581). Environmental documentaries propagate notions of nature as something that makes us feel good as well as something that can enhance our lifestyles. Thus, they do not really contribute to the political, economic, cultural and social change we need to develop a deeper understanding with nature. In this thesis, I will argue that environmental documentaries are influential but influential in the wrong ways and their solutions to address environmental degradation are not radical enough.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006) is an often-cited example of an influential environmental documentary. On October 12, 2007, Steve Inseep, a host at National Public Radio, reported on Gore winning the Nobel Peace Prize along with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Inseep (2007) said that, "*An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) put global warming on the national agenda in a way that he was never able to do as a public official." New Mexico Democratic Senator Jeff Bingaman even argued that, "it seems to me we were having great difficulty recruiting Republican members of Congress to support a bill before Al Gore came up with this movie" (Brosnan, 2006. p. 1). Irena Salina, director of the environmental documentary, *Flow: For Love of Water* (2008) about the global water crisis, said that, "there's no doubt that Al Gore's movie changed everything…I think a lot of people were very surprised at how effective the film really was in educating people" (Monk, 2008, para. 11). Environmental studies scholars have compared the impact of Gore's documentary on reinvigorating the modern environmental movement to that of Rachel Carson's now-classic text, *The Silent Spring* (Johnson, 2008, p. 29), about the dangers of chemical pesticides to nature and people.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006) is not an isolated film or an anomaly but rather points to the broader phenomenon of the rise of the environmental documentary. In fact, the number of environmental documentaries surged from a total of 17 from the 1970s to the late 1990s to over 115 by 2010 (Grinning Planet. (n.d.); Spword. (n.d.). As of September 2010, three of sixty of the highest grossing documentaries of all time according to lifetime box office sales are environmental documentaries. This list includes the films *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Food Inc.* (2008) (Box Office Mojo, n.d.).

This project argues that, despite their success in getting the environment on the agenda, environmental documentaries of the 2000s promote harmful Romantic views of nature and produce overly simplistic knowledge about the causes of global environmental degradation through the use of the conspiracy theory. First, by relying on the faulty strategies of the Romantic view of nature, both the sublime and pastoral, environmental films exacerbate the nature-culture dualism and promote a 'nature as escape' notion that sustains environmental degradation in the first place. Second, by using the conspiracy theory as the primary explanation for the cause of global environmental degradation, environmental films overlook the more significant structural causes of environmental degradation, such as post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture.

In order to better understand the phenomenon of the environmental documentary, this project will ask several questions regarding the unique aspects, achievements and problematic notions of the environmental film. First, what can looking at environmental documentaries as conspiracy theory films tell us about how environmental problems are defined in the 2000s? And, what are the implications of these definitions and what do they fail to portray? Second, in what ways do environmental documentaries, through their Romantic depictions of nature, re-assert harmful notions of nature? What are the implications of these depictions? Third, what do environmental documentaries not show about nature, the environment and the causes of environmental degradation? And, what are the possible implications of these omissions?

Before this project can establish the ways in which the environmental documentary defines environmental problems, nature and the environment, it is necessary to define the environmental documentary and how audiences first encounter them. The most pertinent

description of the political potential of environmental documentaries is one made by the pioneer of documentary film, John Grierson (Aitken, 1992, p. 1). John Grierson and Forsyth Hardy (1966) insisted that documentary, in dramatizing issues, is a political and rhetorical tool that educates citizens about key issues out of a moral imperative to prevent social chaos (p. 269-290). This type of doctrine also characterizes the environmental documentary of the 2000s. Environmental documentaries fall into a category of documentary film that has strong similarities to what documentary film scholar Bill Nichols (2001) discusses as "social issue" documentaries. Social issue documentaries emphasize the filmmaker's social purpose over style, reliance on rhetoric, objectivity, experts to corroborate evidence, a quest for knowledge and a solution-oriented narrative structure (p. 166-167). The notion of the environmental documentary as a social issues documentary is closely tied to the fact that environmental documentaries are environmental activist media. Paul Kevin Wapner (1996) discusses environmental activism as economic, political, social and cultural practices that shape the activities of other institutions, groups and individuals in order to address environmental concerns (p. 153).

Environmental documentaries of the 2000s are successful in using available distribution methods to reach a wide range of audiences with their activist messages. Environmental humanities scholar Salma Monani (2008) suggests that environmental documentaries occupy the space between small-time, avant-garde art productions and big commercial successes (p. 48). Citing films such as *Blue Vinyl* (2002) and *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (2004), Monani observes that environmental documentaries are generally aimed at viewers who are

already interested in the environment and enjoy moderate reach through DVD distributions with bigger commercial companies, environmental film festivals and alternative television circuits (p. 130). Environmental documentaries are also available for sale at sites such as Amazon and have a web presence (pp. 47-50), which includes social media sites.

Historically, the rise of the environmental documentary could not be possible without the disruptive force of video during the 1980s which helped decrease the cost barriers of producing a documentary for new filmmakers (Ellis & McLane, 2004, p. 259). Documentary scholar Patricia Aufderheide (2007) argues that even though documentary films of the 2000s are significantly less expensive to produce than fiction films, documentary filmmakers' budget constraints propel them to please broadcasters and private investors, their main funding forces (p. 6). This results in "attracting and distracting" audiences with sensationalism, sex and violence (p.6).

Having traced the rise of the environmental documentary, we now turn to examining environmentalism of the 2000s, a political movement that environmental documentaries contribute to in a significant way. Environmental and cultural studies scholar Peter van Wyck (2005) has argued that:

> without the fundamental commitment to interconnectedness, ecological and environmental thought would be evacuated of most (if not all) of their radical potentials; they would become conceptually powerless. (p. viii)

This thesis argues that in its attempt to politically agitate individuals about the causes of environmental problems, the environmental movement has drawn on conspiracy theories. Peter Knight (2000), a scholar who studies America's affinity with conspiracy theories, argues that, "the rhetoric of conspiracy offers a symbolic resolution to the problem of

representing who is responsible for events that seem beyond anyone's control" (p. 32). Mark Fenster (2008) describes the conspiracy theory as: "the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof, circulates solely on the margins of society" (p. 1).

As a result of the environmental movement's reliance on conspiracy theories, environmental documentaries have begun to draw on the conspiracy thriller narrative to agitate viewers about the causes of ecological problems. Film critic Myke Bartlett (2009), in discussing *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and competing climate change films, makes the observation that, "Gore's narrative effectively mirrors that of a conspiracy thriller" (p. 38). Bartlett (2009) characterizes the conspiracy thriller narrative as one that:

> seems to empower the audience by aligning them with a precious truth, one that the majority are either blinded to or actively suppress. The viewer of such a narrative is cast as a hero, peeling back the lies and resisting the dogma with which the more powerful seek to oppress the downtrodden. (p. 39)

This project seeks to expand upon Bartlett's insight by proposing that the vast majority of environmental documentaries of the 2000s, not just *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), adopt features of the conspiracy theory narrative to make claims about environmental problems.

Thus far in our undertaking, we have looked at various discursive categories that environmental documentaries fall into. Next, we will look at the rhetorical and ideological features of environmental documentaries and how environmental films are particularly well suited to be analysed through a critical methodology in the tradition of scholars who write on the conspiracy theory, such as Mark Fenster (1999), Peter Knight (2000; 2003) and Fran Mason (2002). A critical reading of environmental films in the tradition of Fenster, Knight, Mason and Jameson is best suited to analyze environmental

documentaries because this method makes transparent the rhetorical and ideological aspects behind environmental films and the ways that the use of conspiracy theory elements steer audiences towards a privileged, yet very incomplete and simplistic, truth about the causes of global environmental degradation. Drawing on Fran Mason's (2002) interpretation of Frederic Jameson's (1991) seminal claim that the conspiracy theory is a "degraded attempt… to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (p. 38), this thesis argues that environmental problems presented through the conspiracy theory unwittingly misrepresent, apoliticize and oversimplify the causes of environmental problems. Ultimately, the conspiracy theory is a version of the postmodern sublime since it cannot represent the impossible totality of the real causes of environmental problems, which are a confluence of post-industrial, neoliberal and consumerism factors. Thus, this study will examine the various other factors that contribute to environmental degradation that are present but that are underrepresented in environmental documentaries. These include post-structuralist critiques of the risk society in the tradition of Ulrich Beck Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (1994), critiques of neoliberalism according to David Harvey (2007) and finally, critiques of consumerist discourse in the tradition of Grant McCracken (1988) and Don Slater (1997).

Still, a critical reading informed by conspiracy theory literature only looks at how environmental problems and not nature are defined. Thus, we turn to analyse how Romantic representations of nature in environmental films continue to define nature in sublime and pastoral terms. To inform our reading of sublime representations of nature, we turn to critical environmental scholars who critique sublime representations of nature. These include Immanuel Kant (1784/2007), Edward Burke (1759), William Cronon

(1996), Christine Oravec (1996), Peter Coates (1998) and Carolyn Merchant (1980). In particular, this study will be sensitive to the ways in which sublime and pastoral depictions of nature perpetuate a dangerous nature-culture dualism (Cronon, 1996, p. 20), irresponsibility towards nature (p. 25), representations of nature in terms of an easily manipulated, feminine and passive object (Merchant, 1980, p. 8-9) and an idealization of nature that deems 'real', imperfect nature as unworthy of protection (Cronon, 1996, p. 10). Scholars who critique pastoral descriptions of nature include Chaseten Remillard (2011), Leo Marx (1964) and Carolyn Merchant (1980). Leo Marx (1964) argues that the pastoral is very attractive to the American mind because it promises a new life in a fresh and virginal landscape (p. 3). Similarly, Chaseten (2011) explains that pastoral depictions of nature define nature in a limited way as a pristine and spiritual space (p. 132). Merchant goes so far as to critique the ways that nature is personified as a passive female, giving of her bounty (p. 8) and a mere "refuge from the ills and anxieties of urban life" (p. 7).

Ultimately, environmental documentaries are cultural perspectives on environmentalism of the 2000s and posing questions about them will help to understand what kinds of concepts of environmental problems, nature and the environment are being advanced. This project argues that environmental documentaries of the 2000s promote harmful Romantic views of nature and produce overly simplistic knowledge about the causes of global environmental degradation through the use of the conspiracy theory. By analyzing the rhetorical and ideological features of environmental documentaries through the tradition of scholars who write on the Romantic views of nature and the conspiracy, this project's methodology will allow us to see how environmental documentaries frame nature and environmental problems in ways that are overly simplistic and even harmful to

the advancement of the environmental movement itself. Ultimately, this project contributes a unique analysis not only of environmental films, but more importantly, the types of definitions of nature and environmental problems that circulate and that are perpetuated in popular culture and environmental movement circles.

The notion that environmental problems can be explained through the conspiracy theory is problematic because it misrepresents the causes of environmental problems as a problem of immoral individuals and distracts from the post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture factors that drive environmental degradation. Furthermore, Romantic depictions of nature in environmental documentaries through the sublime and the pastoral re-assert feelings of human greatness and power, disassociate technology from the destruction of nature and present nature as separate from humans and valuable only as a source of beauty and awe. In doing so, environmental films contribute to legitimizing moral superiority, control and exploitation of nature. Sociologists Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash (1994) have argued that the threat of ecological disaster is in fact the unintended but nevertheless inevitable consequence of modernity or the post-industrial society ("risk society") itself (p. 4). Beck (1994) defines the risk society as:

> A developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for monitoring and protection in industrial society. (p. 5)

Meanwhile, critical historian David Harvey has provided a compelling argument for how the theory of neoliberalism contributes to environmental degradation. He defines neoliberalism as a theory of political economic practices that proposes that:

> Human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade. (p. 2)

According to technology critic Nicholas Rescher (1980), environmental degradation is a product of American social ideology related to material progress, technological omnipotence and millennialism (pp. 23-24). This is coupled with the realities of population densities, high levels of personal consumption and a messy technology of production (pp. 23-24). Consumer culture in particular has contributed to environmental degradation. Cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken (1988) defines consumption as the process by which consumer goods and services are created, bought and used (p. xi). Don Slater (1997), discussing how intimately bound up our needs are to the influences of our culture – our consumer culture – explains that:

> When I say that 'I need something', I am making at least two profoundly social statements: firstly, I am saying that I 'need' this thing in order to live a certain kind of life, have certain kinds of relations with others (for example have this kind of family), be a certain kind of person, carry out certain actions or achieve certain aims. (p. 2-3)

Possibly the most damaging effect that a culture of consumption can have on the environment is the creation of 'insatiable' modern needs that are "no longer fixed either by nature or by the traditional social order" and "feeding off [of] perpetual dissatisfaction" (McCracken, 1990, p. 77).

This project looks at four different environmental documentaries of the 2000s that fall into various degrees of criticizing the dominant discourse of industrialism, which Dryzek (1997) defines as an "overarching commitment to the growth of goods and services produced and to the material well-being which that growth brings" (p. 7). Dryzek argues that environmental discourses fall into four key categories, including reform, radical, imaginative and prosaic dimensions (p. 12-13). These four discourses provide the rationale for choosing four environmental documentaries, including *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The 11th Hour* (2007), *The End of Suburbia* (2004) and *The Long Shadow* (2003), out of the plethora of

environmental films currently available. For Dryzek, reformist views seek merely to depart in a minor way from the industrialist discourse that inherently exploits nature and thus, make only minor adjustments to the current political, economic and social system (p. 13). In contrast, radical views seek to overhaul the entrenched political, economic and social system that sustains environmental degradation (p. 13). The prosaic dimension in Dryzek's typology views the environment as a resource that needs to be managed in a different way albeit by a similar system and group of individuals (p.13). In contrast, Dryzek's imaginative dimension seeks to redefine entire political and economic structures by looking at environmental problems as opportunities rather than problems (p. 13).

For the purposes of this study, I have combined these four discursive categories as it is clear that the single categories of reform, radical, imaginative and prosaic do not capture the full extent of what is expressed in environmental documentaries. Environmental documentaries thus fall into one of four combined discursive categories, which include reform-prosaic, reform-imaginative, radical-prosaic and radical-imaginative discursive categories. In this project, *An Inconvenient Truth* is an example of a reform-prosaic film because it advocates for the current institutions and individuals in power to use scientific and technological solutions to address environmental degradation. *The 11th Hour* is an example of a reform-imaginative film that differs from *An Inconvenient Truth* in that it proposes spiritual, cultural and design-oriented solutions to the ecological crises. However, like *An Inconvenient Truth*, it does not propose any major economic, social or political overhauls of power to address environmental problems. *The End of Suburbia* is an example of a radical-prosaic film as it calls for a dramatic shift in power, as well as the way we organize life in suburbs, in order to decrease our economic, cultural and political dependence on petroleum. However, it advocates that experts

are best suited to change the power structures that sustain environmental problems in policy oriented and mundane ways. *The Long Shadow* is an example of a radical-imaginative film because it documents the grassroots ways in which citizens, scientists and environmental groups challenged the power of Dow Chemical during the late 1990s to draw awareness of high levels of dioxin contamination in their backyards.

It is important mention that all the films, with the exception of *The End of Suburbia* were produced in the United States and are embedded with the American tendency towards populism. Populism is a type of discourse and rhetorical style often used by members of social or political movements that compares "the people" against "the elite" in an attempt to change the current social and political system. American populism would be a very interesting subject to explore because it would shed light on why the conspiracy theory is the furthest that these films can go in terms of critiquing the current political, economic and social system that produced the environmental crisis in the first place. While a study of American populism could contexualize and broaden the study of the conspiracy theory, this project is not a national film study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this section of the project, I will review several bodies of literature that are relevant to an understanding of environmental documentaries. First, I will look at two Romantic views of nature, the sublime (including both the Romantic sublime and its post-modern counterpart), and pastoral views of nature as passive provider. Next, I will look at conspiracy theories and explore several authors who discuss why such theories can be harmful. Third, I will examine three causes of environmental degradation that are not covered, or not covered well, in environmental documentaries, in support of my argument that environmental documentaries are flawed because they do not deal with these causes. These causes are post-industrialism (including "risk society"), neoliberalism and consumer culture.

Romantic Views of Nature: The Sublime

The theories of the Romantic sublime help clarify why Western culture views nature as a site of awe, wonder, escape and even spiritual experience. The eighteenth century philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant are largely credited with contributing theories of the sublime. However, it was Longinus who first articulated the theory of the sublime in the 1st century AD. Longinus argues that "our sense of the sublime is an illusion, which draws the reader to new heights, to the realization that there is something more to human life than the mundane, the ordinary" (Patten, n.d., p. 1). Furtheremore, in actually experiencing the immense capacity and greatness of the sublime, we feel a huge sense of freedom. As Longinus (1899) explains, "for, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime; it takes a proud flight, and is filled with joy and vaunting, as though it had itself produced what it has heard" (VII, 2).

Later, Burke articulated in greater detail the theory of the sublime and then Kant built upon and challenged some of Burke's ideas. In Burke's 1759 book, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Feelings of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke for the first time systematically defined and examined the sublime as something that is distinct from the beautiful. He was also concerned with finding a psychological and physiological basis for these feelings (White, 2002, p. 27). Burke characterized the sublime as an irrational, emotional force which:

> far from being produced by [astonishment…that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror], it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. (Burke, 1904, I, 3)

He also distinguished the sublime from the beautiful in terms of the fear that it conjures, which he argues is a much stronger force than the admiration that beauty attracts. Burke explained that anything that is terrible or 'conversant about terrible objects' is a source of the sublime since it is the strongest emotion that the mind is capable of feeling, much more powerful than the emotions associated simply with pleasure (p. 20). Part of Burke's thesis is that the sublime is a powerful emotion that conjures both fear and astonishment, overwhelms individuals and causes suspended reason. Burke famously formulated the central 'passion' of the sublime as "that state of the soul, in which all its emotions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case, the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other…reason on that object which employs it" (p. 39).

Kant, unlike Burke, characterized the sublime as a transcendent experience. Thirty-three years later, in his 1790 book, *The Critique of Judgement*, he articulated his theory of the sublime and explored the notion of judgement. Kant (1790/1952) often used nature as an example to illustrate his theories. For example, Kant argued that nature

in its larger canvas has a transcendant hold over the viewer because of its power, implanting a sort of terror in us (p. 120-121). For instance, in reflecting upon a great mountain or a violent storm, or anything perceived to be far greater than them, humans come to terms with their own fragility. As postmodern scholar Frederic Jameson (1991) explains, Kant's sublime:

> include[d] the question of representation itself, so that the object of the sublime becomes not only a matter of sheer power and of the physical incommensurability of the human organism with Nature but also of the limits of figuration and the capacity of the human mind to give representation to such enormous forces. (p. 34)

Unlike Burke, Kant analyzed the sublime in terms of a process that occurs *internally* within an individual that brings them to the conclusion that something is merely beautiful or sublime. Whereas Burke argued that the sublime is found *externally* (e.g. in nature), Kant (1987) argued that the inability to grasp the enormity of an event, which simultaneously evokes the beautiful, frightening, vast, pleasurable and painful, demonstrates the inadequacy of our own sensibility and imagination (p. 246). Thus, what makes an object or an event sublime is that ability of our *cognitive abilities* and *imagination* to expand in order to comprehend the infinity, power and beauty of the sublime object, not just the object itself (Kant, 1951, p. 78). Ultimately, what Kant called the "supersensible substrate" is where true sublimity is located (p. 78). This seemingly obscure term simply points to the experience where, when faced with seemingly incomprehensible natural phenomena, the human critical faculties can decipher the intricate parts of the phenomena and unify it into a coherent, understandable whole. This deciphering and unification, through human reasoning, is ultimately what is transcendent and nature simply inspires this transcendent feeling. As Saju Chackalackal (2002)

explains:

> Kant's attempt to locate the supersensible substrate is an inherent requirement of the critical system whereby the human intellect is enabled to project an intelligible world, not by anything external to the human being, but strictly according to that which it is designed and dictated by his intellectual faculties. (p. 530)

Burke and Kant's theories on the sublime were a product of the times in which they lived: the Enlightenment. Kant (1784/2007) famously conceptualized the Enlightenment as "man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another" (p. 39). Kant was referring to the Enlightenment's movement away from religion as the primary (yet "immature") source of knowledge about the world to the scientific method as a process of determining the truth about the world. However, despite the movement away from the Church, the need for spiritual experience was present and nature became an attractive substitute. As critical ecofeminist scholar Carolyn Merchant (1980) argues, "the idea of the sublime as a religious experience became an important component of the European Enlightenment. Nature was now cathedral, temple and Bible" (p. 88).

Romantic Views of Nature: The Pastoral

As the Enlightenment paved the way for Industrialism, the pastoral discourse surrounding nature protected nature's status as spiritual solace. As Chaseten Remillard (2011) argues:

> The instrumentalist discourse of profitability, commodity and inexhaustibility has had a long-standing counterpoint: notions of nature as a pristine (spiritual) space in need of preservation…In preservationist discourses, nature is positioned as a space of sacred meditation, a stimulus for a frame of mind that denudes one of the trappings of civilization. (p. 132)

The preservationist discourse that Remillard refers to has roots in the pastoral tradition, which longs for the "uncorrupted Garden of Eden and an escape from the ills of the city"

(Merchant, 1980, p. 8). Leo Marx (1964), who is largely credited with providing the authoritative account of America's relationship with the pastoral, argues that, "the pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery" (p. 3). He explains that the pastoral is very attractive to the American mind because it represents the withdrawal from the Old World and the promise of a new life in a fresh, green and virginal landscape (p. 3). The pastoral can be recognized in depictions of "a garden, a rural landscape or a peaceful fertile scene [where] nature is a calm, kindly female, giving of her bounty" (Merchant, 1980, p. 8). In this depiction, "nature is seen as a "refuge from the ills and anxieties of urban life through a return to an unblemished Golden Age" (p. 7). However, the pastoral is more than just a "flight from the city" sentiment. It expresses "something of the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence "closer to nature," that is the psychic root of all pastoralism – genuine and spurious (p. 6).

The problem with either of these Romantic views of nature, both the sublime and the pastoral, is that they exacerbate the nature-culture dualism and promote a 'nature as escape' notion that sustains environmental degradation in the first place. The sublime positions nature as something that is outside of culture. This is problematic insofar as it obscures the fact that problems of nature are in fact problems of culture and humans. Instead, the sublime posits environmental problems as a 'problem of nature'. Often, the elevation of nature-as-sublime, a space separate from culture, pristine and beyond human comprehension, informs many environmentalist discourses (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, p. 246; Willems-Braun, 1997, p. 19). Yet, this discourse is problematic because the sublime creates an ontological separation between humans and nature where the very presence of

humans represents the fall of nature. A focus on an ideal nature condemns the narrative of civilization and nature to a 'fall of Eden' story. In this story, there is no possible solution to the environmental crisis unless humans are eradicated from the earth. It is for this reason that the sublime view of nature needs to be reconsidered in favour of a view of nature as something that is part of culture and what it means to be human.

Ultimately, the sublime view of nature can contribute to a dangerous abstraction, idealization and finally, a domination of nature. Speaking about the legacy of the sublime, Oravec explains that the sublime overidealizes the representation of nature to the point that the actual reality of nature disappoints and is deemed unworthy of protection (Cronon, 1996, p. 10) or trivialized (McKinsey, 1985, p. 157). Thus, when protection of the environment most warrants a realistic and engaged relationship with nature, sublime representations of nature in culture (i.e. environmental documentaries) contribute to further separating humans from nature and the environment through a subtle process of idealizing and abstracting nature. Furthermore, the sublime fosters an inauthentic relationship to nature (Oravec, p. 1996, p. 70). Watching nature in a sublime lens has a spectatorial quality as it creates "an awareness of ourselves as separate, human, perceiving" (Wyatt, 1986, p. 16) and "encourages a dangerous dissociation between ourselves and the forces of destruction" (Oravec, 1996, p. 72). The framing of nature as a sublime object has even more ominous implications. As Kant (2006) himself explained, the sublime awakens feelings of our own greatness and power (p. 140), which can potentially justify our domination of nature. In fact, what is often "discovered" to be sublime is not the object itself but the fact that we have the human capacity to comprehend something as vast, frightening and beautiful as the sublime.

Like the sublime, the pastoral view of nature is problematic but for a different reason: the pastoral promotes the view that nature is a mere 'escape' and a source of pleasure. Speaking of the seventeenth century pastoral view of nature that characterized nature as a benevolent female that could be 'plowed', 'cultivated' and used as a resource, Merchant (1980) argues that:

> Nature, tamed and subdued, could be transformed into a garden to provide both material and spiritual food to enhance the comfort and sooth the anxieties of men distraught by the demands of the urban world and the stresses of the marketplace… [B]y conceiving of nature as passive, it nevertheless allowed for the possibility of its use and manipulation. (p. 8-9)

Merchant's critique brings to the light how the seemingly innocent portrayal of nature as a woman that provides a spiritual and physical haven for men is charged with complex and uneven power relations. Simply put, if a society sees women as passive and existing for the purpose of providing comfort, then nature too is doomed to be viewed in the same limited light. As a result, it becomes 'natural' to want to use and dominant nature. The other problem with portraying nature as an escape away from the troubles of the modern world is that it promotes irresponsibility towards nature. As Peter Coates (1998) explains:

> The privileging of nature as superior 'other', a place of escape from the overbearing 'works of man', cultivated by the pastoralists of the classical world and perfected by the eighteenth century Romantics, suggested that everything would work out fine and everyone would be happy if only we obeyed nature's unambiguous instructions. (p. 5)

Ultimately, seeing nature as an escape promotes the notion that nature is "out there" and not something that is part of the human world. Were nature to be seen less as a spiritual vacation and more of something that makes us human and that is part of our culture, then it would be easier to create a social, economic and political structure that protects and values nature. As Cronon (1996) explains:

> If wilderness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world – not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both. (p. 25)

The Post-Modern Sublime

Unlike the Romantic sublime, the postmodern sublime expands what is possible to count as nature beyond valuing nature for its ideal or pristine beauty. The postmodern sublime also views environmental degradation as a type of sublime experience insofar as we can never see the totality of the environmental crisis, but strain to see representations of it through various fragmented images of the crisis. Whereas Kant contributes a normative, universal and totalizing critique as to how judgement on beauty works, post-modern theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard contributes a postmodern critique on how judgement works. Unlike in the Romantic sublime, the postmodern sublime emotion is usually conjured in the face of seemingly uncontrollable modern events, as opposed to merely nature. As Jonathan Bordo (1992) argues that if:

> the 'postmodern sublime' is the condition of being overwhelmed by the threatening and bewildering effects of technology, then ecological catastrophe (as the result of technology) becomes a new source of the sublime... Human beings still experience a humbling sense of fear and awe before nature, but in this case -- in contradistinction to conventional accounts of the sublime - the threat is of their own making. And worse, the danger is all too real. (p. 171)

Unlike Kant, Lyotard argues that there are no metanarratives for how we experience sublime objects. For Lyotard (1994), the sublime's significance is that it "expresses the edge of our conceptual powers and reveals the multiplicity and instability of the postmodern world" (p. 3). Speaking to just how much Lyotard differs from Kant's modernist take on the sublime, Espen Hammer (2006) explains that, for Lyotard, "the

sublime represented a postmodern rebellion, albeit within the framework of a generalized modernism, against form, order and teleology" (p. 205). Through Lyotard's perspective, the sublime can be found not just in the pristine landscapes of nature but in environmental decay and technology's impact on nature. Interpreting Lyotard's unique approach, Slade (2007) states that "the postmodern sublime solicits artistic search for words… images and the rules that give them form in the detritus, pain, decay and ruins of history" (p. 33).

Two central themes that set apart Lyotard's concept of the postmodern sublime are the impossibility of envisioning a totality and inadequate representations. Whereas Kant is striving for unity in his philosophy, Lyotard is fundamentally opposed to this. In fact, Lyotard argues that it can never happen. While Kant suggests that our reason is capable of seeing the whole, Lyotard claims that it is not possible. Therefore, Lyotard contributes an anti-teleological view of the sublime. In other words, Lyotard views the sublime experience as evidence that things cannot be fully unified or entirely rational in the world. Unlike Kant, Lyotard's formulation of the sublime "shatters all attempts to totalize, harmonize and present the absolute" (Hammer, 2006, p. 138).

Furthermore, Lyotard (1994) argues that since there can be no equal encounters with an absolute judgement and an absolute imagination (p. 123), we cannot fully resolve the difference between knowing and feeling that Kant suggests produces the sublime emotion (p. 149). This concept is key to Lyotard's notion of the differend and what sets his theories apart from those of Kant's. Lyotard (1994) suggests that the differend is felt as a resistance for thought and feeling to come to an agreement and this disagreement (the differend) persists as a difference (p. 149). According to Slade (2007), the differend

does not signal the tragic end to all thinking, but according to the Kantian system, "attests to a finality" from which, "we conclude that it is essential for thought to feel reflexively its heterogeneity when it brings itself to its own limits (something it cannot avoid doing)" (p. 34). The postmodern sublime, which can take into account how reason and imagination cannot always be reconciled, thus provides insight into why humans fail to fully understand the magnitude of the environmental crisis. As Lyotard (2006) explains:

> We have the [i]dea of the world (the totality of what is), but we do not have the capacity to show an example of it. We have the Idea of the simple (that which cannot be broken down, decomposed), but we cannot illustrate it with a sensible object, which would be a 'case' of it. We can conceive of the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make invisible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. (p. 129)

Lyotard argues that any representation of that totality is inadequate. According to Andrew Slade (2006), this representation is ultimately sublime because it "bears witness to the force of [i]deas and the limitations of the human mind to comprehend them and of the body to feel them" (p. 22). In the context of environmental films, the footage of polluted oceans, arid deserts and melting glaciers suggest that we are not only destroying nature but that we are on the verge of destroying humankind if we continue on the path that we are on. In this way, the environmental crisis is representative of the postmodern sublime.

The Conspiracy Theory

The conspiracy theory, which appears often in the documentary films analyzed in this project, is an example of the postmodern sublime. This project draws from Mark Fenster's (2008) concept of conspiracy theories, which are "conviction[s] that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some

part thereof" (p. 1). This thesis argues that a conspiracy theory is really a compensatory fantasy that erroneously assumes that the environmental crises can be controlled if only we target seemingly all-powerful and corrupt individuals in business and government. The conspiracy theory serves a purpose insofar as it "attempt[s] to make the convoluted, decentered processes of global, contemporary global capitalism more rational and more dramatic – to put a name and a face to otherwise unrepresentable and impenetrable systems" (p. 21). However, in presuming that environmental damage is the result of external forces that can be traced by name and face, the simplistic conspiracy theory distracts viewers from the deeper, historical, social, political and economic roots of the crisis.

Thus, the environmental crisis is an instance where the totality of the crisis is unrepresentable. In this way, the conspiracy is really a version of the postmodern sublime. Postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson (1991) argues that the conspiracy theory is "a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system to map networks of power too vast to be adequately represented" (p. 38). Drawing from Jameson's argument, Fran Mason (2002) explains that:

> In Lyotard's postmodern version of the sublime, conspiracy theory would provide an allusion to reality even though it isn't reality itself. The representation is not a representation of the conspiracy itself, just an approximation or an analogy. In this sense, a conspiracy theory is a presentation of the unrepresentable through signs and simulacrum in its fullest sense: a copy without an original. (p. 42)

In these accounts, conspiracy theory's oversimplification stems partly from the sublime's attempt to make visible the invisible. Instead of being merely a comforting form of misrepresentation, the conspiracy theory is a reductive (or "degraded"), but still

useful, form of political representation. The problem with conspiracy theory is that it produces an analogy of what the cause of the problem is without addressing the deeper political ideologies and systems that sustain the cultural, political and economic injustices around the globe. Rather, the conspiracy theory is a kind of apolitical system. As Fran Mason (2002) argues:

> Conspiracy theory… either misrecognizes totality as totalitarianism or attempts to represent the unrepresentable by analogy. In both cases, there occurs a "misrepresentation" that produces an illegitimate form of knowledge. Conspiracy theory does not represent ideology and system as they are… but as something else… as another system altogether. Conspiracy theory produces an analogy or approximation that is subsequently taken to be "real". It generates a map of a different world entirely, a parallel or imaginary world of misrecognized social systems and power structures. (p. 39)

When Jameson says that the conspiracy theory is a "situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole," Mason (2002) interprets this as Jameson calling for a way of presenting the unrepresentable, thus making implicit reference to Lyotard's notion of the postmodern sublime (p. 41). In Lyotard's postmodern version of the sublime, the conspiracy theory would be a "presentation of the unrepresentable through signs and is a simulacrum in its fullest sense: a copy without an original" (p. 42).

Lyotard's (1984) arguments that the postmodern sublime "puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself" (p. 110) and that "it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented" (p. 81) work principally in terms of aesthetics, analogy and simulations, all of which are displacements away from the "real" that Jameson seeks to reveal through "cognitive mapping". Mason (2002) argues that:

> A "true" conspiracy would be something that is absolutely unrepresentable or absent, providing no signs or clues of its existence and would be a version of the sublime in the Romantic sense, because it is invisible and undetectable. As soon as it becomes represented, it is no longer a conspiracy: a conspiracy cannot be visible (represented) because it derives its status as a conspiracy from its secrecy. (p. 40)

Several scholars, including Earl Creps (1980), Richard Hofstadter (1966) and Rodger Remington (1965) contribute a more detailed level of analysis of the conspiracy theory's characteristics and how it works. Creps (1980) is critical of the way that the conspiracy theory, through its causal, deductive logic erroneously assumes that a small group of individuals are the cause of larger societal evils. Hofstadter (1966), too, is wary of the vast assemblage of evidence and deductive reasoning, arguing that the review of evidence is only "careful preparation for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (p. 37-38). Creps (1980) argues that:

> Ironically, this leap of faith is cloaked in the most rigorous form of syllogistic reasoning. For the believer, the self-evident nature of the evil being addressed seems to be immediately translated into the idea that the facts of one's case are also self-evident. The argument moves with the brute force of the classical syllogism. (p. 46)

Remington (1965), for example, relates the style of reasoning he finds in the anti-Semitic version of conspiracy theory. In this theory, it is assumed that 'international Jews' control America because of the Rothschilds' family history with the banking system. This is really an instance of overly broad and sweeping assumptions and gaps in logic (pp. 81-82).

Furthermore, as Creps (1980) explains, the conspiracy theory is loaded with moral value orientations and simplistic us-versus-them assumptions:

> The minimal descriptive claims [of the conspiracy theory] are the vehicles for

> powerful, and often unspoken, value orientations. In this sense, the conspiracy argument evinces an essentially enthymematic nature... Thus, the conspiracy claim draws a very clear contrast between the polis and the plot, the former being the complacent victim and the latter the amoral transgressor. (p. 40-41)

Ultimately, from the perspective of the postmodern sublime, the conspiracy theory produces the erroneous knowledge that environmental problems are a product of immoral individuals scheming in secrecy against the good of society. The conspiracy theory is a reminder of the postmodern sublime because it is a displacement away from the "real", which are the actual social, economic, political and historical factors that caused environmental degradation in the first place. In fact, as this project attempts to bring to light, environmental problems are a much more complex and "unrepresentable totality" of post-industrialism ("risk society"), neoliberalism and consumerism.

Post-Industrial Society

Whereas Romantic views of nature, the post-modern sublime and the conspiracy theory point us in the wrong direction in terms of looking at nature and environmental problems, the complex problems of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture provide more insight into the causes of environmental degradation. While complex issues are covered in environmental documentaries, they are not covered in depth. Environmental documentaries, for instance, hardly bring up how the effects of living in a post-industrial society alone have wrought havoc on the environment. Social theorist Ulrich Beck (1994) argues that, for the first time in history, we are witnessing the victories of capitalism and industrial society undercut their own foundations. While this notion may recall Karl Marx's message that capitalism is its own gravedigger, Beck means something more nuanced (p. 2). He argues that we are entering an era which he

names ‘the post-industrial society’. In this society, “it is not the class struggle but rather normal modernization and further modernization which are dissolving the contours of industrial society” (p. 2). Beck further explains that, in the industrial society, industrial institutions have become the producers and legitimators of threats that they cannot control (p. 9). Beck states that:

> On the one hand, society still makes decisions and takes actions according to the pattern of the old industrial society, but, on the other hand, the interest organizations, the judicial system and politics are clouded over by debates and conflicts that stem from the dynamism of risk society. (p. 9)

According to Beck (1992), since the industrial revolution, one of the major large-scale societal achievements, as least in the Western world, has been an increase in the general level of wealth and a reduction in scarcity through the mass production of goods (p. 19). However, this mass production of goods has been accompanied by the production of “bads” or, in other words, risks (p. 3). Beck (1992) defines risk as:

> A systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. Risks, as opposed to older dangers, are consequences which relate to the threatening force of modernization and to its globalization of doubt. (p. 21)

A risk society, at least in theory, is a society that intends to deal with risks in a systematic way. However, risks in the modern age are often unintended, invisible, hard to mesasure, borderless and can affect any socio-economic class (e.g. the rich are not immune to the risks of pollution). Furthermore, the risks of the use of technology and the production of wealth are currently being managed with more technology and more wealth (e.g. goods), perhaps contributing even more to the problems of the post-industrial society. Risk society critics such as Peter Van Wyck have critized this approach as being “irrational”. Applying analysis from structuralist Lacan and post-structuralist Zizek in

Signs of Danger: Waste, Trauma, and Nuclear Threat to look at ecological threats, Van Wyck argues that ecological problems are treated "as if" a solution can be found, for instance, through the frenzied application of science or technology. In fact, this application is rooted in an obsessive and neurotic psychological response that does not address the "real" (p. 94), which is that the science and technology that we have unleashed (e.g. nuclear weapons) has the potential to kill us insofar as it creates risks that harm us and our environment.

Furthermore, the current solutions to manage risks (e.g. new chemicals added to food to counteract the effects of the present chemicals) are inherently inadequate because they are on an individual, not societal, level. Craig Calhoon (2006), identifies this phenomenon as the policy of risk privatization. He argues that this policy:

> makes individuals bear the brunt of hardships that are predictable in the statistical aggregate without creating effective mechanisms to share the burden, let alone reduce the risk. (p. 257)

As a result of this type of popular policy or thinking in North American society, actions to curb the negative side effects of the post-industrial society that fall back on the consumer will always be inadequate. This is because much broader social, political and economic actions need to be taken to curb the complex roots of risks, such as technological advances and commercial activity. In other words, once it becomes assumed that consumers should simply buy more goods to protect themselves, then there is less incentive for governments to intervene through regulating corporate activities (e.g. dumping toxins into the ocean) that harm the public good (e.g. ocean).

Clearly, Beck's characterization of the risks of the post-industrial society does not satisfy the desire of conspiracy theory advocates for clear-cut answers to the causes of environmental degradation. Rather than addressing the complexity of the risk society, environmental films tend to look for simplistic explanations and scapegoats in the form of corporations. While corporations certainly have a role in environmental degradation, the risk society theory that Beck elaborates upon suggests that everyone is inevitably intertwined and responsible for environmental damage. Yet, the pervasive and untraceable nature of, for instance, air pollution, make targeting environmental degradation an immense and seemingly impossible task in the postindustrial society. As critical environmental history scholar John Dryzek (1997) argues:

> The reality of industrial fatalism thus rests upon (at least) two simple cornerstones: the universalization of pollution and the principle of individual culpability. Its very realistic logic lays down that the greater the number producing it, the more obvious it becomes that not only this or that person produces it; hence it follows that nobody produces it. (p. 135-136)

The risk society framework explains why the twentieth century has taken up environmentalism so passionately. Anthony Giddens (1999), a sociologist who also contributes to theories of the risk society, explains that, "whereas for several centuries, people worried about what nature could do to us, such as earthquakes, floods, plagues, bad harvests and so on, over the past fifty years or so, citizens started worrying more about what we have done to nature" (p. 3). More elaborately, Beck (1995) argues that, "the environmental problem is by no means a problem of our environs. It is a crisis of the industrial society itself, reaching deeply into the foundations of institutions" (p. 127). Furthermore, "risks are industrially produced, economically externalized, juridically individualized and scientifically legitimized (p. 2).

Neoliberalism

Since the 1980s, the effects of living in a post-industrial society, where environmental risks seem uncontrollable and to come from no single source, have been exacerbated by the adoption of neoliberalism by Western nations. Neoliberalism itself can be seen as the evolution of modernist thinking insofar as it takes the modernist discourse of "total knowledge, total autonomy and total power" (Manzo, 1991, p. 7) to a new level of extreme. James Harvey (2005), a critical historian, discusses neoliberalism as a modern theory of political economic practices that draws on classical liberalism. Harvey defines neoliberalism as a state where:

> Human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade. (p. 2)

John L. Campbell and Ove Kaj Pedersen (2001) explain that no other project since the Second World War has transformed some of the basic political and economic settlements, such as labor market accords, industrial relations program, redistributive tax structures, and social welfare programs, as much as neoliberalism has (p.1). Key to neoliberalism has been a shift away from Keynesian economic ideas, which emphasized the political management of aggregate demand (p. 1), to a more conservative discourse based on monetarist, supplyside and rational expectations of ideas (Heilbroner and Milberg, 1995, p. 70).

Neoliberal policies, although quite entrenched and accepted today, propose a worldview that is dramatically different from the Keynesian or social democratic policies of past decades. As Susan George (1999) states, from 1945 to 1950, one "would have

been laughed off the stage or sent off to the insane asylum" (p.1) if they proposed that a) the market should be allowed to make major social and political decisions; b) that the State should voluntarily reduce its role in the economy; c) that corporations should be given total freedom; d) that trade unions should be curbed; and e) that citizens should be given less rather than more social protection (p. 1.). Yet, these are the very policies that underpin neoliberalism today. However, since Margaret Thatcher introduced neoliberalism to Britian in 1979 (p. 1) these policies have become deeply entrenched in contemporary political, economic and social life. The draw of neoliberalism is the faith that "market rationality is natural, universal and inevitably leads to the greater good" (Mansfield, 2004, p. 314).

However, the practice of neoliberalism is much more nuanced than some theories may assume. By adopting an institutional analysis of the phenomenon, Campbell and Pedersen (2001) argue that the concept of neoliberalism in reality is more complex, diverse, contested and open to interpretation than is often recognized (p. 1). Furthermore, neoliberalism is:

> Less a coherent totality, as is often assumed, than a loose conglomeration of institutions, ideas and policy prescriptions from which actors pick and choose depending on prevailing political, economic, social, historical and institutional conditions. The results can be either contradictory or complementary and often vary across as well as within countries. (p. 3)

Wendy Larner (2005) also argues that neoliberalism is a more multi-vocal project than might previously have been understood (p. 11). She explains that a whole new set of social relations, only some of which are a direct offshoot of neoliberalism (including feminism, gay and lesbian politics and ethnic social movements), are reconfiguring economic and political terrains.

Neoliberalism's impact on the environmental movement is significant. While David Harvey (2007) acknowledges that some notable political leaders who adhered to neoliberal policies have had some positive impacts on the environment, many have had detrimental effects on the environment. For example, Margaret Thatcher played a major role in the negotiation of the Montreal Protocol to limit the use of the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) that were responsible for the growing ozone hole around Antarctica. However, Harvey argues that overall, the "short-term contractual logic on environmental uses has disastrous consequences" and "neoliberal state policies with respect to the environment have… been geographically uneven and temporally unstable" (p. 172). As a result, the environmental movement has grown significantly since the 1970s (p. 172). Describing neoliberalism's impact on the environment in greater detail, Diana M. Liverman and Silvina Vilas (2006) say that:

> Neoliberalism has been linked to the privatization and commodification of unowned, state-owned, or common property resources such as forests, water, and biodiversity; payments for environmental services; deregulation and cuts in public expenditure for environmental management… and the transfer of environmental management to local or nongovernmental institutions. (p. 327)

Despite its strong influence on how the environment is perceived and treated, the films in this project do not address how the ideology of neoliberalism as a whole has contributed to environmental degradation. Instead, the documentaries criticize the individuals that embody the characteristics of the corporate antagonist, which mirror that of the neoliberal subject: "a rational, maximizing, self-interested, autonomous and self-reliant individual" (Briggs & Hallin, 2007, p. 61).

Consumer Culture

Similar to post-industrialism and neoliberalism, the culture of consumption has

had detrimental effects on the environment and its impacts are not fully explored in environmental films. The culture of consumption contextualizes the individual act of consumption as fundamentally influenced by our culture and suggests a more insidious influence than individuals simply wanting to buy more goods and services to meet their basic needs. As Celia Lury (2011) explains, the theory of consumer culture is not concerned with consumption practices in and of themselves, but rather, with the significance and character of the values, norms and meanings produced in such practices. This focus emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between ownership and use of material goods, economic status, inequality and meaning (p. 11). However, an understanding of the culture of consumption first requires an understanding of the process of consumption. Cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken (1988) defines consumption as the processes by which consumer goods and services are created, bought and used (p. xi). Don Slater (1997), discussing how intimately bound up our needs are to the influences of our consumer culture, explains that:

> When I say that 'I need something', I am making at least two profoundly social statements: firstly, I am saying that I 'need' this thing in order to live a certain kind of life, have certain kinds of relations with others (for example have this kind of family), be a certain kind of person, carry out certain actions or achieve certain aims. (p. 2-3)

Furthermore, a culture of consumption often has 'insatiable' modern needs that are "no longer fixed either by nature or by the traditional social order" and "feeding off perpetual dissatisfaction" (p. 77). Yet, seen from McCracken's point of view that consumption is "shaped, driven and constrained at every point by cultural considerations," it is not consumption that is the problem but a whole culture that needs to be altered in order to curb the growth of this insatiable need.

The roots of consumer culture are complex, but at its very basic level, it is rooted in a drive towards consumption in and of itself as a social status ritual and fashion as the driver of consumption. Douglas J. Goodman and Mirelle Cohen (2004) explain that Europe or America did not have a consumer culture until the nineteenth century (p. 6). While there was consumption earlier than the nineteenth century that took place at weekly markets and seasonal fairs, consumption itself serviced and represented other culturally defined status systems (rather than being the central value of that system) such as royal power or family relations (p. 6). However, it was interest in fashion that really spurred the growth of the consumer culture during the nineteenth century (p. 6), although cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken (1990) argues that status and fashion considerations informed the consumer decision-making process as early as the sixteenth century. Speaking of the importance of fashion as a driver of consumer culture, Jukka Gronow (1997) argues that, "one cannot understand the modern consumer society and the meaning of consumption in a modern society if the social mechanism of fashion, a self-dynamic social process, is not properly understood and analysed" (p. xi).

Scholars who write about the culture of consumption also point out that it is based on individualistic principles. Slater (1997) argues that the culture of consumption is predicated on the thoroughly modernist assumption of a world experienced by a social actor who is apparently individually free and rational (p. 9). However, as many scholars have pointed out, the drive to consume is often based on deep-rooted irrational desires and at times, a means of social status reinforcement and identity expression. As Helga Dittmar & Helliwell (2008) has argued:

> At a deeper level, consumer goods have come to play a stronger psychological role for us: we value and buy them as means of regulating emotions and gaining

> social status, and as ways of acquiring or expressing identity and aspiring to an "ideal self". (p. 2)

Taken to extremes, the rational or irrational individual choice to consume excessively can threaten the well-being of others and even, recalling Beck (1994), undercut the victories of capitalism and industrial society (p. 2).

The culture of consumption is significantly entrenched in all facets of modern culture and by extension, contributes to the excess use and waste of the earth's resources. Consumption is entrenched in North American culture. In fact, shopping as a leisure pursuit in the United States is the second most popular pursuit after television, averaging at six hours per person per week (Nicholson-Lord, 1992). Attempting to create an analogy of how deeply consumer culture affects the environment, Jorge Majfud (2009) argued that, "trying to reduce environmental pollution without reducing consumerism is like combatting drug trafficking without reducing the drug addiction" (p. 1). Yet surprisingly, only one film in this project, *The 11th Hour*, addresses the culture of consumption in any significant way; the remaining films do not address the impacts of consumer culture on the environment.

Modernity

Upon deeper investigation, it becomes clear that the postindustrial society, neoliberalism and consumer culture are all symptoms of modernity. The fall of Medieval Europe and the triumph of the secular nation-state over the universal Church and Christendom produced a distinctly "modern" way of thinking and being (Manzo, 1991, p. 6). As Gilbert LaFreniere (2007) explains, the Reformation, Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, Great Discoveries, combined with colonialism, imperialism and the

intellectual Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries unwittingly produced a distinctly modern and Western worldview (p. 232). Since at least the end of the eighteenth century, "modern discourse has invoked the figure of the reasoning man who might achieve total knowledge, total autonomy and total power" (Manzo, 1991, p. 7).

A confluence of historical epochs focused on rationality, knowledge, science and domination, coupled with a distinctly "modern" way of thinking, has made both the industrial and post-industrial society possible. It has also created the foundation for neoliberalism and a consumer culture to flourish. However, as Gilbert LaFreniere (2008) explains, modern thinking has also led to the "gradual manipulation and domination of nature as Europe and parts of North America and other colonial lands were transformed from native ecosystems and indigenous cultures into so called 'civilized' landscapes, the new 'Edens' of Western civilization" (p. 232). Furthermore, critical environmental historian William Cronon (1996) critiques modernity for positioning wilderness as "the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world… [and] … the ultimate landscape of authenticity" (p.18). However, Cronon explains that the trouble with the notion of wilderness, which modernity has created as a wilderness-civilization dualism, is that it:

> quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past. (p. 18)

This project argues that, unlike the simplistic representations in environmental films, nature is more than just a Romantic concept and environmental problems are the

result of post-industrial, neoliberal, consumer and ultimately, modernity's forces, not a cabal of conspiring individuals and clandestine groups.

Thus, this project's methodology is informed largely by critical environmental history scholars such as William Cronon (1996), Caroline Merchant (1993), Christine Oravec (1996) that can access the problematic implications of Romantic representation of nature. This project is also informed by postmodern scholars such as Frederic Jameson (1991), Jean-Francois Lyotard (1994) and Fran Mason (2002) that can access conspiracy theory explanations of the environmental crisis. Using this methodology will allow this project to see beyond the conspiracy of the environment crisis and nature as merely something that gives us Romantic feelings. Instead, this methodology allows us to analyse definitions and representations of environmental problems and nature at a deeper level, revealing the ways that nature continues to be defined in eighteenth century Romantic terms and environmental problems as a product of the conspiracy. Furthermore, this analysis will bring to light the more significant factors that cause the environmental crisis by drawing on critics of the post-industrial society such as Peter van Wyck (2005), Ulrich Beck (1994) and Anthony Giddens (1994); critics of neoliberalism such as David Harvey (2007); and critics of consumer culture, such as Grant McCracken (1990) and Don Slater (1997). Ultimately, this project contributes an analysis not only of environmental films, but more importantly, the types of definitions of nature and environmental problems that circulate and that are perpetuated in popular culture and environmental movement circles. Finally, this project will present some alternative definitions of nature and explanations of the causes of the environmental problem by drawing on critics of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture.

As this literature review has attempted to demonstrate, despite their best intentions, environment films often use faulty strategies to inform, engage and entertain viewers about what nature is and what the causes of global environmental degradation are. This project argues that these faulty strategies include Romantic views of nature, in particular the sublime and the pastoral, and the use of the conspiracy theory. The problem with either of these Romantic views of nature, both the sublime and the pastoral, is that they exacerbate the nature-culture dualism and promote a 'nature as escape' notion that sustains environmental degradation in the first place. Sublime depictions of nature abstract nature, idealize it and most dangerous of all, create an ontological separation between humans and nature where the very presence of humans represents the fall of nature. Meanwhile, the pastoral promotes the view that nature is a mere 'escape' and a source of pleasure. This view is highly problematic because by positioning nature as a passive object, it promotes irresponsibility towards nature and justifies the domination of it.

The postmodern sublime is a counterpart to the Romantic sublime and also, is representative of the environmental crisis insofar as no analogies can fully map out the complexity and overwhelming magnitude of it. However, environmental films use the faulty strategy of the conspiracy theory to map out the causes of the environmental crisis. This strategy risks articulating the environmental crisis in a reductive, oversimplified and erroneous way as a problem of corrupt individuals, not political, economic or social structures.

The more important drivers of global environmental degradation, which are frequently underplayed in environmental films, are the effects of the post-industrial

society, neoliberalism and consumerism. In the post-industrial society, the mass production of goods, services and the entrenchment of industrial institutions as a whole have been accompanied by the production of risks that are often unintended, invisible, hard to measure and can affect any socio-economic class (e.g. the rich are not immune to the risks of pollution). Secondly, the onslaught of neoliberalism has created the worldview that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2) and in its wake, neoliberalism has been linked to many political, economic and cultural actions that have eroded the environment. This includes the privatization and commodification of common property resources such as forest, water and biodiversity and deregulation and cuts in public expenditure for environmental management (Liverman & Vilas, 2006, p. 327). Thirdly, consumer culture has contributed to global environmental degradation by accelerating individual choices and the desire to consume excessively. As a result, consumer culture contributes to environmental pollution and the exploitation of the earth's resources. Finally, postindustrial society, neoliberalism and consumer culture are all symptoms of modernity. More specifically, global environmental degradation could not be possible without modernity's prioritization of the "reasoning man who might achieve total knowledge, total autonomy and total power" (Manzo, 1991, p. 7) and a confluence of historical epochs focused on rationality, knowledge, science and domination.

Chapter 3: Case Study of Reform Documentaries

This chapter will analyse the reform films *The 11th Hour* and *An Inconvenient Truth* in the context of this project's thesis. Again, my thesis is that environmental documentaries of the 2000s promote harmful Romantic views of nature and produce overly simplistic knowledge about the causes of global environmental degradation through the use of the conspiracy theory. First, by relying on the faulty strategies of the Romantic view of nature, both the sublime and pastoral, environmental films exacerbate the nature-culture dualism and promote a 'nature as escape' notion that sustains environmental degradation in the first place. Second, by using the conspiracy theory as the primary explanation for the cause of global environmental degradation, environmental films overlook the more significant structural causes of environmental degradation, such as post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture.

Since this analysis looks at the ways that the conspiracy theory is expressed through the aesthetics of the Romantic view of nature, it is valuable to clarify and provide examples of how the conspiracy, the sublime and the pastoral operate in 2000-era environmental documentaries. This project draws from Mark Fenster's (2008) concept of conspiracy theories, which are "conviction[s] that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof" (p. 1). This project argues that a conspiracy theory is really a compensatory fantasy that erroneously assumes that the environmental crises can be controlled if only we target seemingly all-powerful and corrupt individuals in business and government. In fact, the current environmental crisis is a less dramatic and more complex product of the historical confluences of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture.

In both *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The 11th Hour*, there are grandiose landscapes of snow-covered mountaintops and vast, glimmering oceans that conjure feelings of awe and wonder. While these objects of nature are undoubtedly beautiful, they also inspire fear because we can imagine being overwhelmed and overpowered by them. The feeling that an object is beautiful, vast and frightening is what defines the sublime at its basic level and distinguishes that object from the merely attractive. Of course, the sublime is a complex notion and this project primarily analyses environmental films from the point of view of the classic, eighteenth century notion of the term as proposed by Emmanuel Kant. Kant (1987) argued that, "sublimity is contained not in any thing of nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of our superiority to nature within us, and thereby also to nature outside us (as far as it influences us)" (p. 123). His statement is informed by his understanding that the sublime experience is less about the object itself than an opportunity to be in awe with the powers of our reason as we attempt to grasp the mathematical (e.g. scale) and dynamic (e.g. power) components of the sublime.

And finally, the pastoral can be recognized in depictions of "a garden, a rural landscape, or a peaceful fertile scene [where] nature is a calm, kindly female, giving of her bounty" (Merchant, 1980, p. 8). In this depiction, "nature is seen as a "refuge from the ills and anxieties of urban life through a return to an unblemished Golden Age" (p. 7). However, the pastoral is more than just a "flight from the city" sentiment. It expresses "something of the yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence 'closer to nature,' that is the psychic root of all pastoralism – genuine and spurious" (p. 6).

Now that we have defined the conspiracy theory, the sublime and the pastoral in the context of this project, we can start to analyse *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The 11th Hour*. Both of these environmental documentaries are exemplars of reform films. As reform films, both documentaries seek to depart in a minor way from the industrialist discourse that inherently exploits nature (Dryzek, 1997, p. 13). Furthermore, reform films are satisfied with only minor, not major, changes to the current political, economic and social system in order to address the environmental crisis. In the larger context of this project, reform films, like radical films, draw from the conspiracy theory and the aesthetics of the Romantic view of nature to communicate the causes of and solutions to the environmental crisis. In doing so, reform films inadvertently contribute towards promoting irresponsibility towards the environmental crisis, perpetuate a nature-culture dualism and depict nature in a passive, feminine lens. This chapter will demonstrate how reform films achieve this by undertaking a critical reading of *The 11th Hour* and *An Inconvenient Truth* informed by scholars who write on the conspiracy theory, the sublime and the pastoral. These two films weave back and forth between using aspects of the conspiracy theory, the sublime and the pastoral to make their claims.

Unlike other films on the environment in the 1990s and previous decades, *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The 11th Hour* contributed to engaging more individuals than ever on the issue of the environment. First, these reform films presented palatable solutions to the environmental crisis in the form of renewable technology and the consumption of green products. Second, in using many of the same visual and editing techniques that mainstream cinema employs, reform films could attract a larger number of viewers. Third, filmmakers intentionally appealed to viewers outside environmental

circles by showcasing celebrities (e.g. Leonardo DiCaprio) and using plenty of scientific evidence in the form of graphs, charts and timelines. And finally, the films used the rhetorical technique of the conspiracy theory to put a name and face on the seemingly faceless corporations and corrupt politicians that individuals already speculated were the causes of environmental damage.

An Inconvenient Truth

In April 2006, Paramount Vantage (originally known as Paramount Classics), a specialty division of Paramount Pictures, released *An Inconvenient Truth*. Featuring former Vice President Al Gore as the narrator, the film originated as a lecture and was made into a documentary through a laptop computer slide show (Rosteck & Frenz, 2009, p. 2). In the film, Gore argued that we have about ten years to stop a climate warming trend that is threatening the planet with environmental disaster and human catastrophe. The former Vice President's film is probably best known, however, for arousing concern about climate change in a way that no other film on the subject prior to it had done before. Part of its success can be attributed to its timing. Throughout the 2000s, environmental groups around the world were growing weary with the apparent inaction on behalf of governments to seriously address climate change since the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Then, almost a decade later in 2005 and as a result of media attention, Hurricane Katrina was framed as a direct consequence of the effects of global warming.

The fact that *An Inconvenient Truth* reached a general audience, not just a select group of environmentalists, was evidenced by its box office sales and surveys of viewers who saw the film. For example, *An Inconvenient Truth* earned $49 million at the box office worldwide and is the fifth highest grossing documentary film to date in the United

States (Box Office Mojo, 2011, para. 1). Even more interesting, a July 2007, 47-country Internet survey conducted by The Nielsen Company and Oxford University demonstrated that:

> Sixty-six percent of viewers who claimed to have seen *An Inconvenient Truth* said the film had "changed their mind" about global warming and eighty-nine percent said watching the movie made them more aware of the problem. More importantly, three out of four (74%) viewers said they changed some of their habits as a result of seeing the film. (The Nielsen Company, 2007, para. 14)

The timing of the film also coincided with a wave of media attention on how to change one's lifestyle in order to protect the environment. For example, The New York Times published an article in response to Gore's film called "When 'living green' comes with a price" (Beam, n.a., para. 1). That same year, Vanity Fair magazine called green "the new black" (n.a., 2006, para.1).

In *An Inconvenient Truth*, the conspiracy theory entails corrupt North American lobbyists, government officials and oil companies working together to oppress, deny or obfuscate climate science and its implications on humans worldwide. However, the fact that *An Inconvenient Truth* follows a conspiracy theory plot is not clear until viewers are three quarters into the documentary. Prior to that, Gore, the "the lone-wolf hero" (MacDonald, 2006, para. 5) and narrator of *An Inconvenient Truth*, establishes his own credibility as an objective messenger of climate science. Similarly, since Gore is the only character in the film and nobody else in the film challenges his point of view, Gore's arguments are implicitly seen as objective. It is important for the film to present Gore as an objective messenger because it contributes towards establishing the conspiracy theory as a logical explanation for the causes of environmental degradation. Objectivity is an influential rhetorical technique in Gore's oratory in the film. Yet, as this analysis of *An*

Inconvenient Truth will later demonstrate, Gore's conspiracy theory arguments create false knowledge about the causes of environmental degradation.

From the start of the documentary, Gore is the center of attention as cameras flash and audiences applaud his PowerPoint presentation. In this way, the film establishes Gore as a well-liked, personable and yet highly authoritative figure. This attribute establishes Gore's ethos. Gore says that, "I feel like I've been trying to tell this story for a long time and I feel as if I've failed to get the message across" (3:00). Within minutes of the introduction, Gore takes over as a pedagogue of climate change science, showing a satellite image of the earth. These images are sublime insofar as they present a view of the earth as sacred, pure and abstract. The sublime representation of the earth portrays nature as something that is external to the human world. As a result, satellite images of the earth contribute to perpetuating the view that human actions are separate from the degradation of the earth. Secondly, the frequently used satellite footage of the earth permits viewers to believe that everyone is part of a distinctive and collective history. As Rob Wilson (1991) argues, "the sublime remains one of those literary genres which, persisting in usage over time as an imaginal construct – as New World dialogue between 'Americas' past and future – permits a purchase of... [a] collective history" (p. 28). Thus, the sublime representation of nature is ideological insofar as it creates the notion of a collective history and a 'lost' pure nature that we come to feel we are entitled to.

Shortly thereafter, the film presents an overwhelming and frightening slew of juxtaposing images showing crackling icebergs, smoke stacks, forest fires and families being swept away in floods. This footage is sublime insofar as it presents nature as a fear-inducing and immensely powerful force, so frightening and vast that it is difficult to fully

comprehend. What this depiction also does is emphasize the fact that amoral human actions have transgressed the inherent moral goodness, sacredness and pristine character of nature. This representation of nature early in the film is problematic because it frames the root of the problem of environmental degradation as a moral issue, as opposed to a complex confluence of the post-industrial society, neoliberalism and consumer culture.

Next, Gore turns to the use of the conspiracy theory in order to demonstrate that climate change is in part a manifestation of a conspiracy. First, Gore discusses the basic science of global warming in terms of a thick layer of greenhouse gases that traps excess solar heat in the atmosphere. Then, he strives to portray the science of climate change through an accessible and yet, highly rational lens. The science is credible and yet as lackluster as any tedious lecture. To enliven the explanation, Gore uses a Simpsons-style animation. Soon after, the story features a little blonde girl ("Suzie") who begins to cry because the heat has melted her ice cream cone. Meanwhile, a gruff, older, pedagogical figure explains to her that the culprit behind her melted ice cream cone is global warming. As the cartoon continues, the sun's rays ("Mr. Sunbeam") are personified as friendly while greenhouses gases are portrayed as sinister, gangster-like characters. After the greenhouse gases beat up Mr. Sunbeam, the narrator of the cartoon says that, "pretty soon… rotting corpses are heating our atmosphere" (10:56). Even though the cartoon is meant to be humorous, it oversimplifies and creates the illusion that climate change is a product of immoral individuals, as opposed to the result of complex post-industrial, neoliberal and consumerist forces.

As the film progresses, Gore continues to draw on the conspiracy theory in order to demonstrate that the American government is an immoral actor in the battle against

climate change. First, he introduces a series of images in the form of red, jagged graphic marks that suggest the rise of CO2 in the atmosphere. As the red CO2 line increases, an image of the earth in the back throbs as if to indicate that the earth is heating. Second, Gore uses a scientific image to illustrate his discussion of the many ways that he unsuccessfully sought to push climate legislation through Congress from the 1970s through to the 1990s. The implicit question, created by the plethora of evidence at this stage of the documentary, is why the American government did not pass legislation to stop global warming. The suggestion is that the U.S. government is not only ignorant but also corrupt. This implicit suggestion is problematic because it creates an artificial divide between the polis – the group of individuals in society who are morally good and supposedly untainted by corrupt forces – and the conspirators, an elite cabal of individuals whose intentions are evil. In this case, the implied conspirators are high-ranking members of the U.S. government.

Gore continues to draw on the mechanics of the conspiracy theory, in particular a dizzying array of evidence, to demonstrate that a small group of conspirators are responsible for exacerbating climate change. In the next part of the film, Gore projects a scientific graph comparing CO2 levels and temperatures. He states that even a minute difference is a "difference between a nice day and having a mile of ice over your head" (22:28). After indicating where today's CO2 concentration lies, Gore walks across the stage and steps into a closed platform. From here, he demonstrates the exponential increase in unrestricted fossil fuel burning over fifty years. As Gore rises higher and higher in the platform at the same rate as the red, jagged CO2 lines on the screen, the audience goes silent. Suddenly, Gore stops at a dot on the graph marked with the text,

"the projected concentration of more than 50 years of unrestricted fossil fuel burning". Together, the visual of the rising platform and the graph set the stage for demonstrating just how outrageous and potentially dangerous continued fossil fuel burning can be. Capitalizing on the tension that has built up to this point, Gore remarks, "the so-called skeptics look at this and they say, well, that seems perfectly OK" (24:03). This comment causes the audience to laugh. Thus, Gore's presentation, which involves framing an unknown group of skeptics in a negative light sets up any challengers to Gore's assertions on climate change not only as irrational and ignorant, but also amoral.

The humour at this stage of the film is very carefully constructed to reinforce the conspiracy theory and to make a clear distinction between the benevolent community and its outsiders, the conspirators. The concern with the film's distinction between the 'victim' and the 'transgressor' is that it creates the false knowledge that climate change is the product of evil and immoral individuals (Creps, 1980, p. 40-41).

Midway through the film, Gore uses the sublime to enhance the effect of the conspiracy theory. First, we become aware of Gore's own personal experiences that deepened his concern for climate change. In particular, Gore's description of a near fatal car accident that confined his six-year old son Albert to the hospital for a month becomes deeply intertwined with the potential tragedy of the loss of human lives to the consequences of global warming. To illustrate, Gore says that:

> The possibility of losing what was most precious to me [gave me] an ability that maybe I didn't have before, but… when I felt it, I felt that I could really lose it. That what we take for granted might not be here for our children. (27:20)

Thus, Gore's own subjective experiences colour the documentary with a sense of moral urgency and a feeling of the sublime. This is because Gore reflects on and comes

to terms with the totality of the global warming crisis. At once, he fears and is in awe of the power of climate change on his life and the life of others. The use of the sublime softens Gore's rhetoric offers a subtle change in perspective and makes us more sympathetic with Gore's cause and more receptive to the statements he makes about climate change. Ultimately, the use of both the sublime and the conspiracy theory creates a mystique surrounding the causes of climate change and romanticizes what nature 'once was' prior to the moral transgression of individuals.

Next, Gore transitions back to the use of the sublime to create a sense of fear surrounding nature and what its immense power can do to humans, this time contributing to creating a human-culture dualism. First, he emphasizes the 2003 heat wave that "killed 35,000 people [in Europe]" (28:50). Second, he shows sublime still photographs of hurricanes and tornadoes, which clearly showcase the human devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Third, Gore intersperses graphs and timelines as credible illustrations of the risks of climate change. And finally, we witness heart-wrenching images of humans around the world dealing with catastrophic floods and droughts. In particular, Gore contrasts flooded streets in China to a graph of Lake Niger in Africa that has "dried up to almost nothing" (38:55). In *An Inconvenient Truth*, these sublime depictions of nature in crisis shock and frighten audiences by showing them that they may lose what they have now.

Of course, what is not shown in these moments of crisis is significant too. In previous parts of the film, in selecting romantic images of what nature was, reform films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* over-idealize nature. In over-idealizing nature and thinking about it primarily in a sublime way, we begin to think that only a certain type of

pristine nature warrants our concern and that humans will always be associated with environmental degradation. As Cronon (1996) explains: "wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall" (p. 17).

Soon after, Gore turns to the use of the sublime and the pastoral to further amplify the fear surrounding nature and the nature-culture dualism. After Gore is done showing us scientific evidence related to global warming, he lets us in on another personal story of growing up on his family's pristine farm. As if to suggest that something has gone awry with the pastoral environment since he was a child, suddenly the landscape transforms into something sinister as cows begin to scurry and the river near his family farm becomes covered in a haze. Accompanying this effect, Gore says that:

> Here on this farm, the patterns are changing. And it seems gradual in the course of the human life... But, in the course of time as defined by this river, it's happening very, very quickly. (41:15)

Another diversion to a map of the Arctic, where Gore uses the analogy of "canaries in the coal mine" (41:48), demonstrates that climate change is already happening at a faster rate than previously estimated. Again, the kaleidoscope of sublime images of ice shelves broken into two and collapsed buildings due to melted permafrost stun and awe us. The footage of ice shelves and the Arctic is sublime because it brings to light the ways that nature can draw us in with its immense beauty and yet, also have the ability to annihilate us. At the same time, this sublime imagery assumes that all of nature is Edenic, which is problematic because it contributes to pitting the environment against humans.

Next, Gore reverts to using the conspiracy theory to provide the audience with a misleading sense of truth about the causes of climate change. By this point, Gore's exposition of evidence contributes to strengthening his case, through mounting scientific and legal evidence, that high-ranking members in government and business in North America are responsible for climate change. As Creps (1980) explains:

> The persuasive force of the conspiracy case is produced not by a single portion of testimony, but by the simultaneous consideration of hundreds of pieces of evidence… The irony here is that, while the conspiracy offers simple causal explanations, the style of these arguments can become enormously complex. (p. 45)

Furthermore, through Gore, the almost president of the U.S., we begin to feel that we are privileged to know the secrets of climate science that others do not. This sense of privilege is essential for what Mike Bartlett claims is a part of *An Inconvenient Truth*'s conspiracy thriller narrative. Bartlett (2009) argues that this narrative:

> …[E]mpower[s] the audience by aligning them with a precious truth, one that the majority is either blinded to or actively suppresses. The viewer of such a narrative is cast as a hero, peeling back the lies and resisting the dogma with which the more powerful seek to oppress the downtrodden. (p. 39)

Continuing with the theme of the conspiracy theory to create an irrefutable and monolithic claim about the causes of climate change, we see and hear politicians declare their distrust and distaste of environmentalists and climate change through carefully edited news clips of political speeches. First, Ronald Reagan states, "a number of very reputable scientists have said that one factor of air pollution is oxides of nitrogen in vegetation, this is what causes the haze that gave the big, smoky mountain" (50:27). Second, George Bush Sr. states, "this guy is so far off in the environmental extreme, we'll be up to our neck in owls and out of work for every American. This guy is crazy!"

(50:38). And finally, Senator James Inhofe argues that, "even if humans were causing global warming… this could maybe be the greatest hoax every perpetrated on the American people. We're dealing with something that is highly emotional " (50:47).

This news footage is indicative of the fact that the government is perpetuating the risks of climate change through an organized ignorance. In contrast, because Gore is the only voice that speaks, he is constructed as a neutral messenger of truth that reveals and reminds the audience of the orchestrated conspiracy of government to allow climate change to happen. Again, the array of evidence trumps and distracts from the lack of logic that the conspiracy theory is proposing. Whereas it would be difficult to accept the notion that high-ranking government officials are conspiring with oil companies to confuse the public about the causes of environmental degradation, this is what the film is arguing for. It is through the drama of the conspiracy theory that the presentation of this argument becomes believable. Creps (1980) in particular has argued that:

> the counter-subversive is often so intent on constructing an impregnable, monolithic claim that the result is a veritable jungle of interlocking evidence and assertion. (pp. 43-45)

Thus, the conspiracy theory provides simplistic arguments regarding motive and cause, defended primarily by a mind-boggling array of "evidence" (p. 45).

Next, the film uses the sublime to demonstrate that nature is to be feared because it can potentially cause the death of millions. The film comes to a climax when Gore explains how a break off of a western chunk of the Antarctic can cause sea levels to rise twenty meters. An essential part of the conspiracy theory in the film is the dramatization of what Gore calls "majestic and massive" (55:15) glaciers. The film illustrates the nature of glaciers through a computer simulated depiction of how melt water from glaciers can

flood areas such as Florida, San Francisco, the Netherlands, Beijing, Shanghai, Calcutta and Manhattan. In the background, Gore tells us that these areas are "homes to tens of millions of people" (59:40). This dramatic simulation is truly sublime because such tragic flooding represents the potential death of millions of individuals from around the world. This representation incites both the fear and wonder that is necessary for us to experience the feelings of the sublime. Bjørn K. Myskja (2002) has commented that "the effect of the sublime is part of a general effect connected to all feelings in rhetorical contexts and an analysis of it belongs to the larger discussion of the ethical function of feelings in general" (p. 57).

This analysis seeks to go further and argues that sublime depictions of entire cities going underwater trigger feelings of fear and anxiety that are often vented on the so-called conspirators of climate change: high-ranking government and corporate officers. This process is highly problematic because it absolves individuals – anybody outside of the group of conspirators – from responsibility in the environmental crisis. As Creps (1980) explains:

> by blaming the evil on a cabal, the conspiracy advocate shifts guilt away from the community. The plot becomes a scapegoat for the polis' plight as the community is cleansed of guilt. The function of the conspiracy argument implies that the community could attain a utopian future or reclaim an idyllic past if only it could rid itself of the influence of the cabal. (pp. 35-36)

As the film progresses, Gore reveals even more evidence that suggests that government inaction and ignorance of climate change is the result of a conspiracy theory. First, Gore makes the comparison that out of 928 peer reviewed scientific articles on climate change, only one article disagreed with the "global consensus that greenhouse gas pollution has caused most of the warming of the last fifty years" (1:12:30). The number

928 and the number one stand out on the screen. Second, we see Gore read aloud a piece of text that has been taken out of an article, "doubt is our product since it is the best means of creating a controversy in the public's mind" (1:13:10). The quote seems to reveal the tricks of the corrupt party. Third, in a key visual that demonstrates the power of an elusive group of conspirators to confuse individuals about climate change, Gore reads out that out of 928 peer-reviewed, scientific articles, zero per cent of the articles disagreed with the anthropogenic cause of climate change. In contrast, out of 636 articles in the popular press on climate change, fifty three per cent were in doubt as to the cause of climate change. Together, these fragments of evidence demonstrate that the corrupt "other", an unknown, mute and invisible cabal of characters depicted in the film (e.g. high ranking government and corporate officials), have conspired in lying to and misleading the public by sowing doubt about the scientific certainty of climate change.

As further evidence of the internal conspiracy that has caused confusion, Gore voices over footage of two high profile events that dramatize the degree to which climate science has been censored. First, we see Gore in a May 8, 1989 television clip asking Jim Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies, "why do you directly contradict yourself about this testimony when you are given this scientific question?" (1:14:48). In turn, Hansen replies, "the last paragraph in that section was not a paragraph that I wrote. That was added to my testimony" (1:14:51). Hansen's comment suggests that a corrupt group of conspirators have tampered with scientific evidence. Second, Gore shows on the screen an edited memo by Phil Cooney, formerly a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute and later, Chief of Staff for the Council on Environmental Quality in the Bush Administration. Nearly the entire document is crossed out,

demonstrating the degree to which corrupt government officials have censored climate science.

Gore moves away from providing evidence to support the conspiracy theory and challenges a common assumption that conspirators often make about the environment: that we can either help the environment or the economy. To illustrate that this option is a "false choice" (1:18:04), Gore makes a parody of a cartoon depicting a scale with gold bars on the left and the planet on the right. Through this image and by arguing that both the economy and the environment can flourish, Gore effectively reinforces the reform nature of *An Inconvenient Truth*. In turn, he proposes that we undertake technological and lifestyle solutions to address the problem of climate change. For example, Gore presents a pie chart of all the solutions available to us to address climate change. These solutions include energy efficient vehicles and carbon capture and sequestration. Gore continues to discuss how "each one of us can make a difference by the things we buy, the electricity we use, the cars we drive" (1:23:37). In the background, we see computer simulated pictures of rotating solar panels, high speed trains, windmills and individuals in China riding bikes. Through the soothing rationale of these minor reforms and with the knowledge that we cannot do anything to address the large-scale conspiracy of climate change, viewers are absolved of having to do anything radically political to address the environmental crisis.

Finally, the film uses the sublime to demonstrate how vast, awe-inspiring and abstract the planet is. The film ends on a sublime satellite image of the earth in the backdrop of a kaleidoscopic and multicolored sky. This image brings the audience back to a state of awe about how vast, huge and precious our planet is. We zoom out on a

sublime satellite of the earth as a tiny, white pixel in the universe. Speaking to this image, Gore rhapsodies about how "all the triumphs, all the tragedies, all the war, all the famines… it's our only home and that is what is at stake" (1:27:14). Just like in the beginning of the film, this image is sublime because it presents a view of the earth as sacred, pure, abstract and as part of our collective history, which are all misleading claims about the current state of the environment. Finally, in a scene at the river where Gore's family farm is, the film comes to a full circle. The film ends with text that comes across the screen:

> Are you ready to change the way you live? The climate crisis can be solved. Here's how to start. Go to www.climatecrisis.net. In fact, you can even reduce your carbon emissions to zero. Buy energy efficient appliances + lightbulbs. Change your thermostat (and use clock thermostats) to reduce energy for heating + cooling. Recycle… If you can, buy a hybrid car. (1:29:30)

Thus, through appealing to individualistic and consumer oriented solutions, scientific graphs and charts. *An Inconvenient Truth* fully absolves us of tackling the political and social issues behind the environmental crisis. It also absolves audiences from the real work of addressing climate change in the context of a complex, post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture.

The 11th Hour

About a year after theatres showed *An Inconvenient Truth*, Warner Independent Pictures released *The 11th Hour*. While critics described *The 11th Hour* as the "unofficial sequel" (Zaleski, 2007, para.1), the former distinguished itself by covering a much wider array of themes than *An Inconvenient Truth*, such as mankind's place in the animal kingdom and the nature of human greed (Bowles, 2007, para.3). The year the film came out also coincided with the release of the Fourth Assessment Report of the United

Nations' International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The document, which received widespread media coverage, aroused public alarm regarding anthropogenic climate change. Even reporters from the national blog The Huffington Post and The New York Times were often willing to overlook the "term paper format" of the documentary and call the film a "must see" and "essential viewing" (Zaleski, 2007, para.1) for the purpose of raising awareness of climate calamity.

The 11th Hour belongs in the same category of reform films as *An Inconvenient Truth*. Like *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The 11th Hour* only seeks to make minor adjustments to the political and economic system to address the degradation of nature. However, *The 11th Hour* adopts unique and more imaginative perspectives on how the market, human activity and nature can complement one another. For example, this film envisions a 'green economy' where conserving environmental resources, working less, spending less and using renewable fuels is rewarded, as opposed to punished, by the market. *The 11th Hour*'s premise is that the future of humanity is in jeopardy due to human actions that degrade the earth and push the environment into its 'eleventh hour' or the last moment when change can happen to avert possible disaster. Unlike *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The 11th Hour* focuses on a much wider array of environmental issues such as air pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, marine life depletion, human health and species extinction. The fact that the film focuses on the cultural, political, spiritual and social causes of environmental degradation also distinguishes the film from *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Narrated by Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio, the last third of the film proposes reform, as opposed to radical solutions, in the form of new design, technology, consuming less and 'reconnecting' with the earth. The fact that over seventy experts are

cited in the film, including former Soviet Prime Minister Mikhail Gorbachev, Dr. David Suzuki, scientist Stephen Hawking, former head of the CIA James Woolsey, and sustainable design experts William McDonough and Bruce Mau, contributes to the documentary's expertise based storyline. The film is organized in a linear and sequential way that introduces the environmental crisis, the negative human relationship to nature, the problem of climate change, ecosystem extinction, the culprits behind the environmental crisis and potential solutions to the crisis. Unlike in *An Inconvenient Truth*, the conspiracy theory in *The 11th Hour* is more generalized and the culprits of the environmental crisis are consumer culture and government officials under the influence of corporations, in particular oil companies.

The 11th Hour opens with the sublime, drawing attention to the ways that nature is being destroyed. The haunting and sublime images include a human fetus, human corpses, military troops, the burning of oil fields, skeletal bodies, stock traders and chickens hung on an industrial line. Together, these images frighten and awe us by the monstrous things done to nature. This footage is sublime insofar as it presents nature as a powerful and fear-inducing force, so frightening and vast that it is difficult to fully comprehend. This imagery also emphasizes the fact that amoral human actions have transgressed the inherent moral goodness of nature. Following this sublime opening, a series of experts warn of the apocalyptic implications of neglecting nature. Experts plea passionately that the earth is "sick" (2:53) and that it is putting us at risk of surviving or surviving in a world that we do not want to live in (2:42). In particular, Paul Stamets sets the apocalyptic tone for the remainder of the film when he says that, "I hear generations in the future screaming back to us in time, 'what are you doing? Don't you see?'…we are

ultimately committing suicide" (3:42). Starting *The 11th Hour* film from the point of view of the apocalypse is effective not only to demonstrate to audiences what is at stake in the environmental crisis, but also, for setting up the film to later on demonstrate that the crisis is a product of a conspiracy.

Next, the film uses the sublime to emphasize the notion of interconnectivity, a concept that is integral to the solidification of the conspiracy theory. To make a point that what we see in nature and natural disasters is not as it seems, DiCaprio says that:

> …[N]ow, ecological disasters are depicted as isolated incidents by the media. But, if we connect these events, would we find a larger story that needs to be told, a human story. And more so than that, a global understanding that takes into account who we are and the state of our relationship to this planet, our only home. (4:48)

To depict these isolated media incidents, the film shows exploding mountains, skeletons of dead animals in the desert, tornadoes and blazing volcanoes. By implying that these images are connected, DiCaprio sets the stage for the conspiracy theory's adherence to the notion that everything is connected. In many ways, *The 11th Hour* adopts a contemporary style of conspiracy that as Peter Knight (2000) explains, has "changed from a rigid conviction about a particular demonized enemy, to a cynical and generalized sense of the ubiquity – and even the necessity – of clandestine, conspiring forces in a world in which everything is connected" (p. 3).

The conspiracy theory at this stage of the film plays a very small role and instead, we experience sublime vistas of sunsets, mountains covered in clouds and buffalos roaming on a field. The vistas are sublime because they expose the vastness and size of the environment and all of its creations, in a way that eludes our full understanding of nature. Meanwhile, experts rhapsodize about the ways that "creation is the universe, it is

everything we can see and a lot of what we can't see" (5:47). The notion that everything is connected, the emphasis on how we are a part of some mystical relationship with nature and sublime landscapes of the environment set the stage for suggesting that the conspiracy theory is the only logical explanation for the rupture in nature's pristine state.

From this point forward, experts draw on the sublime to demonstrate how we believe we are superior to and separate from nature. This sets up an important foundation for the conspiracy theory, which is that corporations are poisoning our environment for the sake of profits. Specifically, expert discussion feeds into the notion that an overly rationalistic and exploitative corporate structure is conspiring to destroy nature. To break the feel-good storyline about how special the earth and we are, scientist David Suzuki discusses the ways that the intellectual abilities of humans not only allow humans to be different from nature, but also, how they enable us to simultaneously create and destroy the environment. DiCaprio picks up from Suzuki's statement and poses the question, "if the human mind threw us out of balance, what changed in the last century?" (10:40).

At the textual level of the film, this expert commentary is brought to life by shocking depictions of technology in all of its explosive and accelerated forms in contrast to shocking depictions of nature in its most raw form, such as lions roaming the Savanna. In presenting technology as sinister and outside of the sacred realm of nature, *The 11th Hour* film already begins to create a divide between nature and culture. This sublime representation of nature is problematic because it suggests to audiences that nature is something external to us, valuable only if it is uncontaminated by humans and consequently, best left to others to take care of. As Cronon (1996) has argued, "any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature - as

wilderness tends to do - is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior" (p. 22).

Next, experts return to using sublime imagery and description to emphasize the conspiracy theory surrounding oil. Economist reporter Vijay Vaitheeswaran says, "there is a lot of harm that oil does, economists would call them externalities because they are external to the price you pay at the pump" (17:40). Vaitheeswaran's discussion of the acid rain problem and the war in Iraq are accompanied by images of black clouds coming out of a coal factory and explosions of fire in the desert. By this point, the film has already interpreted these visuals as the consequences of using oil. Later, when the documentary shows entire homes being blown up, children in Africa crying and body bags in an airport, the substance is quickly associated with causing catastrophe on the planet. Ultimately, by giving oil characteristics through association with highly emotive and sublime images, oil becomes an influential symbol in the film and the means with which a powerful group of individuals can manipulate society, cause great harm to the environment and also, potentially kill humans.

To alleviate the feelings of fear that these sublime images cause, the film immediately cuts to a pristine, ideal, vast and majestic landscape of mountains. The film's transition to pastoral depictions of nature is a tactic that the reform film *The 11th Hour* uses often to avoid dwelling too deeply on the broader political and economic structures that fuel the exploitation of the environment. Furthermore, the cut to soaring vistas of oceans, followed by hypnotic, lyrical music, idealizes nature in its most pristine state and also, without humans. The implication of this idealization is that it perpetuates an artificially created dualism between nature and culture and justifies the dismissal of

protecting less than ideal forms of nature. As Cronon argues, "idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home" (p. 21).

Soon after, the film turns to the mechanics of the conspiracy theory to provide an explanation into the cause of climate change. DiCaprio's statement that "a few degrees difference is what separates us from catastrophic change" (20:19) focuses the film on the subject of climate change news. Suddenly, clips of droughts, storms and floods caused by climate change and the tragic displacement of humans from Hurricane Katrina juxtapose with a televised clip of Senator James Inhofe's infamous statement that "could it be that climate change is the greatest hoax ever perpetuated on the American people" (21:27). This juxtaposition makes it clear not only that the denial of climate change is a product of a conspiracy but also, that any deniers of climate change evidence are cynical, ignorant and even inhumane. Already, as in *An Inconvenient Truth*, we see the beginning of a mounting of evidence to compensate for the lack of logical argument for why a conspiracy is the cause of environmental degradation. As Creps (1980) explains:

> The underlying assumption here is that individual bits of proof may not amount to much for the uninitiated, but that a carefully constructed combination of facts can enlighten even the most naive auditor... Each individual fact may be less than dispositive, but the totality of all the evidence provides both a huge mass of probative material and a seemingly unassailable pattern of explanation. (pp. 43-44)

Right after Inhofe's statement, footage of people's homes in New Orleans, starved cows, burning fields and helicopter views of massive, deforested patches of land reinforce the severity of the climate change crisis.

Then, sublime depictions of red skies, deserts and the sulfuric acid rain of planet Venus scare and mesmerize us not only about the risk of death as a result of global warming, but also, how far the human race has altered the planet with our technology. In this last section on climate change, Stephen Hawkins predicts that the Earth could transform into planet Venus as a result of prolonged global warming. As in *An Inconvenient Truth*, footage such as that of Venus helps to manufacture a feeling of a crisis. In the case of *The 11th Hour*, these crisis moments point to the apocalyptic nature of the film. In the environmental movement, apocalyptic visuals of warning often heighten the need for audiences to apportion blame to a single individual or group responsible for the looming crisis.

Following pastoral footage of majestic, cloud covered mountains and vast oceans, DiCaprio warns us that, "we face a convergence of crises, all of which are a concern for life" (29:25). In this section of the film, experts walk us through major problems such as species extinction, deforestation, soil erosion and chemical dumping in the soil and water, dead zones in the ocean, over-fishing and pollution. Meanwhile, sublime images of massive trees falling in forests, floods carrying away entire homes, tankers spilling toxins in the ocean and twitching disorders in babies illustrate expert commentary. The discussion on declining ecosystems contributes little to heighten the conspiracy theory except to leave us feeling scared and angry with what others and we have done to nature. For example, oceanographer Jeremy Jackson predicts that:

> …[W]ith all of our dead zones, we could make the [ocean] surface, the whole damn surface ocean, stagnate. And that's a terrifying thought. The last time that happened was the End-Permian mass extinction and more than 95% of all the species on the earth went extinct. (37:36)

In *The 11th Hour*, a sense of fatalism tends to produce a sense of despair of the overwhelming forces that produce the environmental crisis. In fact, often unbeknownst to us, the film is using only the most sublime images of environmental degradation to arouse the audience's interest. Thus, the sublime representation of nature, insofar as it stimulates intense feelings (pathos), serves as one of *The 11th Hour*'s most influential rhetorical tactics.

Following the longest, most haunting and dramatic cut to a pastoral vista of majestic mountains and ice caps, the film returns to the conspiracy theory to introduce morally suspect culprits of climate change. First, DiCaprio asks, "what are the forces that are blocking change?" (39:45). In response, the film immediately cuts to a shot of a corporate boardroom. A shot to the boardroom presents businesses as morally suspect culprits in the conspiracy to block environmental progress. At this stage, the film begins to look at the conspiracy plot of corporations and governments working in cahoots to block solutions to the environmental crisis. Environmental justice advocate Tom Linzey says that, "in reality we have a constitution that empowers the corporate few to make decisions that trump the majority. And it's been our failure to drive real law into place because we don't have the authority" (40:52). In saying this, he articulates a common theme that the conspiracy theory hinges on: the existence of an all-powerful group of individuals that "wills the course of history" (Hofstadter, 1964, p. 84).

Immediately after, foreboding music and a nighttime, aerial view of the White House reinforces the seemingly unstoppable and mysterious internal workings of politics. Similarly, Michael Gelobter, Executive Director of the environmental non-profit Redefining Progress states that "the reality is that we have very responsive leaders, they

are just responsive to wealth, to money and to corporate power" (41:06). Gelobter's comment is followed by a shot of ExxonMobil corporate headquarters, an image that reinforces the idea that corporations are corrupt forces in American society. He further states that, "people say, gee, why aren't politicians responding to the climate crisis?… Because they're responsive to a higher power unfortunately and right now, that higher power is the fossil fuel industry" (41:20).

The conspiracy theory in *The 11th Hour* moves from being generalized around corporations and corrupt governments to being pinpointed at particular individuals in the Bush Administration (2001-2009). As Hofstadter (1964) argues, people view power through a sinister lens when they are cut out from the political bargaining process (p. 86). In a clip of a televised interview, Rick Pilz, Former Senior Associate of the U.S. Climate Change Science Program, reveals to the interviewer that Phil Cooney, formerly a lobbyist for the American Petroleum Institute and at that time, Chief of Staff for the Council on Environmental Quality, returned a review on climate change with a "large number of edits" (41:45). A pan in on a document with crossed out edits further feeds the conspiracy theory.

The fact that both businesses and government are intertwined and working together to block any kind of environmental progress to protect corporate profits sinks viewers into a deep apathy that nothing can be done. In this way, experts who criticize the causes of the environmental crisis in a conspiratorial lens ultimately do a disservice to the environmental movement by providing unrealistic and false hopes of ever overcoming large-scale, impenetrable corporate and government systems. As Hofstadter (1964) argues:

> This demand for total triumph leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid's sense of frustration. (p. 85)

Experts may think that they may be doing a service to viewers by hinting at a conspiracy but they may in fact be providing people with information that ultimately paralyses them. This is because audiences often lack the wealth, authority and other means, to overpower the conspirators. As Fenster (2008) explains, in the conspiracy theory, we substitute "fears of all powerful conspiratorial groups for political activism and hope" (p. 219). Then, when DiCaprio asks, "to what extent do we participate in the destruction of our biosphere?" (46:57), the film shows image after image of gaudy product advertisements and people scurrying in shopping malls. This carefully constructed presentation creates the impression that consumer culture is a generalized conspiracy perpetrated on the American people. Tom Thartmann sets the stage for the consumerism themed part of the film by arguing that the environmental crisis is "fundamentally a cultural problem" (47:26). To illustrate what this cultural problem looks like, we see an advertisement of a couple diving into a massive credit card surrounded by palm trees. Similarly, an assortment of advertisements for computer, automobile and household products illustrate how advertising potentially brainwashes audiences and how pervasive the products of the advertising industry are in disconnecting us from nature. For example, David Orr asserts that, "we are now products of 500 billion dollars of advertising" (47:35).

Slowly, the film transitions from footage and text suggestive of an underlying conspiracy to sublime images of nature. In this transition, we are slowly absolved from the conspiracy theory of corrupt governments, greedy corporations and an insidious consumer culture. Whereas the conspiracy theory alarmed us earlier in the film, we now

marvel at sublime and pastoral views of planet earth. Meanwhile, experts soothe us by rhapsodizing about the beauty and tenaciousness of our planet. For example, accompanied by pastoral depictions of sunsets and birds flying in the sky, Suzuki says that:

> I don't believe for a minute that life will be extinguished. Even though we have radically altered the air, the soil, the water, life has been incredibly tenacious and adaptable…99.9999% of all species that have ever existed are extinct. So, extinction is a natural part of life. Extinction is what makes life flourish. (54:30)

Through Suzuki's statement and beautiful images of nature, we become filled with a sense of wonderment at the same time that we are overwhelmed with sublime feelings of our own greatness and power. Sharing Burke's view that the sublime object risks apoliticizing issues, Lyotard is critical of the fact that the classical Kantian sublime process encourages us to believe that the nightmare will never occur. In the case of *The 11th Hour*, both experts and Romantic footage of nature suggest that nature is resilient and by extension, that the environmental crisis will not occur.

In a quick turn in the film and expert Joseph Tainter's cue that, "I think that there is potential for a dark age" (55:40), *The 11th Hour* stops marveling at the environment and begins aestheticizing the potentially disastrous future of the planet through the use of the sublime. For example, expert David Or says that, "what we risk is the destruction of civilization, everything we fought for… It will have been undone in a flash of consumption, bad judgement, violence…" (56:22). Meanwhile, we see a dismantled house drowning away on a river, a toxic waste dump and a dead carcass of a beached whale. In the case of *The 11th Hour*, only images that symbolize the worst-case scenario are shown in order to heighten our feelings of fear in the film. Thus, the documentary

contributes to creating a sense of apathy that nothing can be done to overcome the overwhelming state of the environmental crisis.

Soon after, we are again absolved from the conspiracy theory and desperation of the environmental crisis through footage of different kinds of renewable technologies and green design products. With DiCaprio's question, "does nature hold the answers we need to help restore our planet's resources, protect our atmosphere and therefore, help all life survive?" (59:42), experts begin to suggest that despite the seemingly desperate situation, there is hope for us through finding a harmony between nature, technology and design. For example, the National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence Wade Davis says that, "if human beings are the source of the problem, we can be the foundation of the solution" (1:00:00). Then, following images of glimmering solar panels, rooftop gardens and offshore wind farms, author Tom Thartmann sets the tone for this solutions-oriented section of the film by saying that:

> …[S]ome people suggest that in order to live sustainably, we have to go out in the woods and put on animal skins and live on roots and berries, and the simple reality is that we do have technology. The question is how can we use science and technology, along with our understanding of culture…to create a culture that will interact with science and the world around us, in a sustainable fashion. (1:00:09)

In *The 11th Hour* film, as in *An Inconvenient Truth*, it is primarily technology, not nature that is the object of our sublime feelings. As Tabbi (1996) states, "Kant's sublime object, a figure for an infinite greatness and infinite power in nature that cannot be represented, seems to have been replaced in postmodern literature by a technological process" (p. ix). Ultimately, *The 11th Hour* is a reform film that advocates for minor tweaks, not a significant overhaul, to the post-industrial, neoliberal and consumerist system. Together, computer simulated depictions of sophisticated, high-speed trains and

renewable energy powered homes become sublime objects in that they inspire both fear and awe in terms of their speed, size and ability. In presenting these objects in an awe-inspiring light, the film also gives the impression that these products and technologies can overpower the environmental crisis and our own human failings to salvage the environment.

The film's ending, which by this point has emphasized the greatness of human achievement in science and technology and encouraged minor lifestyle changes, anaesthetizes us from the conspiracy theory through the use of the sublime and the pastoral. For example, the native leader Oren Lyons reinforces the film's sublime nature, which ultimately makes us think of our own infinity, greatness and power:

> …[I]f we choose to eradicate ourselves from this earth by whatever means, the earth goes nowhere and in time it will regenerate and all the lakes will be pristine, the rivers, the waters, the mountains, everything will be green again, it will be peaceful, there may not be people, but the earth will regenerate. And you know why, the earth has all the time in the world and we don't. So I think that's where we are at, right now. (1:23:25)

Immediately after Oren Lyon's words are spoken, we are taken on an exhilarating helicopter ride depicting pastoral images of glaciers, gushing waterfalls and lush, forested mountain tops. Meanwhile, the primal sound of a drumbeat intensifies and ends on a sublime satellite image of planet Earth. The words "11thHourFilm.com. Join the movement. 11thHourAction.com" displays across the screen, reminding us of the advocacy intent of the film.

As a reform film, *The 11th Hour* converges around three key themes. First, it relies on the conspiracy theory to avoid dealing with the fact that the environmental crisis is largely a product of the complex and controllable forces of the post-industrial society,

neoliberalism and consumer culture. That is, for example, the environmental crisis is a product of the global convergence towards the commodification and privatization of water, the air and the earth, not a cabal of immoral individuals. Second, The 11th Hour does not address the fact that environmental crises such as desertification, deforestation and climate change are the uncontrollable biproducts of decisions made since at least the Industrial Age to exploit nature's resources.

Ultimately, The 11th Hour suggests that with a few technological advances or the consumption of new green goods, we can avert the environmental crisis. The 11th Hour services the environmental movement insofar as its engage audiences in the environmental crisis through an aestheticized, dramatized and simplified explanation of the crisis. In this way, The 11th Hour does a disservice to the environmental movement by fostering an ideal of environmental activism that is distracted by the conspiracy theory and the aesthetics of the sublime and the pastoral.

Chapter 4: Case Study of Radical Documentaries

Drawing from this project's thesis, this chapter argues that radical films, which 2000-era environmental documentaries such as *The End of Suburbia* and *The Long Shadow* exemplify, also promote harmful Romantic views of nature and produce overly simplistic knowledge about the causes of global environmental degradation through the use of the conspiracy theory. First, by relying on the faulty strategies of the Romantic views of nature, both the sublime and the pastoral, environmental films exacerbate the nature-culture dualism and promote a 'nature as escape' notion that sustains environmental degradation in the first place.

As radical films, both *The End of Suburbia* and *The Long Shadow* seek to depart in a major way from what John Dryzek conceptualizes as the industrialist discourse, which he argues inherently exploits nature (p. 13). At their core, radical films desire a dramatically different political, economic and cultural structure that is not based on unlimited economic growth and technological solutions. The films *The End of Suburbia* and *The Long Shadow* are important to analyze because they exemplify key assumptions that the radical stream of the environmental movement holds about environmental problems, nature and the environment.

While *The End of Suburbia* and *The Long Shadow* differ in their years of release, their modes of distribution and reception from audiences and critics, both films make similar economic, political and social critiques. Produced by An Electric Wallpaper Company in 2005 and directed by Gregory Green, *The End of Suburbia* was distributed in the United States through Microcinema and in Canada through KRK Media (The Electric Wallpaper Company, 2009). While the film was exhibited in independent

screenings across the U.S. and Canada, its reach was marginal compared to the prosaic-reform film *An Inconvenient Truth*. For instance, in a ranking of the top one hundred highest grossing documentary films of all time, *An Inconvenient Truth* is the sixth highest grossing documentary film to date (IMDb Inc., 2011). In contrast, *The End of Suburbia* is not among the top one hundred highest grossing documentary films and instead, reached a primarily "broad underground audience" (Klare, 2004, para. 3) when it was released.

The End of Suburbia garnered positive praise from alternative news organizations while mainstream news organizations received the film with mixed feelings. Thomas Wheeler (2004), contributing editor of the Alternative Press Review, writing for the Baltimore Chronicle and Sentinel, called *The End of Suburbia* "one of the most important must-see documentaries of the year" (para. 17). He also argued that the film provided "a much-needed look at the reality of the situation many in North America will be facing in the coming years" (para. 17). Meanwhile, Andrew Potter (2006), columnist for Maclean's and co-author of *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture Can't be Jammed*, argued that, "in the spirit of The Corporation or Bowling for Columbine, *The End of Suburbia* rehearses a number of familiar arguments" (para. 5). Potter further explained that most of the arguments made in the film are "just lifestyle snobbery masquerading as social conscience" (para. 8) since "the people who move to the suburbs aren't nearly as stupid or careless or brainwashed as the makers of *The End of Suburbia* seem to think" (para. 9). Meanwhile, audiences who were already engaged with the subject of peak oil called the film "a perfect tool for introducing people to peak oil. Just enough humor to sugarcoat the bitter pill" (The Electric Wallpaper Company, 2004) and applauded the film for its highly informative and eye-opening content (IMDb, 2011). Audiences new to the topic and

skeptical of the goals of the environmental movement generally dismissed the film for its left-leaning ideological stance and hypocritical criticism of suburbia (Corcoran, 2005, para. 13).

The End of Suburbia was a particularly important film to the environmental movement because its storyline directly challenged reformist assumptions, rampant in popular films such as *An Inconvenient Truth*. For instance, reform films often argue that all it takes is a technological fix, a new 'greener' lifestyle or a product to solve environmental problems. In fact, *The End of Suburbia* argues that no amount or combination of renewable energy or technology in existence today will be able to sustain the North American lifestyle at the level that it is functioning now. While the film critiques excess energy usage, it actually takes direct aim at excess production and consumption. In particular, the film calls for a dramatic reduction in intensive travel, production and consumption, three key points that are characteristic of radical environmentalist rhetoric. The film argues that if North American society does not take these steps, it will face extreme oil withdrawal symptoms and a crippling of its economic, political and social structures.

The Long Shadow is a unique film in this project in that it is the only documentary that emerged in an academic setting, as opposed to a commercial production company. Steve Meador, the director of the film and a journalism student at the time, created the documentary as part of his Master's Project at the Michigan State University's Center for Environmental Journalism. The documentary was not shown in theatres and attracted significant controversy. The film was rejected by PBS and at least four local Michigan stations (McKenna, 2005, para. 13). *The Long Shadow* was the most limited in its

distribution since copies of the DVD could only be viewed online or purchased through a local Midland activist group, the Tittabawassee River Watch (TRW). The group calls itself "an organization of concerned property owners along the river promoting the protection of our homes, health and river from the effects of unprecedented dioxin contamination" (TRW, n.d.).

The Long Shadow can be seen as a small scale, 2000-era version of the 1982 documentary *If You Love this Planet*. While the content of the films is different – *If You Love this Planet* spoke about the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and *The Long Shadow* detailed the 2002 dioxin controversy in Midland, Michigan – both films were disruptive to the status quo and received antagonistic reactions from the government and corporations in the U.S. Whereas the message of the Oscar-winning short film *If You Love this Planet*, delivered by outspoken nuclear critic Dr. Helen Caldicott, was that the government could not postpone nuclear disarmament (NFB, 2011), Meador's (2003) message was that *The Long Shadow*:

> Exemplifies the need for citizens to be fully engaged in the democratic process, and the danger in assuming that government officials are always acting in the best interest of the public they are charged to serve and protect.

In many ways, both films were directly focused, unlike any of the other films in this project, on political, social and economic injustices and the value of citizens keeping government accountable. For instance, due to the film's criticism of the government and its practices, the United States' Justice Department labeled *If You Love This Planet* "foreign political propaganda" (NFB, 2011). Similarly, journalist Brian McKenna (2005), remarked that "Michigan media and universities are quiescent [about the dioxin contamination], fearful of offending the behemoth [The Dow Chemical Company]" (para.

32), whose international headquarters are in Midland, Michigan. McKenna further suggested that local media and university were silent likely due to the fact that Dow had "contributed more than $10 million in direct contributions to the University of Michigan," an institution which also housed a PBS station (McKenna, 2005, para. 15).

The Long Shadow is an important documentary and is unlike any of the other films in this project because it focuses not on national or global ramifications of environmental problems, but on how one powerful corporation can place a host of social, economic and health risks upon a small community. As such, the film demonstrates the unintended and unwanted effects of the post-industrial society more clearly and succinctly than any other film in this project. In this sense, *The Long Shadow* functions as an activist tool that raises awareness of the tangible and damaging effects of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumerism on everyday citizens. In fact, the TRW often used *The Long Shadow* as direct evidence of the extreme levels of dioxin contamination that existed in the Midlands, Michigan area in 2002 and referred members of its activist group to purchase the DVD (TRW, n.d.).

When analyzing the radical films, this chapter will address the following questions. First, what can looking at *The End of Suburbia* and *The Long Shadow* as conspiracy theory films tell us about how environmental problems are defined in the 2000s? And, what are the implications of these definitions and what do they fail to portray? Second, in what ways do *The End of Suburbia* and *The Long Shadow*, through their Romantic depictions of nature, re-assert harmful notions of nature? What are the implications of these depictions? Third, what do these films not show about nature, the environment and the causes of environmental degradation? As this analysis will

demonstrate, these two films, like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The 11th Hour*, will weave back and forth between using aspects of the conspiracy theory, the sublime and the pastoral to make their claims.

The End of Suburbia

The End of Suburbia begins with a juxtaposition of disheartening quotes (e.g. "we're literally stuck up a cul-de-sac in a cement SUV without a fill-up") and post-war images of an overly enthusiastic nuclear family moving into a suburban home. In the background, a narrator's voice describes the positive and exciting aspects of suburbia and points out that the suburban family does not know what they have signed on to by moving to suburbia. The footage of smiling families is interrupted by events showing the evolution of suburbia over the decades, leading up to the chaotic and negative aspects of suburban living in the 2000s. Kunstler sets the tone for the remainder of the film by saying that, "the whole suburban project can be summarized quite succinctly as the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world. America took all of its post-World War II wealth and invested it in a living arrangement that has no future" (4:14). Kunstler is a dominant voice in the film since his comments colour the documentary with his distinctly left-leaning, radical ideologies towards the market, society and politics. As such, his perspective greatly influences what is proposed for viewers to believe, see and think.

The confluence of dystopian commentary and beaming suburban couples frames suburbia as a farce. This framing is foundational to the conspiracy theory that later manifests in the documentary because it posits the experts that critique suburbia as having superior knowledge that suburbia was a major risk to develop in the first place.

The point of view that the narrators in the film adopt is that ordinary citizens were not consulted in the development of the suburban project. The assumption from the beginning is that suburbia was built by evil and amoral individuals in high-ranking positions of power. As Hofstadter (1964) argues, people view power through a sinister lens when they are cut out from the political bargaining process (p. 86). Michael Maniates and John Meyer (2010) argue that:

> Suburban life also involves individualization of risk avoidance as it offers a seeming refuge from the social, political and ecological problems associated with urbanization and overdevelopment… As Ulrich Beck notes in discussing the "risk society," such attempts at escape are ultimately fruitless. Moreover, in promising shelter from risk, suburbia shields its residents from collective sacrifice. (p. 218)

Later in the film, pre-suburban life is portrayed in terms of pastoral depictions of nature in order to frame nature as a former Eden and a morally incorruptible object. Kunstler first discusses country living as the template for suburbia and a reaction against the grim realities of industrialism. Nineteenth century depictions of tranquil, spacious and elegant country life in the form of manors are shown in contrast to toiling, soot-covered workers in factories during the Industrial Age. As a result of the fact that suburbia cannot fulfill the pastoral pleasures of the countryside or the sophistication of the city, Kunstler labels suburbia as a 'false promise'. The presentation of pre-suburban life through a pastoral lens conjures feelings of nostalgia for an illusive, Edenic past and reinforces human greatness over nature. This is achieved by positioning nature as an "other" whose purpose is to provide aesthetic pleasure. This positioning could potentially be used as a justification to develop the land for economic purposes. As Christine Oravec (1996) explains, the sublime convention is "openly used for the purposes of promotion, settlement, and development of the land" (p. 65).

Kunstler continues with the theme of the pastoral, gradually contributing to the creation of a human-nature dualism in the film. First, he discusses the history of suburbia as if it is an inevitable compromise between two different worlds: the city and the country. Similarly, the success of suburbia is measured against the degree to which it includes authentic nature as opposed to artificial, cookie-cutter lawns. At this stage in the film, even though the intention may be to simply explain the origins of suburbia, the film reasserts the same type of culture and nature dualism that helped inform the suburban project in the first place. This dualism is problematic because it provides a reason to romanticize nature, while creating a distance from it and thus, develops what Cronon discuss as an abdication of responsibility from nature. This dualism posits nature as the place where humans are not, therefore making humans living in nature represent the fall of nature indefinitely (p. 17). The compromise that Kunstler suggests recalls the problematic ways that North American society celebrates the notion of an unadulterated wilderness and uses it as the measure to judge civilization. Cronon argues that this situation leaves "little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honourable human place in nature might look like" (p. 17).

In a segue from the history of suburbia to the ways that the suburban project produced a North American wide dependence on cars and highways, the film focuses on the conspiratorial ways that automobile and oil companies have contributed to the failed suburban development. Calthorpe discusses the conspiring of oil companies to destroy the light rail system during the 1940s and replace it with highways and cars. Black and white archive footage shows Roger Moses, a New York traffic authority director, receiving an award for his new highway design in a room full of oil and automobile

corporate executives. Meanwhile, Kunstler summarizes the problem of suburbia as one of North Americans "stuck up a cul-de-sac in a cement SUV with an empty gas tank" (19:31). The additional footage of the New York traffic director receiving an award at a corporate sponsored event solidifies this scene as evidence that suburbia is the product of the conspiracy theory. This rhetorical claim, constructed through a series of textual evidence and images of authority figures in a private reception area, is problematic because it gives the illusion that the logic of the conspiracy theory is self-evident. In actuality, as Creps points out, the conspiracy theory is constructed through a distracting and overwhelming array of evidence. Later in the film, Kunstler and other experts attempt to present the problem of cars and highways as a structural problem where individual agency is meaningless and irrelevant in face of the conspiratorial decisions made by oil and automobile companies. This framing suggests "a sense of fatalism, or predestination where nothing can be done, we can only watch the progression towards the final result, in the hope that next time we may recognize the writing on the wall" (Bal, 1997, p. 9). In the case of *The End of Suburbia*, the predestination is the nightmare scenario that North American society will collapse as a result of suburbia.

In fact, the conspiracy theory, as Peter Knight (2000) argues, "gives voice to a far more general anxiety about the loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of increasingly vast and bureaucratic forces that seem to control our lives" (p. 10). However, by depending on the conspiracy theory and presenting the present day problems of gridlock and sprawl in terms of the technological sublime, the film constructs environmental problems too narrowly as a problem of the moral transgression of humans. Thus, it overlooks the ways in which the problem is a complex confluence of post-

industrial mass production of automobiles, consumer desires for a personal automobiles and a neoliberal tendency towards individualized modes of transport. As van Wyck (2005) discusses, when signs of the degradation of the environment are "read symptomatically as providing a link between a manifest crisis and a disrupted or transgressed nature" (p. 95), they ultimately tell a story about the moral improprieties of man (p. 95).

Furthermore, in demonstrating the negative implications of suburbia with imagery of a chaotic, endless and seemingly out of control landscape of suburban homes and six-lane highways, the documentary's imagery conjures feelings of the technological and postmodern sublime. Jonathan Bordo (1992) describes this state as the condition of being overwhelmed, threatened and bewildered by the effects of technology (p. 171). Whereas in the original Romantic tradition, individuals experience this humbling sense of fear and awe only before nature, these feelings have been transferred to technology and the chaotic debris of civilization. The conjuring of the technological sublime in the form of mesmerizing footage of complex societal structures has negative implications. In addition, the accelerated and overlapping footage of six-lane highways, gas stations, suburban homes and the Las Vegas strip conjure the postmodern sublime insofar as these awe-inspiring and frightening landscapes attempt but ultimately fail to represent the entirely and complexity of global, capitalist networks of speed, power and consumption. This footage ironically emphasizes the power and technological prowess of humans to create these structures, which downplays the potentially destructive and dystopian forces of suburbia.

In the next part of the film, a 2003 blackout event in Toronto becomes a symbol

that the North American population is being enveloped in a conspiracy theory about dwindling global energy supplies. Matt Simmons, a prominent energy investment banker, argues that the August 13, 2003 blackout in Toronto and the East Coast of the United States was a 'big red light' that North American society is reaching peak capacity of energy use. Experts such as Michael C. Ruppert, an author and publisher, reinforces Simmons' expertise and argues that "a guy of this background [saying] that future growth is not possible is like the Catholic church saying that the earth is round before Galileo" (25:28). Again, the film builds up layer upon layer of evidence to obfuscate the fact that the conspiracy theory of the suburban project does not hinge on any type of clear logic. As Hofstadter (1966) argues, a review of a vast corpus of evidence is only "careful preparation for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable" (p. 37-38).

By attempting to present the blackout in terms of a conspiracy, the film overlooks how North America is affected by unintended, unseen and unwanted risks by virtue of being connected to a global, transnational network. First, the film frames the 2003 blackout as the ultimate evidence that peak oil is in effect and over-emphasizes the role that the energy industry plays in sustaining social, economic and political networks. Meanwhile, the film underemphasizes the post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture factors that allowed the blackout to occur in the first place. As Beck (2006) explains:

> The cosmopolitanization of reality… is not the result of a cunning conspiracy on the part of 'global capitalists' or an 'American play for world domination', but an unforeseen social effect of actions directed to other ends performed by human beings operating within a network of global interdependence risks. (p. 48)

Moreover, it is this confrontation and representational inadequacy of a global network of corporate, financial, information and communication systems that produces the feeling of the postmodern sublime in which humans realize their limitations to comprehend these

global, intertwined links. Footage of Toronto in stark darkness depicts how far the human race has exploited nature's energy sources and thus presents the phenomenon of peak oil through a postmodern sublime lens. Ultimately, however, as the postmodern sublime abstracts and separates technology (e.g. electricity) from its destructive aspects (e.g. large scale crash of cities) with its mesmerizing combination of fear and awe, the film contributes to legitimizing human control and exploitation of nature and the environment.

Again, the film takes a conspiratorial turn when the narrator poses the question, "what have we not been told about the future of oil?" (26:40). Heinberg, Ruppert, Kunstler and Julian Darley provide a brief overview of the bell curve of oil reserves, depletion and the dwindling of oil reserves. Ruppert explains that, "the books on oil have been as cooked as the books at Enron" (32:12) while Heinberg shares that, "in the late 1980s, virtually all of the Arab countries reported extraordinary reserve increases of something like fifty to one hundred per cent, just within a year or two and this wasn't related to any new discovery" (32:28). To emphasize the fact that peak oil is a very near reality, Simmons argues that, "if it turns out that Saudi Arabia has peaked, then categorically, the world has peaked" (33:30). This experts insight into oil reserves and the dwindling of these reserves are satisfying insofar as they afford a view into the private world that only oil executives and nations' leaders are privy to.

However, the viewing of this truth is problematic because it sets up a type of elitist and moralistic view of the world. As Bartlett (2009) argues:

> The appeal of a conspiracy narrative is chiefly that it seems to empower the audience by aligning them with a precious truth, one that the majority are either blinded to or actively suppress. The viewer of such a narrative is cast as a hero, peeling back the lies and resisting the dogma with which the more powerful seek to oppress the downtrodden. (p. 39)

First, this elitist and moralistic perspective reinforces viewing nature through a Western, scientific rationalization lens in terms of a resource or a mere number to calculate on a spreadsheet. Second, this perspective distracts from the post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture factors that are bringing society to the brink of oil depletion by setting up the peak oil problem as a Manichean struggle of good versus evil agents. In the film, the binary division between moral and immoral individuals is constructed as real, even though it is an overly reductive analysis.

Following an introduction to the basics of peak oil theory, the documentary focuses on a peak oil conference in Paris. The conference becomes a key platform for experts to express peak oil in terms of a conspiratorial totality. Experts discuss the events that signal peak oil such as unemployment (e.g. "two million jobs lost"), economic instability ("seven trillion dollars lost in the U.S. stock market"), and the disappearance of the middle class. Accelerated footage of a gas fill up tank, six lane highways and weary looking families pushing baby strollers exemplify the negative implications of the suburban lifestyle.

As much as the film strives to connect various bits of evidence in terms of a dystopian and conspiratorial totality, it falls short because the conspiracy can never really be represented. As Jameson explains, conspiracy theory is "a degraded attempt…to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system to map networks of power too vast to be adequately represented" (p. 38). Not only does the conspiracy in *The End of Suburbia* fail to adequately present the impossible totality of global networks and unwanted risks as a result of resources, energy and technology usage, but this false grasp of totality leads to the thinking that these networks are operating in an intentionally

totalitarian regime. Fran Mason (2002) explains that conspiracy theory "either misrecognizes totality as totalitarianism or attempts to represent the unrepresentable by analogy. In both cases, there occurs a 'misrepresentation' that produces an illegitimate form of knowledge" (p. 42).

Meanwhile, accelerated and overlapping footage of row upon row of vegetables growing in a massive field and cellophane wrapped cheese on an industrial line conjures the technological sublime. In the next part of the film, experts explain that our society will have to downsize everything we do as a result of the peak oil crisis. These images suggest the threatening, overwhelming and uncontrollable technological effects of life in the post-industrial, neoliberal and consumerist society. Similarly, when Ruppert discusses how petroleum based fertilizers on farmland are not sustainable, imagery of the wholesale spraying of petroleum based fertilizers and pesticides on miles of degraded, sponge-like farm land conjures fear and awe about the destructive powers of modern technologies. Further reinforcing the emotional impact of these visuals and his expert commentary, Kunstler argues that the risks of rising agricultural and food prices will lead to questions such as, "how are **you** going to feed your children?" (42:35)

The technological sublime in the film can achieve one of two things. First, the technological sublime awakens feelings of infinite greatness and power (Tabbi, 1996, p. ix) in view of the complex and possibly deadly technologies used for agriculture, food production and transportation purposes. These feelings of awe can trump the fact that the human race continues to exploit nature and treat it as a resource for material gain. Thus, being overcome by the technological sublime in the documentary can potentially justify our domination of nature and foster a "dangerous disassociation between ourselves and

the forces of destruction" (Oravec, 1996, p. 68). Second, the technological sublime conjures feelings of fear that the technologies that human civilization has developed can ultimately kill us.

Next, experts use the mechanics of the conspiracy theory to illustrate the economic and political impacts of peak oil. In terms of the economy, Heinberg explains that the energy and financial markets are so intertwined that it would probably result in decreased economic activity, recession after recession and ultimately, an economic depression. To illustrate this future scenario, stark footage of the stock market contrasted by store closing signs is shown. Campbell predicts that people's immediate reaction will be that they have been "ripped off by the oil companies" (47:14). Speaking about the political implications, Kunstler argues that peak oil will lead to tremendous stress on the political system and the 'election of maniacs' to help Americans maintain their lifestyle. Video footage of enthusiastic, smiling and applauding politicians such as Senator John Kerry, former President Bush Jr., Dick Cheney and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger are shown.

Reiterating risk society theorists Giddens and Beck's arguments that ecological disasters are the unintended but nevertheless inevitable consequence of modernity, Knight explains that the conspiracy theory is becoming a convenient and yet unsatisfactory explanation for societal risks:

> Not only is the location of blame in the past becoming harder, but the time scale of the "boomerang effect" of cause and result in the future is likewise indefinite…It is precisely because everything is connected that it becomes impossible to separate out the contributory factors in locating causes and apportioning blame. (Knight, 2000, p. 207)

Discussing the social impacts of peak oil, experts blame the American public and the

media for producing complacency and what Heinberg calls “the fantasy” (52:09). Kunstler poses the question, “Why is the American public not informed? Where is the media in all of this?” This expert commentary is accompanied by news clips of smiling anchor people rapidly overlaid with clips of Michael Jackson, NASCAR races, the Shopping Channel, the NFL and Jennifer Lopez. This footage and the superior tone of addressing the North American public suggests that North Americans are too busy paying attention to the wrong and superficial issues when they should be paying attention to the issue of peak oil. For example, Kunstler comments that, “we’re happily existing in the consensus trance, the idea that everything is OK and that everyone agrees that it’s OK” (52:11). Ironically, however, the presentation of environmental problems as those of a conspiring group of media and advertising companies distracts from the notion that peak oil is just one example of how far the unintended effects of neoliberalism and consumer culture can reach, including over-consumption, excess waste, abstraction from the organic processes of life and social anomie.

Then, the film cuts to Heinberg and Ruppert addressing a crowded room at a San Francisco peak oil conference about the individuals in U.S. government who are behind the plan to continue wars and permit North American dependence on fossil fuels. In presenting the power relations between the U.S. military and North American energy industry as corrupt, the film implicitly casts the U.S. government in an unnecessarily sinister lens. Again, the film's conspiratorial aspect creates the illusion of totality or that the film has covered, connected and proven all the existing evidence to demonstrate that the American public’s catastrophic fate is in the hands of a few immoral individuals. However, since the conspiracy is ultimately a misrepresentation and mere analogy to the

unwanted effects of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture, these expert's arguments are undermined. Jameson (1995), for instance, explains totality in terms of the feeling of closure:

> The sense of closure here is the sign that somehow all the bases have been touched, and that the galactic dimensions and co-ordinates of the now global social totality have at least been sketched in. It should be obvious that, just as totalities can never be perceived with the naked eye (where they would remain, in any case, purely contemplative and epistemological images), so also closure in the postmodern, after the end of the (modernist) organic work, has itself become a questionable value, if not a meaningless concept. (p. 31)

Soon after, experts discuss the structural changes that need to occur for the suburban project to have a viable future. First, some experts advocate for "new urbanism", or a return to more livable, walkable and dense communities as an alternative. Second, Kunstler expresses skepticism that new urbanism is a real solution, arguing that North Americans will need to make do with the remnants of suburbia, not build new homes because "we are just entering a period where we have less money and less ability to invest in the future… We may see more than one family living in a McMansion, but I think they will basically be the slums of the future" (1:08). While these experts attempt to present thoughtful solutions, their suggestions ultimately revert to mere improvements to the suburban problem and function as a kind of defense from the largely uncontrollable and unintended risks of the post-industrial society, neoliberalism and consumer culture.

With the narrator's comment that "while some believe there exist few prospects for this way of life… others believe that there are ways to adapt to the new realities of the twenty first century" (1:11), experts begin to discuss the potential lifestyle, cultural and daily solutions that draw from both radical and reform films. For example, Kunstler argues that everything North Americans do must be local. Similarly, Simmons argues for

individuals to "start paying attention to how you use energy. Pay attention to the fact that energy costs were too cheap and need to be more expensive" (1:12). Closing the film on a positive note, Ruppert argues the peak oil will reverse globalization and bring a stronger sense of community. Similarly, Simmons says that, "from some of these great problems comes this great ingenuity. I think we will look back twenty years from now and [see] all the new things we developed" (1:14). Meanwhile, visuals of what suburbia originally was in the form of Technicolour footage of a family during the 1950s illustrate a suburban past that North America has lost.

Ultimately, while The End of Suburbia attempts to present radical structural solutions and expose the peak oil cover up of powerful governments and corporations in cahoots to hide the truth from North Americans, its solutions still revert to placing the burden of dealing with the unwanted risks of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture on the individual. In the end, the film succeeds at presenting suburbia as a failure and peak oil as a major problem that North American society has to face. However, it inadequately presents the complex problem of diminishing oil resources through the conspiracy theory, which serves only as a mere analogy to the larger, historical industrial, economic and cultural forces at play that are bringing society to a breaking point in terms of energy supplies.

The Long Shadow

In comparison to *The End of Suburbia* (2004), *The Long Shadow* (2003) does not suggest as radical and sweeping political, economic and social changes. Nonetheless, *The Long Shadow* embodies the character of a radical film due to its strong David and Goliath theme, grassroots origins and extremely local context (e.g. all the events occur in a small

county in Michigan state). In addition, the documentary uses a more subtle variant of the same techniques as *The End of Suburbia*. This is due to the fact that the problems exposed and solutions proposed are on a smaller scale (e.g. community dialogues, letters to local government) and are dealt with directly by a small group of local and grassroots residents and activists.

The Long Shadow chronicles the ways that citizens, scientists and environmental groups from Midland and Saginaw county in the Floodplains area in Michigan state fought Dow Chemical and various governmental agencies. Their purpose was to make Dow responsible for the dioxin contamination that the company had caused in their neighborhoods. Dow is the "creator of household brand names like Saran Wrap and Styrofoam and the Dow Midland plant has also manufactured more controversial products such as mustard gas, napalm, and Agent Orange" (Meador, 2003). Dioxin contamination is linked to long-term health problems such as cancer and birth defects. At the time that the documentary was filmed, the dioxin contamination in the Midland and Saginaw county area was equivalent to over 7,000 parts per trillion (PPT) near parks and residential areas or 80 times the state of Michigan's cleanup standard. While Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) downplayed news of this level of dioxin contamination, residents were struck with fear for their personal health, financial security and mortality.

The film begins on a conspiratorial tone by positioning citizens and environmental groups as peeling back the lies behind a supposed Dow dioxin contamination cover-up. The narrator recounts that in 2002, Michigan County citizens and environmental groups suspected that high-ranking government officials at the DEQ

were hiding important information on dioxin contamination from the public. Former DEQ Director Russ Harding argued that it is ‘absolute nonsense’ that his department would try to hide information. However, Dave Dempsey, Policy Advisor at the Michigan Environmental Council argued otherwise and discussed a censored government document on dioxin levels in the Floodplains area that he obtained through a Freedom of Information (FOI) Act database. Through the tense dialogue between the characters, including Harding and Dempsey, the film positions the DEQ on the defensive. It is implied that the DEQ is working in collaboration with Dow to hide critical information from the public. As Creps (1980) explains, this occurs through a process of placing the conspirators in the impossible and disadvantaged position of having to prove a negative:

> Since it is impossible to prove that one isn't a member of a clandestine agency, the charge of conspiracy is most difficult to refute in a definitive way. While the counter-subversive may enlist mountains of facts, the accused lacks any dispositive evidence. (p. 48)

The suggestion that the DEQ and Dow are part of conspiracy occurs when the narrator shows a visual of a censored government document, with traces of entire paragraphs blacked out. Even though two primary and seemingly equal sets of individuals speak in the film, including those assumed to be complicit in hiding information regarding the dioxin contamination (i.e. the DEQ, Dow) and those determined to reveal it (i.e. environmental groups, residents, scientists, etc.), the narrator serves as the "organizing voice" in the film and favours the environmental groups, residents and scientists. Hofstadter (1966) has observed how conspiracy theory plots use extraordinary pedantry to provide elaborate documentation and create links between the plot and historical events (p. 35-36). Ultimately, this evidence obfuscates the fact that the

conspiracy theory can only explains the root of the complex problem in overly simplistic, moralistic and often, false, terms.

Through the use of evidence (e.g. censored government documents) and the positioning of Russ Harding, the film is successful in demonstrating that the DEQ and Dow have an unethically close relationship. When the film proves even the subtlest conspiracy theory, it positions DEQ and Dow as "conspiracy groups [that] are seen to be simply utilizing the current social system… [acting] as scapegoats for the system's failure and thereby [focuses] disaffection on the abusers of the system rather than the system itself" (Fran Mason, 2002, p. 40). This positioning is ultimately a diversionary tactic (p. 40) because it gives the impression that the conspiracy theory is an ideology that can stand on its own.

While it is difficult to accept that dioxin contamination is a complex product of unregulated markets, outdated industrial processes and excess consumption, a conspiracy theory is a more palatable explanation. As Beck (1995) explains:

> The environmental problem is by no means a problem of our environs. It is a crisis of the industrial society itself, reaching deeply into the foundations of institutions; risks are industrially produced, economically externalized, juridically individualized, and scientifically legitimized. (p. 127)

Further in the film, the conspiracy theory distracts attention away from the structural causes of the dioxin contamination. Environmental representatives, including Michelle Hurd-Riddick of the Lone Tree Council, discuss a DEQ issued newsletter regarding the amount of dioxins in soil considered safe for residential areas. The newsletter spurs controversy and fear regarding delay in public notification and the omission of a comparison number. In response to the controversy, Dow offers to use its Corporate Center as a surrogate sample for dioxin testing. In turn, environmental groups

and residents, distrustful of Dow's offer, convince the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to do an independent public health consultation. Meanwhile, the narrator and several residents recount the 'climate of fear' that they sensed from DEQ employees who called residents anonymously to disclose information of the dioxin contamination taking place in their backyards. On the surface, the characters' anxiety appears to be with the fact that Dow and the DEQ worked in tandem to *obfuscate* the dioxin comparison number, the standard with which to measure tolerable levels of dioxins. However, this supposed conspiracy is a mere distraction because it focuses attention on the abusers of the system, whereas it would be more fruitful to pay attention to the failure of the scientific process and bureaucratic institutions of which Dow and the DEQ are examples. For example, the fact that the Michigan Dow Operations' paper products produce elevated levels of health threatening dioxins is a symptom of the modern industrial system's failure to account for all the social, political and economic implications of its developments.

Similarly, the characters' anxiety and inclination to blame the dioxin contamination on a conspiracy is a symptom of struggling to come to terms with apportioning blame in an age of "unfathomably complex networks" (Knight, 2000, p. 111). However, apportioning blame is a nearly impossible task given Dow's complex and interconnected networks of production, distribution, consumption and political ties. As Scott Lash and Brian Wynne (1992) explain, speaking about the darker side of Beck's risk society, "it is becoming impossible to compensate those whose lives have been touched by those hazards, as their very calculability becomes problematized" (p. 2). Rather, the conspiracy theory speaks to a widespread anxiety that itself is the product of

attempting to cope on an individual level with the problems of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture. As Peter Knight (2002) argues, the conspiracy theory "gives voice to a far more general anxiety about the loss of individuality and autonomy in the face of increasingly vast and bureaucratic forces that seem to control our lives" (p. 10).

As indicated in a Summer of 2002 DEQ newsletter, the tension between Dow and environmentally concerned citizens intensifies based on the fact that Dow emerges as the clear culprit of the dioxin contamination. Dow expresses surprise with the results and in response, proposes to fund a multi-million dollar health study. Environmental groups and citizens are skeptical of the offer, calling the study premature while Harding claims that the study would "once and for all put this matter to rest" (36:58). In response to what Floodplains residents see as a conflict of interest, they form the grassroots group Tittabawassee River Watch (TRW) and organize monthly meetings. The group identifies itself as "an organization of concerned property owners along the river promoting the protection of our homes, health and river from the effects of unprecedented dioxin contamination" (TRW, n.d., para. 1). Meanwhile, a former DEQ deputy director describes the DEQ at that time "being too much influenced by Dow Chemical" (38:40). Similarly, resident Gary Henry expresses resentment that the health county's website content on dioxins took information nearly word for word from Dow's website.

Again, by piecing together selected evidence, including the newsletter, testimonials from health authorities and residents, the film gives the impression that Dow, the DEQ and the health county are part of a conspiracy plot. This impression is highly problematic because the explanation that dioxin contamination is the product of high-

ranking and amoral individuals in government and corporations trumps any nuanced or more thoughtful explanation of the economic, political and social contributors to the dioxin problem.

While Dow's role in the dioxin contamination is very serious and grassroots groups deserve credit for their efforts in revealing the unethical aspects of Dow's operations, the finality and paranoia aspects of the film fail to situate the problem Dow created for the residents of Midland as the unintended effects of post-industrialism and neoliberalism. While environmental groups are accurate in pointing out the absurdity of Dow's proposal to fund a multi-million dollar health study, their fixation on Dow overlooks the degree to which corporations in general believe that the market can resolve nearly all social ills and act freely without any regulation by government. This assumption is a foundational principal of most contemporary, neoliberal corporations such as Dow.

Ultimately, the film's fixation on blaming Dow for the dioxins misses the fact that dioxins result from the consumption of certain products that Midland residents use on a regular basis (e.g. Saran Wrap, Styrofoam). This is because dioxins enter the environment through industrial processes such as the manufacturing of chlorinated chemicals and product refinement. In the conspiracy, the fact that the community is inherently assumed to be benevolent is problematic because it assumes that citizens can evade responsibility for their actions towards the environment.

Furthermore, while environmental groups are accurate in pointing out the absurdity of Dow's multi-million dollar study, their accusation of Dow neglects to take into account the degree to which corporations in general believe that the market can

resolve nearly all social ills and that they should be allowed to act freely, without regulation, in society. In other words, the film neglects to situate Dow's actions as part of the broader phenomenon of neoliberalism. Instead, the film argues that Dow adheres to a separate and apolitical conspiratorial plot.

On the surface, the anxiety and anger that Midland residents experience seems to be aimed at Dow and the health county's intentionally misleading labeling of dioxin contamination. Peter van Wyck (2005), drawing from the discourse of psychoanalysis in the tradition of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek, speaks about the various responses that individuals have towards ecological threat. Van Wyck argues that, when individuals see warning signs, they respond with obsessive, procedural or neurotic activity (p. 94). Each response functions as a displacement of coming face-to-face with the dark reality (e.g. potential death) that the signs represent (p. 94). From this perspective, it is possible that Midland residents read these signs of danger as:

> Symptomatically… providing a link between a manifest crisis and a disrupted or transgressed nature… these signs tend to tell a story — or at least are the implications of a larger narrative — concerning the ecological, and therefore moral, improprieties of "Man". (p. 95)

Van Wyck argues that all three responses "blind us to understanding the nonrepresentability of ecological threats; which is to say they blind us to the real" (p. 93). Furthermore, individuals, when faced with disaster, are "always at a loss for concepts, always struggling with words. It was unspeakable, it was beyond comprehension" (p. 92). Similarly, the 'real' that Midland residents are blinded to and cannot communicate is that the risks of dioxin contamination are deadly, far-reaching and untraceable to a guilty party, despite what the conspiracy theme in the film may suggest.

Ultimately, the non-presentable aspect of what the elevated levels of dioxins

implies conjures the postmodern sublime. As Jonathan Bordo (1992) argues:

> The 'postmodern sublime' is the condition of being overwhelmed by the threatening and bewildering effects of technology, then ecological catastrophe (as the result of technology) becomes a new source of the sublime... Human beings still experience a humbling sense of fear and awe before nature, but in this case -- in contradistinction to conventional accounts of the sublime - the threat is of their own making. And worse, the danger is all too real. (p. 171)

In a scene that conjures the postmodern sublime and frames nature in a pastoral lens, Floodplains residents Wendy and Dennis Domino discuss their love for the forested neighborhood in which they live. Wendy Domino recounts her horror in allowing her nephews to play in the pond on her property prior to her knowledge about the dioxin contamination. Wendy Domino then explains how she could not sell her house without letting the potential buyer know about the dioxins. As a result, the buyer retracted his offer and Wendy Domino asked Dow to purchase their home, a request that the corporation declined. This emotional scene conjures the postmodern sublime insofar as the characters struggle to come to terms with the vast political, economic and social structures that caused the dioxin contamination and what it means in terms of its social justice, human health and economic impacts. In other words, the characters come close to understanding what the dioxins mean through a post-industrial risk society lens as opposed to a merely conspiratorial lens.

Just as the film begins to progress beyond the reductive quality of the conspiracy theory to explain the problem of dioxin contamination, the documentary reveals that Dow had negotiated a consent order with the DEQ. The consent order meant that the DEQ would only hold Dow legally accountable for cleanup only if the links between the dioxins and negative health impacts were proven, as opposed to Dow being accountable for the prevention of dioxin contamination. This realization is the climax of the film and

reinforces the supposed truth that viewers of the documentary were privileged to know all along: that the DEQ and Dow were complicit in a conspiracy plot.

The film ends by framing the dioxin contamination as an unresolved conspiracy while depicting nature through a sublime lens First, Wendy Domino, Gary Henry and Mitch Larsen recount their loss of faith in their own personal security, their 'waiting and worrying' regarding potential health risks and their emotional connection to the Floodplains area. In particular, Wendy Domino describes the feeling of continuing to live in the dioxin contaminated Midlands area where she could potentially get sick or see her property values go down. Meanwhile, the narrator explains that the dioxin contamination 'saga' involves an on-going and unsettled dioxin controversy amongst local residents, a failed consent order and over three hundred law suits plaintiffs against Dow. Finally, Mitch Larsen rhapsodies about the river where he lives and the documentary provides an extended close up of a sunset on the Tittabawassee River. In this way, the film depicts the river as a pastoral object that conjures nature as a passive source of pleasure.

Ultimately, the film attempts to humanize the effects of the dioxin contamination through emotional anecdotes from Midland residents. However, the documentary's synthesis of the aftermath of the dioxin contamination investigation by citizen groups, scientists and environmentalists falls short in politicizing the dioxin contamination. Instead, the film is conspiratorial because as Peter Knight (2000) says, it "reintroduces the possibility of naming and blaming in an age of unthinkably complex global connections" (p. 32). The naming and blaming aspect of *The End of Suburbia* film is debilitating to recognizing the ideological impacts of living in a post industrial, neoliberal and consumer oriented society as the conspiracy "generates a map of a different world

entirely, a parallel or imaginary world of misrecognized social systems and power structures" (p. 40). Ultimately, the conspiracy risks making the issue of dioxins apolitical insofar as it makes no distinction between the individuals and the political, economic and social structures that actually produce environmental degradation. As Mark Fenster (2008) explains, the conspiracy "leaves unresolved the issue of precisely how the state can respond to conspiracy theory as… a political challenge to its legitimacy" (p. 16).

Furthermore, in framing the lawsuits against Dow as a resolution, the film inherently frames nature within the same rationalist lens that created the notion of the problematic nature-cultural dualism. Karen Warren (2000) argues that rationalism informs "hierarchically organized value dualism[s]" (e.g. man/woman, nature/culture, mind/body) that frame nature and indigenous beings as an inferior Other (p. 24). In addition, rationalism looks down upon the values of respect, care and responsibility that are necessary for environmental progress since they are considered "non-rational" values. In this view, the film positions dioxins as entities that are best dealt with by experts in the context of a rational environment like the legal system. The problem is that, as Beck (1995) argues, even the legal system is incapable of 'managing' the environmental crisis and reliance on it thus absolves everyone of responsibility:

> The reality of industrial fatalism thus rests upon (at least) two simple cornerstones: the universalization of pollution and the principle of individual culpability. Its very realistic logic lays down that the greater the number producing it, the more obvious it becomes that not only this or that person produces it; hence it follows that nobody produces it. (p. 135-136)

It is also the film's pastoral framing of Tittabawasee River that further reinforces pastoral definitions of nature as unadulterated wilderness. This concept of wilderness supports an absolution of responsibility towards the environment. As William Cronon

(1996) argues:

> The trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before. (p. 15)

Conclusion

As discussed earlier in this thesis, environmental documentaries are environmental activist mediums. Activist mediums are "economic, political, social and cultural practices that shape the activities of other institutions, groups and individuals in order to address environmental concerns" (Wapner, 1996, p. 153). Thus, it follows that environmental documentaries contribute to shaping views on what exactly are the causes of environmental problems and what nature is in the contemporary era. This project has attempted to demonstrate that by framing environmental problems as a product of a conspiracy, we miss out on looking at environmental problems as a product of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture. Secondly, nature continues to be seen in Romantic (e.g. sublime and pastoral) terms, which perpetuates the nature-culture dualism and 'nature as escape' notion that sustains environmental degradation in the first place. Ultimately, the way that the causes of environmental problems are understood and how nature is defined impacts the kinds of solutions we propose to address environmental problems and nature.

In environmental documentaries, the conspiracy theory and the Romantic view of nature work together in problematic ways. First, the conspiracy theory distracts audiences from the real causes of environmental problems and second, the Romantic view of nature contributes to absolving humans from responsibility to nature. The conspiracy theory

presents a problematic account of the causes of environmental problems. This thesis argues that, contrary to the representation of the causes of environmental problems in environmental films, environmental degradation is the result of post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture forces, not a cabal of conspiring individuals and clandestine groups. To begin with, the drama of the conspiracy theory trumps more nuanced and logical explanations of the causes of the crisis. Second, the simplistic, deductive and causive logic of the conspiracy suggests that a small group of individuals are responsible for the environmental crisis. Third, the logic of the conspiracy always implicitly concludes that the environmental crisis is a product of immorality. Not only does the perception of the existence of all-powerful conspiratorial groups substitute for political activism and hope but also, the logic of the conspiracy theory is unsubstantiated.

Ultimately, the conclusion that the environmental crisis is a product of immoral individuals as opposed to a complex confluence of the side effects of post-industrialism, neoliberalism and consumer culture recalls Jameson's (1991) assertion that the conspiracy theory is a "degraded attempt… to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system" (p. 38). Furthermore, what is interpreted as immorality is an indication of how it is possible, through the current system that we have now, for a minority group of wealthy and influential individuals, to gain power over the heads of government. As Beck (2000) argues:

> Corporations acting within the framework of world society have gained additional scope for action and power beyond the political system. Over the heads of government and parliament, public opinion and the courts, the balance-of-power contract that characterized the first modernity of industrial society is now being terminated and transferred to the independent realm of economic action. The transition to a politics of globalization has crept in on velvet paws, under the guise of normality, rewriting the societal rules of the game – with the legitimacy of a modernization that will happen come what may. (p. 4)

Ultimately, the conspiracy theory is a problematic way to explain the causes of environmental problems because it promotes irresponsibility towards the crisis and creates a convenient, yet inaccurate, explanation of the causes of environmental degradation. Since environmental documentaries make it appear as though a small group of individuals are at the root cause of the environmental problem, guilt is shifted away from individuals that participate in and benefit from postindustrial, neoliberal and consumer culture. Second, the conspiracy theory becomes a convenient explanation for larger societal political, economic and social imbalances. Environmental degradation has been a serious concern since at least the beginning of The Industrial Age. Often, when the narrator or experts express anxiety about the often corrupt political context of the environment (e.g. influential oil and gas lobbies), they are expressing discontent about the loss of individuality and autonomy that has resulted from the culmination of neoliberalism and postindustrialism.

The Romantic view of nature in environmental documentaries is also problematic. In the films, the sublime and the pastoral work together to present nature as something that is inferior to humans. This occurs insofar as nature is framed as a resource that brings material and spiritual gains. The representation of oil in *The End of Suburbia* is an example of this. In addition, nature is presented as a source of aesthetic pleasure and a passive object of beauty as with the pastoral vistas in *The 11th Hour*. Lastly, nature is framed as something that requires control as is the case with Dow Chemical dioxins in *The Long Shadow* and climate change in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Ultimately, the Romantic view of nature distances humans from nature. Its

depiction of an ideal nature makes nature seem abstract and something outside of the human world. Second, Romantic views of nature over-idealize nature to the point that other types of less than perfect forms of nature are deemed unworthy of protection. For instance, the concept of an unadulterated nature supports an absolution of responsibility towards the environment.

While the insights drawn from this study of environmental documentaries appear fatalistic, it is important to point out that these films are limited in expressing the full range of the causes of environmental problems and what nature is because they are deeply embedded in the traditions of American culture, populism and the economic, social and political pressure that documentary filmmakers face. Documentary films cannot criticize the very audiences for their contribution to the environmental problem because these individuals are the filmmaker's market. Second, these films must entertain as much as they must educate or else they may lose their audience. As a result of these constraints, these films may not have the luxury of providing a nuanced social, political and economic discussion of the causes of the environmental crisis. Furthermore, this project argues that it is impossible for any environmental film to provide an ideal discussion and depiction of nature and environmental problems. Rather, a plethora of environmental documentaries that deal in depth with one environmental problem and its nuances would be much more beneficial to the progress of the environmental movement as opposed to one film that tries to cover all existing environmental problems, such as *The 11th Hour*. This is because each environmental problem is rooted in a rich social, economic and political history and an analysis of this history sheds light on how the environmental problem is really a problem of how we have organized our society, rather

than a "problem of nature".

Ultimately, this project argues that environmental films are influential, but that they are influential in the wrong ways and their solutions to address environmental degradation are not radical enough. Both reform and radical films are not radical enough because they do not fundamentally move beyond presenting environmental problems as a problem of immoral individuals in high-ranking positions of power. Furthermore, these films cannot move beyond presenting nature as the pastoral and sublime object that is in circulation today. Reform films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The 11th Hour*, while they use rhetorical claims and negative imagery of corporations and corrupt lobbyists, advocate for minor tweaks, not a significant overhaul, to the post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture system that perpetuates environmental degradation. Furthermore, they resort to the very technocratic and individualist solutions that exacerbate environmental problems such as climate change in the first place.

The reform or oppositional techno-fix response to nature in reform films offers evasive, simplistic and apolitical answers to a complex set of issues. An overdependence on the technological solution contributes to the 'greenwashing,' or the denying and covering up of the political, economic and social fundamental drivers of environmental degradation and ecological problems. For example, reform films cannot risk saying outright that neoliberal policies and institutions are responsible for climate change because reform films are still intimately tied up with the corporations, political parties and sponsors that contribute to using and abusing the planet's resources. Thus, reform films are obligated to continue to uphold the consumer-democracy paradigm if their films are to survive in the box office.

For instance, both *The 11th Hour* and *An Inconvenient Truth* are under the control of

two corporate distributors, Warner Independent Pictures and Paramount Classics, respectively. Due to this corporate patronage, reform films have few options for suggesting to viewers the degree of radical political action necessary to curb global environmental degradation. It would be unlikely, for instance, that *The 11th Hour* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, would follow the lead of technology critic Nicholas Rescher (1980), who argues that environmental problems are the cause of the fundamental American social ideology related to material progress, technological omnipotence and millennialism (pp. 23-24). In particular, unlike Rescher, reform films do not have the political capacity to say that our society needs to deal with population densities, high levels of personal consumption and a messy technology of production (pp. 23-24) to genuinely address environmental problems.

The radical or alternative anti-growth response to environmental problems and nature in radical films offers an "us-versus-them" conspiracy theory that can be crippling, by way of its suspicious and nihilistic tendencies, towards sustained environmental and intellectual progress towards the human-nature relationship. Unlike reform films, radical documentaries construct the basis for political and social action on the notion that we need to be skeptical of corporate America, its institutions and technology. The benefit of this approach is that the arguments behind radical documentaries are much more directed at focused political action as opposed to the consumption of greener products and services. However, radical documentaries do not address post-industrialism and barely touch on neoliberal ideologies and consumer culture as the reasons why we are in an environmental, health and energy crises. Without addressing the fundamental social, economic and political structures that sustain global environmental degradation, radical documentaries offer short-sighted and even harmful explanations into the causes of environmental problems (e.g. the conspiracy theory). Thus, like reform films, they

miss the opportunity to better contextualize the causes of global concerns such as climate change, desertification, species extinction and pollution.

Ultimately, the rhetorical appeal of both reform and radical films happens through text and visuals. However, these visuals can only provide limited insight into the causes of environmental problems and nature. It may be the case that, the medium of the environmental film may be too limited to delve deeply into the causes of environmental problems and representations of nature. The problem, of course, is that these mediums have wider influence and circulation than most books or articles that provide more nuanced insight into the causes of environmental problems. Moreover, these films are often cited with influencing the environmental movement, as with the case with *An Inconvenient Truth*. For instance, Irena Salina, director of the environmental documentary, *Flow: For Love of Water* (2008), said that, "there's no doubt that Al Gore's movie changed everything…I think a lot of people were very surprised at how effective the film really was in educating people" (Monk, 2008, para. 11).

Reform and radical films are not radical enough in different ways. For instance, reform films ultimately say that individuals should bear the burden of resolving the environmental crisis (e.g. buy green, support renewable technology, etc.). Thus, these films still operate within the same system that is the cause of environmental problems in the first place. Radical films, on the other hand, even though they are better able to touch on the neoliberal and consumer culture causes of environmental problems, do not address the post-industrial causes of environmental problems. Like reform films, the use of the conspiracy theory reduces environmental problems to a problem of immoral individuals not the negative side effects of a post-industrial, neoliberal and consumer culture society.

Also, similar to reform films, radical films still frame nature as a resource. This is particularly visible in films such as *The End of Suburbia* where the film focuses on the decline of oil.

Ultimately, while environmental documentaries of the 2000s have helped to move major environmental issues to the forefront, the definitions of environmental problems and nature that they offer are lacking in nuance and context. By drawing on postmodern scholars such as Jameson and Mason to critique environment films, this project has attempted to reveal how the use of the conspiracy theory is a less than ideal attempt to explain the complex social, economic and political causes of environmental problems. Similarly, by drawing on scholars who critique the continued use of the Romantic sublime and pastoral to represent nature, this project has attempted to demonstrate how the seemingly innocuous and taken for granted definitions of nature contain dangerous prejudices against nature.

At their best, environmental documentaries bring to light environmental problems in a way that is highly compelling and emotive . At their worst, they oversimplify the causes of environmental problems, rely on Romantic definitions of nature that have been in circulation since at least the eighteenth century and avoid any type of radical critiques about the causes of the environmental crisis. Yet, despite this, environmental films are very instrumental in drawing awareness to the environmental problems that lay before us and the human capacity to use storytelling in its most awe-inspiring form to spur positive change on a mass level.

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