

# Towards an Ecological Cinema

*By Olivier Dorlin*

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**Hollywood cinema tends to represent climate change in catastrophist and sensationalistic movies. By contrast, a new type of ecological cinema emerges in which the issue of sustainability is taken into account not only as a theme, but also within the film production process.**

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The world of film, and of audiovisual industries more generally, has progressively taken on board environmental considerations, so that they have now become a key issue for this art form. At the heart of said environmental considerations is the climate, one of the subjects most frequently covered by the media, as Guillaume Sainteny claims in his analysis of media portrayals of climate change.<sup>1</sup> This has allowed for the development of an extremely dense filmography. Eco-cinema, a type of film in which the climate is often the main theme, sometimes plays relies on the reality and objectivity of scientific facts, and sometimes becomes a medium for another message, or is used for different purposes altogether.

What we usually call “environmental films” are promoted by the emergence of international distribution and promotion networks. As Thierry Paquot, a French philosopher and emeritus professor at the Paris Institute of Urban Planning, reminds us in his an article he wrote in the *Dictionnaire de la pensée écologique* (Dictionary of Ecological Thought):

The environmental question has for some time been treated cinematographically, in fiction films that assign this or that responsibility for an ecological catastrophe, or in documentaries that are genuine case files on industrial pollution, river diversion, planned deforestation, or desertification, etc. These subjects are sensitive, to the point that

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<sup>1</sup> Climate change took first place among the French population’s environmental concerns, ahead of atmospheric pollution, water pollution, or natural catastrophes, according to an INSEE [study](#) that was carried out in 2015. In *Le Climat qui cache la forêt* (The Climate Hiding the Forest), Guillaume Sainteny examines the way in which the French media cover environmental issues, often as a separate issue, unlike Anglo-Saxon media, which, according to the author, “often take a more balanced and more global approach to environmental issues.”

“neutrality” turns out to be at the service of either a denunciation (“against”) or a defense (“for”).<sup>2</sup>

The film industry as a whole has taken a green turn and we can see emerging the outline of what we might rightly call an “ecological cinema.” This should not be understood as designating films dealing with specific environmental issues, but rather films that take the environment into account at all stages of their production and through to their distribution. The question of economic and political issues also arises in this multi-faceted universe.

Are we dealing here with renewed environmentalism, with a mere fashionable trend, or with a desire to educate and raise awareness among a greater number of viewers? How are industry players reacting to this global challenge?

## Climate Change Onscreen

Climate change is omnipresent in films. From scientific documentary films to mainstream disaster movies to animated features, climate change has become a favorite topic for filmmakers. Several documentary films have met with genuine success in France and abroad. We might, for example, mention *Before the Flood* (2016), narrated and coproduced by Leonardo DiCaprio, an actor who has shown great commitment to defending the environment, and who was appointed “Messenger of Peace for Climate Change” in 2014 by the then United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon.<sup>3</sup> Luc Jacquet, who is well known for his film *March of the Penguins* (2005), directed *Ice and the Sky*, which recounts the life and activism of the French glaciologist Claude Lorius; it was screened for the first time as the closing film of the 2015 Cannes Film Festival. As for *The Age of Stupid*, a film perched between documentary and fiction, it propels British actor Pete Postlethwaite to the year 2055: he is the sole survivor of an annihilated planet—a great classic screenplay trope for this kind of film. *The Age of Stupid* historicizes climate change in the form of archival videos and highlights the inaction that has led to the destruction of the Earth. These films each represent very different propositions on the topic of climate change, but they share an awareness of the situation our planet currently finds itself in, and an assignment of collective responsibility to individuals in the long term.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Here and below, translations from the French are by Kate McNaughton.

<sup>3</sup> In 2007, the year in which the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) published its fourth report, DiCaprio narrated and coproduced *The 11th Hour*.

<sup>4</sup> In *Le contrat naturel* (*The Natural Contract*), a founding text of environmental ethics in France, the French philosopher Michel Serres explores the question of time. He brings together what he calls “the two *temps*” (to which he devotes a subchapter with this title): “meteorological time,” and by extension the climate, and “chronological time,” which the French language allows us to connect through the word “*temps*,” which means both “time” and “weather”—unlike in English or German. In *Éclaircissements* (*Conversations on Science, Nature and Time*), he once more defends this thesis in a series of interviews with Bruno Latour and claims that, “at a deeper level, they are the same thing.”

Other films have been more controversial. One of the documentaries that was internationally successful, acknowledged and celebrated the world over, *An Inconvenient Truth* (which came out in 2006, two years after George W. Bush was reelected), is a good illustration of this. Its star, Al Gore, former vice president of the United States, was awarded, together with the IPCC, the Nobel Peace Prize for this film in 2007. He has been criticized for using and misappropriating his film for political ends, as well as for the scientific data it presents. In *La Comédie du climat* (The Comedy of Climate), Olivier Postel-Vinay discusses the case of the appeal against Tony Blair's British government to have Gore's film broadcast in all state schools, in the "grip of an enthusiasm made all the more militant by the fact that there was an election coming up and that his party risked losing it (it did)." This legal episode would highlight nine scientific "mistakes" and approximations in the film, but Justice Michael Burton of the High Court in London, who was in charge of the case, nevertheless stated that the film was "broadly accurate."

The film *Home* (2009), which was written and directed by Yann Arthus-Bertrand and produced by Luc Besson, and was a great success, winning the César for best documentary, raised questions about its funding (10 million euros came from the international luxury group PPR, now known as Kering) and about the interest certain major brands might have in environmental causes. The examples of *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Home* show to what extent the cinema has been the target of debates or accusations of economic or political misappropriation that go beyond the art of filmmaking in its strictest sense or cinema's vocation to deal with these global issues.

In fiction films, imagination takes over from the reality of the climate and rewrites it. Several variations on this theme have been suggested in mainstream disaster movies (which are often American-produced blockbusters), in which a natural catastrophe is at the center of the story. Climate change is the subject of Roland Emmerich's 2004 film *The Day after Tomorrow* (a few years later, Emmerich would also direct the similarly themed *2012*). A violent climate imbalance propels the planet into a new ice age.

We see the same climactic phenomenon at work in other films: South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), Spanish director Miguel Ángel Vivas's *Extinction* (2015), and a trilogy of "mockbusters" based on Emmerich's film, concluding with *2012: Ice Age* (2011). Located somewhere between a sense of climate catastrophism and an inexorable end of days, these offerings have given birth to a new category of fiction film, which are brought together under the label of "cli-fi movies."<sup>5</sup>

We might ask questions about the use of these films and their role in raising awareness among their viewers. A certain number of the mainstream films have in fact lost credibility. This can be explained by the explosion of the number of films on this topic, which have not always known how to rethink the climate or present a different aspect of it, with the films

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<sup>5</sup> These films have also inspired and follow the wave of "cli-fi books," within the wide range of what might be termed "eco-fiction."

often remaining stuck in a familiar type of narrative. This is also due to the increasing significance that is attached to climate change by various media, which have in the past tended to trivialize the phenomenon.

## **Preventing Climate Change in the Film Industry: Toward a New Ecological Film**

Faced with the challenge of preventing climate change, the film industry and its various players have gradually come around to considering what can be done within their industry. This sense of responsibility has translated into the conception of and actual desire to produce films in an environmentally friendly manner, that is, by taking the environment into account from a film's initial concept through to its distribution. By integrating environmental issues into the film industry, these initiatives also aim to transform their viewers' practices. According to a recent study carried out by Ecoprod, a French example of such an initiative, the audiovisual industry's carbon footprint comes to 1.1 million tons.

The French National Center for Cinema and the Moving Image, whose main responsibilities are regulating the cinema industry and providing support for audiovisual, film, and multimedia productions and institutions, reminds us that this is a "collective initiative launched in 2009 by audiovisual industry stakeholders to commit the industry to taking into account its environmental footprint." Among its founding "partners," Ecoprod can point to ADEME (the French Environment and Energy Management Agency) or to the Audiens Group (which provides social protection in the sectors of culture, communications, and media), but also to major French broadcasters.<sup>6</sup> The collective encourages the production of audiovisual content that is respectful of the environment, aiming to reduce the carbon footprint generated during film shoots. The audiovisual professionals who are committed to this approach rely on specific tools (practical guidelines are available online) and commit by signing a charter (which was created in 2014). The collective has created the "Carbon'Clap," a tool for measuring carbon emissions aimed at audiovisual and film productions (Albert certification was created for the BBC in a similar spirit).

This green wave has also developed beyond Europe. Film4Climate, which came out of the World Bank's Connect4Climate program, whose Charter was presented during the 21st meeting of the Conference of Parties, or COP 21, supports initiatives in the field of ecological film production and aims to raise awareness and bring together ever more stakeholders from within the film industry. The same goes for the Green Production Guide. In Europe, the "Green Screen" program, financed by Interreg Europe, has the same objectives.

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<sup>6</sup> ADEME promotes the humanities and social sciences and encourages the development of research projects and innovations with a direct link to environmental issues.

These initiatives also translate into a growing number of festivals working around environmental issues. Such festivals aim not only to promote environmental films, but also to work on the environmentally friendly technical means that will allow for their production.

The Green Film Network is one of the main networks of festivals in this field. This is an international network created by Gaetano Capizzi (founder and current director of the CinemAmbiente festival—an Italian environmental film festival that was set up in 1998) and just recently certified by the United Nations Environment Programme, which brings together the largest environmental film festivals at the international level.<sup>7</sup> This major development in the audiovisual industry resonates with an increased awareness of ecological issues.

The Green Film Network also aims to bring together and educate viewers, and to communicate an eco-responsible attitude to them. Among the participating festivals is the Deauville Green Awards, one of the largest environmental film festivals in France and a partner of the French Ministry of Culture and of an Ecological and Socially Responsible Transition.<sup>8</sup> Environmental images are shown here as part of three competitions: “spot” (short awareness-raising messages), “info” (information films, audiovisual media produced by local authorities and/or communities, companies, and nongovernmental organizations), and “docu” (documentaries, TV programs, online documentaries). There are a total of 14 categories on offer, including activism and adaptation to climate change, the energy transition, consumption, and eco-labels.

These are programs with very varied subjects, which allow audiences to understand the challenges related to the environment and the wide-ranging interdisciplinarity that they generate. Among the prizewinners of the 2018 festival were Nespresso France, which won a gold trophy in the “Sustainable Agriculture and Silviculture” category for the documentary *La Quête du café parfait* (The Quest for the Perfect Coffee), and the AccorHotels Group, which received a prize in the “Sustainable Production and Circular Economy” category. This group has been committed to environmental protection since the 1970s and has developed various measures aimed at limiting environmental degradation within the framework of its activities.

The phenomenon of these environmental issues being appropriated has led to environmental films being used in new ways. Eco-corporate films have found their place in the field of corporate PR and are receiving awards in international festivals.

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<sup>7</sup> This organisation, which was created in 1972, is part of the United Nations Organisation.

<sup>8</sup> Within the framework of a week devoted to environmental images, organised at the University of Evry-Paris Saclay, the SLAM lab (SCRIPT department) had worked with another French festival, the *Festival International du Film d'Environnement* (International Environmental Film Festival) organized by the Île-de-France region in 2016. One of the issues explored was climate refugees. The Argos Collective's exhibition “With the Climate Refugees” was included in the event.

## Conclusion

Different types of media are now crossing over and creating new interactive worlds that aim to raise public awareness of climate change. They encourage their viewers—who are increasingly becoming video game players—to take more responsibility.<sup>9</sup> They put forward a variety of approaches to climate-related issues. If it is the film industry that has propelled climate change onto the screen, we now see new tools emerging that use specific types of environment, and target yesterday's viewer, who is now the player of today.

In 2015, a transmedia project, *Les Îles du futur* (The Islands of the Future—a documentary series and video game), commissioned by the Franco-German television network Arte, was released—the same year as the COP 21.<sup>10</sup> The game *Les saisons—Morphosis* (The Seasons—Morphosis) is inspired by the documentary film *Les saisons* (The Seasons) by Jacques Perrin and Jacques Cluzaud. Online documentaries have also allowed producers to create innovative and playful media to deal with climate-related issues. *Climate under Pressure* offers an interactive documentary experience that gives the player “control over the climate stories and destinies of 6 individuals around the world.”

Climate change is thus constantly being rethought, presented in different ways, and adapted onscreen. These productions aim to inform, educate, and raise awareness in their audiences, who will then get involved, or are expected to get involved, in the change required. Behind a film industry that continues to use climate change as a commercial or political tool, new ecological practices are gaining ground in the film industry, aimed at developing innovative ways of preventing climate change at an earlier stage.

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<sup>9</sup> Many scientific games may be found on the [Cité des sciences et de l'industrie website](#).

<sup>10</sup> Transmedia has gained considerably in importance since the publication of *Convergence Culture*, by Henry Jenkins, in 2006.