

ON DELIVERING MESSAGES OF DIRE NEED FOR ACTION ON PRECIPITATING
PROBLEMS BEFORE THE STORMS COME

or

NO TIME TO WASTE: OCEAN FILMMAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF
OCEANIC CRISES

by

Spartacus Shapiro

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Science & Natural History Filmmaking

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2011

©COPYRIGHT

by

Spartacus Shapiro

2011

All Rights Reserved

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Spartacus Shapiro

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citation, bibliographic style, and consistency and is ready for submission to The Graduate School.

Theo Lipfert

Approved for the School of Film and Photography

Dr. Robert F. Anderson

Approved for The Graduate School

Dr. Carl A. Fox

STATEMENT OF PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Montana State University, I agree that the Library shall make it available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

I have indicated my intention to copyright this thesis by including a copyright notice page: copying is allowable only for scholarly purposes, consistent with "fair use" as prescribed in the U.S. Copyright Law. Requests of permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this thesis in whole or in parts may be granted only by the copyright holder.

Spartacus Shapiro

April 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....1

2. BLUE CHIP VS. CONSERVATION PROGRAMMING: AN OLD DEBATE IN BRIEF.....3

3. BLUE CHIP PROGRAMMING.....5

4. CONSERVATION PROGRAMMING.....8

5. THEORETICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND ACTUAL PROBLEMS.....12

6. IS ANYONE MAKING RESPONSIBLE MEDIA, AND WHAT IS THAT?16

7. THE MONEY FACTOR: RESPONSIBILITIES OF AND PRESSURES ON FILMMAKERS.....22

8. THE FUTURE OF RESPONSIBLE PROGRAMMING ABOUT THE OCEAN.....25

9. EXEMPLI GRATIA.....29

10. CONCLUSION: OCEAN FILMMAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF OCEANIC CRISES; A NEW BRASS RING.....33

WORKS CITED.....37

ABSTRACT

Blue chip and conservation filmmaking are the two styles most commonly applied to Natural History documentaries. The numerous threats to our oceans are among the most pressing problems of our time, and certainly these are Natural History stories. Yet neither of the established models of filmmaking has been able to effectively tell the story of our oceans in crisis. A “revolution” is in order. After contextualizing and analyzing exemplars, I will propose a new model which draws on the strengths of both blue chip and conservation filmmaking, but which would fit neither category as is. This new model, green chip filmmaking, holds my hope for filmmaking, my hope for oceans, my hope for our children, my hope for humankind.

INTRODUCTION

“The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.”

Karl Marx

There are many modes of filmmaking, many categories and labels, under which film and video programming are produced, distributed and discussed. In pursuing an MFA in Science & Natural History Filmmaking, I find the field of Natural History documentaries in general, and, specifically, films about the ocean and related ecosystems, dominated by just two subcategories: x) blue chip and y) conservation programming. Not surprisingly, as is often witnessed when a stage has but two actors, there is both a strong relationship and also conflict between them.

Far from its origins as an apolitical public relations vehicle, “documentary,” as we understand it today, is a label often laden with political overtones. Metaphors of revolution abound in the canon of film theory pertaining to documentary production: this Thesis is not peculiar in that way. In this essay I engage and attempt to contextualize the debates surrounding the blue chip and conservation categories of Natural History documentaries and then I explore alternatives. Some of them are off, and some of them on the x-y axis of these two categorizations.

In the end, I propose a new model of telling stories about the plight of the oceans that might teach viewers about themselves and the world around them with insight and sensitivity, and perhaps, “with a radical political message *and* visceral pleasure to boot!” (Gaines 99). The aim, not a new one in itself, is to educate and inspire audiences to interact with their world, their ocean, with perspicacity, integrity and conscience. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, it is my hope that this mode will take the best of film technique today, apply it to the ocean film production of tomorrow, and empower and embolden audiences to act on their beliefs at all times.

BLUE CHIP VS. CONSERVATION FILM; AN OLD DEBATE IN BRIEF

Blue chip films depict beautiful images of bountiful life and habitat and are more often than not self-contained, cyclical stories, ending where they begin. These films may engender lifelong interest in the natural world; however, they have been heavily criticized for leading to a false sense of abundant wilderness and endlessly resilient cycles of birth and death unrelated to, and independent of, human civilization. Some of these films are not even “stories,” but pretty pictures run together over a voiceover thread: they lack beginnings, middles, conflicts and/or ends. They are expensive to produce and therefore often dependent on sponsors, tending to avoid any meaningful controversy.

Conservation films, in contrast, usually feature people and industry prominently. These films call attention to one or more problems often stemming from human development of once-wild habitat and the use and overuse of “natural resources.” Conservation programming, more often than not, offers strong opinions that are aligned politically in reception and interpretation, if not in intention, and are considered controversial. As a result, conservation films are generally subject to a more limited reception and shorter financial viability than blue chip films.

The debate seems to me an old-fashioned and out-dated Platonic binary: assuming one approach is “better” than the other. I maintain there are stories that need communicating more clearly than either of these traditional modes encourages today. We need to keep what “works” from each of these models and “win the future” with new forms. Revolution is both the goal and the method by which we reach the goal. Indeed,

if we do not come up with a new way to educate others, and ourselves, about the oceanic crises, we stand to “lose the future.” If we keep on doing business as usual, what splendor this ocean world might be able to hold could be lost forever to future generations.

BLUE CHIP PROGRAMMING

Blue chip films are categorized by big budget cinematography that is visually beautiful, often stunningly so, and mostly devoid of any signs of humans. Most people will use the words “pristine,” and “unspoiled,” in describing images in this category. A disembodied narrator, reinforcing the no-visible-humans structure, often explains animal behavior in anthropomorphic terms to which the audience can supposedly relate. Glamorous nature with its “spectacular timelessness” is the subject, even if the filmmakers have to work overtime to avoid any visual signs of humanity (Bousé, 188). By avoiding any human industry or overt politics in their films, essentially freeing their subjects from circumstances that might date or contextualize the film, producers may hope to provide a product that has a good chance of returning extended cash flow from extended interest in the subjects. Blue chip films often take many years to make and are very expensive to produce, but they do tend to reach wide audiences. The following statement from an award-winning underwater filmmaker alludes to some justification:

I think images of breathtaking pristine beauty and the often anthropomorphic behavior of wild animals increases the value people place on these environments and the creatures that live there. They help create a value to people who may otherwise never experience wilderness except through these motion pictures. People will not conserve something they don't value. People will not be distressed by the loss of something they don't love. And people will seldom act when confronted with a crisis unless it is personal. (Hall)

There are solid arguments here for the positive aspects of blue chip programming. The beautiful triggers the emotional and engenders attachment, and that, in turn, might

foster some conservationist or preservationist action. There are devices and techniques of value in this category, but there are also effects that need to be examined and mitigated.

The idea of a cyclical, unblemished and unaffected natural world is one of the underpinnings of blue chip film. This misleading structure could easily have negative consequences. Chris Palmer, Director of *The Center for Environmental Filmmaking*, summarizes some of the criticism of blue chip programming on the Center's website:

...blue-chip films can also lead viewers to feel complacent about conservation because such films show plenty of untamed wilderness for wildlife. Blue-chip films, by definition, present unspoiled and inspiring landscapes. Anybody watching a heavy diet of these films might be excused for wondering why environmentalists constantly complain about loss of habitat when evidently from the television screen there is plenty of it. These films can give a false sense of security, a false sense of endless bounty. (Palmer)

The film *Oceans*, co-produced by DisneyNature in 2009, is for the most part a good example of the blue chip film genre. While the film does mention the threat of overfishing, in seeming counterpoint to its own argument, it follows this statement with explicit mentions of "untouched wilderness." Cynthia Chris explains: "As is conventional to the genre, bad news must be answered by good before the credits roll" (198). By attempting to de-politicize the ecosystemic struggles involving the subject of their film, and ignoring any real discussion of any global impact or social ramifications, the filmmakers of *Oceans* expose themselves to criticism for having acted irresponsibly toward their viewing public in deference to their sponsors. In order to sell their fact-based fictionalized version of the myths of a resplendent and incorruptible sea, the filmmakers mislead the audience in typical blue chip fashion with a narrative which, as

Chris, in a similar context, puts it, “Insists that despite whatever adversity human culture produces, nature in its precious, aesthetic splendor remains resilient, even eternal, thus relieving humanity of any immediate obligation to restrain abuses of it. The genre has done so in various ways since its origins” (200). And it is indeed misleading, since modern science tells us the opposite: that we must not only restrain our abuse, but retrain our populace if we are to have any recognizable fish left in the oceans 40 years from now when it is predicted we will have nine billion human mouths to feed. New films *could* go a long way in helping that cause, if only they *would*.

CONSERVATION PROGRAMMING

Conservation film is a very diverse genre, ranging from independent short films directed at local user groups, or as serial television hours, to feature length studio pictures for general audiences. Conservation programs have seemingly transparent agendas, and often make strong, clear calls to action in an effort to “conserve” something or other. These films generally propose behavioral and policy change in order to preserve species and resources for continued viability into the future. Local politics are sometimes highlighted but the issues at hand rarely see resolution in the films span. *The Death of the Oceans?*, produced by BBC2 in 2010, is an excellent example of conservation programming with a heavy-handed message. Overfishing is examined along with the toxic threats of physical, chemical and sound pollutants to the global ocean and those living there. Human avarice and indifference are clearly to blame for the decline of the health and diversity of the ecosystems examined. Several different authority figures are presented, each situated in a space meant to authenticate their authority while they appeal to reason and care.

Most conservation films fail to devote much of their limited screen time to the “pristine” images that draw audiences to blue chip films. This lack of “beautiful” images could be because either they are too focused on elucidating the problems at hand, or they are using the images of the “ugly” world they see to educate an audience, now seeing these images too, sometimes for the first time. Films in this category are

inaccessible to many: polarizing arguments are limiting, images of devastation or messages of degradation are criticized as depressing, and the sheer scale of the problems can be unpleasant to think about. *The Death of the Oceans?* was not universally well received. As with many conservation films, it was panned for being a downer by Jamie Steiner, among others, on the web,

If you haven't already been driven to the point of insanity by the endless stream of depressing headlines that dominate the news on a daily basis, Horizon's latest offering *The Death Of The Oceans?* might finally cause you to squeeze the trigger. Tight. Whilst David Attenborough sees it fit to occasionally add a dash of optimism into proceedings, the majority of the programme will leave you feeling helpless, disheartened and apoplectic with rage, a feeling made only worse by your inability to do jack about the already disastrous state of the Earth's most mysterious of eco-systems. (Steiner)

And by Tim Dowling, in ink, for *The Guardian*: "I'm sorry, but can someone try being a bit more optimistic, just to get everyone motivated?" (Dowling)

Despite these criticisms of conservation filmmaking, there is a grave necessity for this type of message delivery in today's world. It is crucial that we acknowledge the current state of affairs on our ocean planet home. In the same speech to the Conservation Society, from which I took the earlier quote endorsing blue chip filmmaking, Howard Hall also said, "Whether the effect is dramatic or not, I do believe conservation films certainly serve to increase public awareness of the problems facing wilderness today." (Hall)

In attempting to protect the quality and diversity of life for many generations to come, I see most conservation issues as social justice issues and conservation films as social

justice films. All social documentaries and indeed all films are inherently political stories (Tobias). Even if the telos of an ocean-related documentary were intended to be apolitical, political statements would still be imposed or interpreted by viewers, regardless of the filmmaker's intention. Politics is not only an intellectual matter; it is often emotionally charged, and being so, it is not always subject to reason (Gaines 88).

Neither is politics always transparent. Sub-genres, blue chip and conservation filmmaking included, often attempt to define their own political boundaries by limiting their topics of discussion. However, the fact that an issue is ignored does not make it go away. These films still exist in the external world as positioned pieces of culture, made within established ideologies, and often taking a great deal for granted. David Hess, writing about scientists in ways that could easily be applied to artists, points out that our human pursuits are always 1) political, 2) cultural, 3) evaluative and 4) positioned (153). Certainly, films about the ocean cannot escape adherence to these categorizations. Americans (of whom I am one) and Europeans share sensibilities that other cultures often disregard. Life itself is valued differently depending on where in the world one finds oneself, and the era in which one lives.

Politicized, even revolutionary, terminology permeates the dialogue of documentary theory. Filmmaking, under the right circumstances, can lead to societal change. The hope for film to be transformative, "using the mimetic potentialities of the footage as a means of extending the community of resisters," is a hope shared by many (Gaines 96). "'Social change' has been decoupled from 'revolution,' disconnected in such a way that we are

led to see revolution as an unrecognizable extreme as opposed to a daily possibility” (Gaines 87). And yet, revolution is the right metaphor for understanding paradigm shift, says Thomas Kuhn (92). We are indeed in need of a paradigm shift, a cultural revolution if you will, in the production of informed informational media regarding oceanic ecosystems. This change needs to be a daily possibility until it is a daily reality. Natural History documentaries in general, and programming about the oceans specifically, may not readily conjure thoughts of revolution, but they are as good a place as any to start.

THEORETICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND ACTUAL PROBLEMS

There is a lot of debate about how we humans fit into the natural world.

Anthropocentrists believe that nature only has value as it relates to humans and human consumption, whereas ecocentrists believe the natural world has intrinsic value independent of the human race (Kortenkamp and Moore 262-272). In the introduction to *Uncommon Ground*, William Cronon explains that if everything is nature, we are part of that and therefore we have an interest in solving its (our) problems. Conversely—if we're separate, we easily become irresponsible in our ways (Cronon 25). Bill Evernden, in his book *The Social Creation of Nature*, calls these concepts Monism (we and nature are “one”) and Dualism (we and nature are separate) (93). He points out that we like to be separate, it makes us feel special, and we like to feel special. Humans feel so special that they take whatever they want from nature. The tragedy of the commons is writ large in the ocean (Hardin). In his epilogue, Evernden suggests that: “cultural change is a matter of changing vocabularies rather than unearthing truths” (132). This observation may often prove accurate; however, in this instance we actually have new truths about the ocean and the trouble it is in. New data from the past 50 years of technological advances, both in collecting data and collecting fish, paint us a new picture of the world and what the future may bring. Yet, maybe this new data doesn't negate Evernden's idea, and what we need is to change how we speak of the ocean and the new risks we are taking in our old relationships with it. Maybe we can just reverse the order of Evernden's causality.

Since we have discovered new truths about how we have been living, we need to change the way we communicate that information and bring about a cultural revolution.

Jacques Derrida was also concerned with vocabularies, maintaining that the way we use words (such as “natural resources”) determines many of our actions in the social world (30). Just as Derrida wrote in 1984 that the big global threat of the day, Nuclear War, was a concern to artists and humanists as well as to the military and the politicians since all of us are threatened by the “destruction of the archive,” I maintain that the issues facing our ocean should be of concern to all as well, not just to the fishermen and the scientists studying phenomena (23-27). The threats to the ocean today are even more potentially devastating and more likely to bring misery than Nuclear War. It is true that we still do need to avoid starting a nuclear war. However, we do not need to avoid starting ocean acidification or rampant overfishing, we need to stop them; they are already happening. The fate of the ocean is clearly intertwined with our own fate as a species; its quality of life is intricately and intimately connected to our quality of life.

When reflecting on the work of scientists and their predictions for the future, there seems to be a clear conclusion that fishing from the ocean, as we understand it today, as we have learned it from our families and communities for many generations, cannot continue unchanged. In her book *The World is Blue*, Sylvia A. Earle clearly describes several recent and developing crises of the ocean (9-14). Industrialization and modernization brought about destruction to the planet and the oceans that we are all complicit in perpetuating. We must begin practicing and acting on an entirely new kind

of careful thinking, including more selective eating and sustainable fishing. This approach means we will need new models and a better education. This is where new film production can help. We cannot rely on old modes of communication. We cannot rely on the logic of our parents to govern the world of our children. The disparity between modern conditions and the outdated thought that governs modern human behavior is becoming a chasm that threatens to swallow the whole ocean. Treated too long as an endless bounty and a bottomless bin, the oceans are in trouble and people are at fault; we must adjust our policies and actions toward the ocean to reflect an understanding of both what we have already taken out of it and put into it in the last two centuries (Earle 208). This is not to say, by any means, that fishing cannot continue; rather it means that fishing and its related endeavors must change and adapt *in order to* continue. These physical realities demand a response from filmmakers telling stories about the ocean.

If we would do anything but document today's species for imperialist nostalgia, we must address the looming catastrophes that we have set in motion over the last decades (Rosado 69). In the case of the oceanic ecosystems, the ramifications are so great, the scope so far-reaching, and what is at stake is so huge in proportion and scale that academic arguments of dichotomies including Monism vs. Dualism or Ecocentrism vs. Anthropocentrism break down and dissolve. The "two cultures" merge seamlessly and all are rendered as one. Our future as a race of individual human beings relies on our not destroying our home, something we are currently doing and doing quite well. Earle

again: “Time is running out for choices that we can act on now. If we do not, we will lose the chance forever” (211).

IS ANYONE MAKING RESPONSIBLE MEDIA, AND WHAT IS THAT?

There are alternatives to blue chip and conservation programming, of course. Reality TV offers ocean-centric programming but so far these are just as irresponsible or inaccessible as the films mentioned heretofore. *Swords: Life on the Line*, a 2009 Discovery Channel offering which ought to have been called *Death on the Line* instead, does a fine job of normalizing and legitimizing one of the most devastating fishing practices we've invented so far. Long lining has effectively depleted our oceans of most of the big, marketable fish. Nine out of ten big fish have been taken from the seas, a great many taken by long liners (Earle 59). On this weekly series, we see the commoditization of nature in gruesome detail, as time after time the fishermen put the sharp hooked ends of their gaff sticks right into the eye sockets of the— still living— several hundred pound fish they are hauling into the boat. The fish are always referred to by their potential cash values and the next time we are shown those fish they are headless, finless gutted chunks on ice, ready for market. This ocean-centered program is neither blue chip nor conservation programming. Unfortunately, it represents the dominant, irresponsible, sensational culture of television. And the political positioning here is subtle: framed without reference to any bigger picture, this program shows its heroic fishermen “just trying to make a living.”

Many see conservation efforts as “outsider” efforts to conserve things they feel entitled to use: agency to take away their lifestyles, livelihoods and legacies. The ways

of life inherited from forebears are at risk of being forever lost to offspring. Fishermen don't want to be tour guides and hoteliers; they want to fish, and they want their children to fish. Hunters want to be hunters and raise little hunters. These user groups have asserted that conservation groups act "with total disregard for how these... dealings affect the social, political, and economic life of our communities. We feel that many of these communities are just as much endangered species as any animal species" (qtd. in DiChiro 302). Some user groups feel persecuted by conservation campaigns, and often rightly so, because they want to keep using. Yet often, however, they are using "too much" to be reliably continued into the foreseeable future. It is clear to me that we need to educate as many people as possible as to the impact that their use of so-called "natural resources" is having on the planet and the dwindling possibilities for a bright, abundant future.

Swordfish, the species of choice and intent on *Swords: Life on the Line*, are only now fishable again after a very successful "Give Swordfish a Break" conservation campaign resulted in a decreased consumer demand as well as a decade-long ban on long lining for this big, tasty fish. The ban on fishing allowed dangerously depleted fish stocks to recover. The species did rebound somewhat, enough that the ban was lifted; proof that responsible "resource" management can make a difference. Yet, conservation issues are elided by this Discovery Channel production. These issues are not even argued against: they are aggressively ignored. What fills the vacuum and makes for drama is a constructed "competition" between the showcased fishing boats to get out there in all kinds of conditions and take as many fish as possible. Adding to the tension are the

personal stories of the romanticized, wild-west, man-against-nature type crews. Will the crew be cheated by lazy greenhorn crewmembers? Will the crew be cheated by the captain, who pays for all of the “expedition” expenses before doling out a penny? Will the crew be cheated by the sea herself? Tune in next week to find out more. But don’t ask about the environmental damage long lining has on the oceanic ecosystem. These good folks are just doing their jobs.

A bit more hopeful-seeming televisual entertainment can be found in *Whale Wars* (2008), on the Animal Planet network. Following Captain Paul Watson and his crew as they attempt to intervene between whaling vessels and the whales they hunt, Watson claims that his Sea Shepherd group is the only organization physically enforcing the International Whaling Commissions moratorium on commercial whaling. This politicization is a little more out in the open, but again, highly positioned. This is a human struggle, regardless of the title of the show. The less obvious subtext is culture against culture. The Sea Shepherd organization is positioned as good, pitted against the evils of whaling, represented for the most part by the Japanese “scientific” whaling fleet. The audience might see whales being processed by the inveterate whalers, triggering feelings of what the fight is against, but there are no nice shots of whales to trigger feelings about what the fight is for. Additionally, the high-seas adventure, as vicariously as it might play out on screen, is wholly inaccessible to the audience, who, if they wanted to get directly involved, would need to be willing to join an inexperienced crew on

dangerous missions with little or no training for periods of many months at a time: implausible and impossible for most.

A very accessible parody (and legitimate critique) by the series *South Park*, called “Whale Whores,” aired on the Comedy Central network in 2009. Paul Watson and crew were ridiculed for their grandstanding and indeterminate behavior. The racism of the original is highlighted in classic us-vs.-them style, and, so as not to miss out on a joke, the Japanese were ridiculed for their aggression and insensitivity towards whales and dolphins as well. In this world of *South Park*, the Japanese really hate dolphins and whales. This lampoon also lays bare the unfortunate truth that the ratings of a TV show and the necessary parity between a show as pitched and the one delivered trump any obligation to the “reality” of the situation, at least as far as executives are concerned. This speaks not only to *Whale Wars*, but also to the culture of Reality TV.

Very different animals from Reality TV, blue chip and conservation films share much with the rest of the art and business of film, be it fiction-filled, fact-filled or both. Blue chip films and conservation films, as carefully constructed as they may be, as factual as they may seem, are still films, teaching stories, told about characters that represent something larger than themselves; “creative treatments of actuality” (to possibly abuse Grierson’s words) that avail themselves of the particular vernacular of filmmaking and require interpretation by the audience. Pablo Picasso may not have been speaking directly about filmmaking, but the words ring true in his famous quote, “Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.” The salient parallel to filmmaking here is inescapable

for me: the very idea of producing a documentary film is to *make* the audience *realize* something that we think they might not understand, or to make them realize something they need to confront, but don't want to. In most cases it's a little of both; people are rarely ignorant of the larger debates, even if they are often ignorant of the details.

In reference to the impending doom of the oceans and the implications for our species' quality of life, the established methods of filmic storytelling are falling short in communicating the scientific facts. I contend that, given the information we now have and the timeframe we are aware of for pulling ourselves back from the brink of disaster, blue chip filmmaking, as a whole, is as irresponsible for omitting messages of peril and imminent danger as fisheries are for fishing over capacities. Furthermore, I think that filmmaker and producer justifications are often of the same ilk as those who over-consume or pollute; that is, this approach makes financial sense to us right now, and we have a responsibility to our investors to return profits. This is classic social dilemma, and, equally classic is that so many people are making bad choices (Dawes, 111). When speaking of the fate of humankind, there is no "us vs. them."

Conservation films are equally irresponsible to not pre-suppose the consistent "doom and gloom" criticism in all stages of production and come up with a conservation film about which "downer" cannot be used in easily dismissive ways. There are plenty of stories without happy endings in our history and literature. The well-told ones, however, speak to issues beyond the confines of the story itself. Oceanic stories need to be

powerful enough to make people realize the extent of the implications on their lives and the lives of those they love and care for. These films need to be stirring enough to overcome the inertia of the status quo.

THE MONEY FACTOR: RESPONSIBILITIES OF AND PRESSURES ON FILMMAKERS

In his book *Reel Nature*, Gregg Mitman writes “In the interests of mass appeal and economic profit, nature had to conform to the conventions of Hollywood entertainment” (54). Mitman was writing about film in the 1930s, but this formula, for the most part, is still intact today. People don’t want to interact with depleted fisheries or plastic gyres; they want to hang out in crystal clear waters or on beautiful pristine beaches; they want to swim with smiling dolphins. People, consciously, or more often, unconsciously, want to interact with mythology. But the fact is, the ocean is in peril from the reckless things we humans have done and are doing. The myth of an incorruptible ocean is an irresponsible falsehood that fosters complacency.

Oceans, a typical blue chip film, was arguably produced (at a staggering cost of approximately \$66 Million US) as a vehicle to make money for its studio, which it did to the tune of roughly \$10 Million in profits, all told (*Oceans*). Taking four years to make, and incorporating modern stylistic choices, it has leanings toward the revolution: the narrator does mention some damage inflicted on the oceans by humans. Unfortunately, it also has the same issues as other blue chip programming in that the audience could easily be misled into a false sense of the “unspoiled” nature of nature. There are millions of dollars being spent on this kind of film reinforcing ignorance, or downplaying the significance, of one of the most serious problems of our era.

The documentary genre as a whole, on the other hand, has had a hard time at the box office, and, while that is changing slowly, the genre still has difficulty whetting financial appetites (Palmer). When looking for funding, the term “conservation” is even more unpalatable. Nobody has yet spent \$66 million dollars on a conservation program, probably because nobody thinks they will get their money back. Media moguls, those who have built huge fortunes catering to the lowest of common denominators, have an obvious influence on what gets produced and distributed. Films that ignore the implications of human developmental sprawl on their subjects, no matter how they are marketed, are not conservation films. In the same way that nationalist governments and selfish corporations look only to their particular bottom lines, production houses and filmmakers are more likely to produce films that they think will return the largest possible cash profits. Until recently that meant avoiding any unpleasantness or controversy.

An Inconvenient Truth, a 2006 Oscar®-winning power point of a movie by Davis Guggenheim was one of the first conservation films to be a resounding financial success. Pulling in almost \$50 Million US in worldwide take, half of that from domestic box-office, it changed some producers’ minds about the viability of controversial stories (*An Inconvenient Truth*). It has a strong voice and a clear message, but as a film it does not share in most of what is special about filmmaking: the moving images, the craft and spectacle. Yet, it made a lot of money. And it certainly is controversial. It is also reasonably good science communication: educational in the most traditional sense. So

maybe the tide has turned and maybe a new flood of money will pour into the coffers of ocean conservation filmmakers. If an arguably so-so conservation film can make money, it stands to reason that “better” films would make “better” money.

As documentary filmmaker and critical theorist Trinh Minh-Ha reflects, “The larger the amount of money involved, the more valuable the film, the more believable the truth it holds out” (Renov, 93). This is, of course, not always the case; there are low-budget films that have been successful. These successes are, unfortunately, the exception and not the standard. Furthermore, even if films can be made inexpensively, there is little chance that they will get seen by appropriate numbers without costly advertising campaigns spreading the word. “The economics of production and distribution,” as Robert Rosenstone puts it, “work to keep any offbeat movements, trends, or tendencies in film buried” (215). Inertia is working against us, and that is why we need a revolution, because the oceans, and by extension the quality of life for humanity, face real and immediate danger. With more funding for new responsibly messaged films we might have a chance to help steer our course away from the rocks of disaster, and to convince others to help in the process. These investments of time, focus and money, however, have yet, but still need to be made.

THE FUTURE OF RESPONSIBLE PROGRAMMING ABOUT THE OCEAN;
GREEN CHIP FILMMAKING

I am suggesting a new model between blue chip and conservation programming, as I have defined them here. Taking the best devices from each, I propose a new category of film: green chip programming. Applying the recent cachet and implications of the label “green,” and following closely parallel to the connotation of blue chip filmmaking with blue chip stocks, implying large investments and long term dividends, I label this category of film green chip programming after a newer category of green chip stocks which index sustainable commodities and technologies.

Green chip films are visually and sensually stunning films, evocative of care in their subjects, which bring home messages of dire need for action on precipitating problems before the storms come. They are “committed documentaries,” after Tom Waugh, focused on promoting awareness of ecosystemic crises and ending unsustainable behaviors (Sherman, 260). These films offer solutions and incremental actions in which interested audience members can participate. I see an urgent need to inject messages of both imminent threat and cautious hope: not to inspire fear, nor for the dramatic value that it will have, but for education and motivation. Films are not going to solve problems. Films are going to teach people what some of the problems are, and how other people are behaving. Green chip films will inform people on how they can get involved and encourage them to do so. What each viewer does with that information is part of the process.

The debate over the use and purpose of filmmaking has been long-standing and the revolution has been a long time coming. Formalist Sergei Eisenstein focused on the emotional connection between people and their world: he felt that reality spoke obscurely, if at all. He seemed to feel that it was the responsibility of the filmmaker to tear down the structures and the system of representation and to reconstruct them into stories capable of inducing the most understanding, the greatest hermeneutic effects, in the viewer (Andrew, 69). Realist Siegfried Kracauer also wanted to reach this end, albeit through different means: he felt that film was a tool, which, by mirroring the world, could teach us intellectually about the world and our place in it (Andrew, 104). The end here, reached through mimetics, is still a hermeneutic goal: a goal of comprehension, interpretation, and deepened relationship. On one side of the looking glass, the magnified or distorted side, film as art touches people and reflects the world back in ways that everyday life does not allow them to see. On the other side, film as direct reflection teaches people about the world and their personal connection to it. Although presented in opposition, these views are not mutually exclusive: they are two sides of the same hand mirror, reflecting back different images, both useful, of the same things.

We often fall back on the easy binaries of this-way-or-that, us-vs.-them rhetoric, but in trying to preserve the oceanic ecosystem we are ultimately trying to preserve our own species. Green chip filmmakers will break and recast the hand mirror of our analogy, allowing audiences to be able to view both reflections at once. Green chip films will

satisfy both the scopophilic like-to-look and the epistemophilic want-to-know tendencies of viewers; they will educate through appeals to sensation and intellect, voyeurism and curiosity (Tobias). We need to recruit more people to the cause of a healthy ocean. We need an uprising of responsibility on the world stage. We need a revolution. Lines have been drawn that can be erased and redrawn. What stood between could instead connect.

It is reasonably certain not everyone will agree that we need a new model or category for educational media regarding the oceanic crises. Anti-revolutionary¹ filmmakers of the blue chip strain may say, “That sounds less profitable.” The first, most obvious answer to that assumption is to re-think what profit is: it is indeed profitable to maintain an ecologically diverse future for subsequent generations. Another answer to that assumption is “how do we know?” Just as no one would have predicted such a huge return for *An Inconvenient Truth*, it might turn out that green chip films haul in boatloads of monies. Anti-revolutionary filmmakers of the conservationist variety might suggest that they don’t have the time for pretty pictures when the problems confronted are often so ugly. As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” If you want to see a beautiful world, make beautiful movies. We humans are a visual species, and we need to remind the audience what there is that is worth fighting for. We also need to inform the viewing public, as well as the private sectors, about the ugly realities of our blue planet and the potential disasters that await us if we keep on with “business as usual.” As Rosenstone puts it, “The visual media have

¹ In this case I am referring to my proposed filmic modal “revolution.”

become our chief means of telling each other about the world” (206). This is why I say we need to keep parts of the current forms while compositing what is useful into new forms.

Revolutionary thinker Trinh Minh-ha wrote, “Truth is produced, induced and extended according to the regime in power” (90). This thought is not unique to Minh-Ha. Herbert Marcuse wrote prolifically in the 60s and 70s about governing powers co-opting anything that they thought might be a threat to the status quo; media, television and film are proudly among these threats. We need to take back the screens for intelligent, conscious, responsible, forward-thinking programming. While the idea of green chip programming may not seem like much of a revolution, the revolution has indeed begun, and it will be televised (Scott-Heron).

EXEMPLI GRATIA

The Cove, a film by Jim Clark, directed by Louis Psihoyos, released in 2009, previews the revolution I write of here. It engenders respect and care for the dolphins it showcases, and offers plenty of beautiful photography, yet it also is an accessible adventure story with clear messages, urgently yet professionally delivered. This is attempted “political mimesis” as Gaines would have it, depicting a struggle in the assumption that, once so informed, the audience will “body back,” and carry on the struggle (100). Certainly not all doom and gloom, except for the dolphins, this film is unapologetically positioned, proactive and thoughtfully presented, and it encourages the audience to join in the campaign. There are many parallels between this film and the series *Whale Wars*, however, and some similar criticisms as well. Again, there is a sub-surface culture against culture commentary. Again, the Japanese are the “enemy.” And again, apart from raising awareness of the topical issues, very little progress is made on screen to alter the activities so heavily indicted. Defenders of the film, though, might say that raising awareness is often a critical first step along the path to inciting change.

I don’t agree that *The Cove* is a revenge story, as some have said, with a subtext of “avenging Flipper’s death.” It is, however, clearly about one man’s crusade to “right the wrongs” he sees; wrongs he himself was not only complicit in before his change of mind (precipitated by a change of heart), but also instrumental in establishing. There is yet no global culture, but these dolphin crusaders certainly wish there were. Moving forward into a world with extremely limited resources maybe there will need to be. If movies like

this would be made addressing larger issues than a single town's take of a limited range of marine mammals, however lovable or pathetic (pathos-inducing), then we would realize the potential of green chip filmmaking.

Charles Clover's 2009 *The End of the Line* is a film with some great imagery, and a strongly argued ocean conservation message about overfishing. Authenticated by the very well-spoken, "we are fighting a war against fish... and we are winning," it is too long a movie for its own good, even if it only runs 85 minutes. It seems that the filmmakers could not figure out how to finish the film. As a result the narrative falls apart at the end and was not terribly inspiring in its call to action. Educationally right on topic, but without accessible motivational ways forward. A film like this, with a more concise edit and a more forward-thinking, invigorating ending would be a good candidate for green chip.

Plastic Bag is a clever first person narrative fable that starts and ends at the sea, following the "life" and wandering quest of a plastic bag to find "paradise," the great Pacific Vortex, and its "maker," the first person to use it. Filled with wonder and emotion, this short film by Ramin Bahrani and narrated by Werner Herzog (as the bag), is inspirational, educational and beautiful to watch and listen to. There is not an explicit problem cited, rather it is implied. There is not really a call to action, either, only a "wish" made by the plastic bag that he could "die." In this case, the implications are enough for some, but might elude many.

These are examples of the potential for new films to teach us new ways to think, new things to see and hopefully new ways to act. They represent, however, neither the sum nor the total of possible instances of green chip programming. They are, in fact, not green chip films, but they have many of the earmarks and much of the same intention: to inspire (emotionally as well as intellectually), educate, entertain and empower.

And then there is *Green*. *Green* is a film produced, directed, filmed and edited by Patrick Rouxel, a tour-de-force indictment against industrialization. Skillful storytelling right from the beginning rewards the viewer with a glimpse of Indonesia: the forest and its deforestation revealed through the story of one homeless orangutan named Green and her many less-fortunate captive cousins. This film was made on a low, creatively financed budget, yet received top honors at some of the most prestigious wildlife film festivals in the world. A beautiful film about ugly realities, this film narrative eschews the use of a voiceover to interpret the pictures for the audience. Rather, it employs an emotional soundtrack and a technique that is gaining popularity but is still considered experimental by some: the performative mode (Nichols, 32). This technique encourages the audience to make sense of and to contextualize what the filmmaker is showing them, combining for themselves the filmmaker's interpretation and their own. *Green* represents to me all of the aspects of green chip filmmaking: strong story, stunning images of places and animals most people have never seen, clever visual metaphors, whistle blowing and a call to action, even if, in this case, that call is unspoken in words. Green, the ape, stands in as synecdoche for all of the wild animals, things and places without

voice, which are being encroached upon by human societies. It is not a happy story and there is no happy ending. It is a clear warning. This may be a small film on the fringes, but it does represent a larger revolution. *Green* shows us vividly what is “out there” and what is, quite literally, being taken away; this is the mission of green chip filmmaking.

CONCLUSION: OCEAN FILMMAKING IN THE CONTEXT OF OCEANIC CRISES;
A NEW BRASS RING

If we do not address the oceanic crises and adapt our relationship with the ocean soon it will be too late to ever do so. Conservation films tell us what we are losing, and blue chip films show us what is worth saving, but neither technique is doing enough to inspire the radical changes in human behavior that the science tells us we need in order to halt our destruction of the oceanic ecosystems; also known as our world. There is no more time to wait. The global populace needs education as to the drastic nature of the underlying “big picture” problems facing our oceans.

Opportunistic governments and corporations do not ask when is a good time for rapine and pillage. They just act in the name of today’s profit. Now we need to act, in the name of our tomorrows. And we need to make beautiful, watchable films that foreground instead of ignore the pressing problems of today’s world; films that touch hearts and minds *as well as* stimulate and provoke bodies to question authority, to do further research, and to engage in action. We need to do this right now. Ignorance is the worst enemy that the earth, the ocean and all of their children will face in the near future. As oceanographer, submariner, explorer, author and teacher Dr. Sylvia Earle said to me once on the topic of educating people everywhere, “They can’t care if they don’t know.” And, yet, knowing is just a beginning.

Viewers must be engaged in a process within which they employ their own innate powers of interpretation. As Kieran Egan states in *Teaching as Story Telling*, “Knowledge is... composed not merely by experience, but the mind constructively makes its own contribution” (11). This act of interpretation is the key to true audience comprehension of subject matter -- not simply a knowing of facts, but a self-making of *meaning* out of information: a synthesis of *what they know* with *who they are*, and, further, with *what might be*.

I find the current modes of filmmaking about the ocean to be disappointing: largely either inaccessible or irresponsible at best, and, in the extreme, immoral, after Bauman² (215). By combining mimetics and hermeneutics, green chip conservation education stories can be presented in ways that show *and* tell; that inspire and provoke audiences into self-to-nature analysis whereby they come to identify their own place in the natural/physical world.

The twenty-first-century understanding of the state of the oceans has precipitated a need for a new paradigm; the time for conservation films to be made with blue chip treatments is upon us. In fact, it is the responsibility of those who can, to do. There needs to be a new form of educational entertainment moving forward: wherein studios, and others with the money to spend, produce beautiful high-end films that combat

² “Whoever willingly or by default partakes of the cover-up or, worse still, the denial of the human-made, non-inevitable, contingent and alterable nature of the social order, notably the kind of order responsible for unhappiness, is guilty of immorality – of refusing to help a person in danger.” --Zygmunt Bauman

ignorance with serious messages of personal and professional responsibilities embedded in them. Furthermore, we need to spend the money necessary to get these films shown not only to a general public willing to pay \$12.50 or more per ticket, but across the human spectrum: to user groups with no access to the traditional movie theatre experience, as well as, and maybe more importantly, screenings for government officials, heads of corporations, and policy makers the world over. This movement to overcome social inertia has already begun, but slowly, haphazardly. This green chip summation is partial and open-ended, rather than totalizing. Yet, by coining new terminology and standardizing a new categorization for new films, we can call on others, in clear ways, to join the struggle to make the world aware, not just of what we stand to lose, but how we can act to save the oceans from the dangers of utter destruction. There is time to save the oceans, and our futures, but no time to waste.

In making films about our global ocean, filmmakers have available to them not just the tools of science but also the entire lexicon of filmmaking. Our vernacular, as scientist-philosopher-filmmakers, is uniquely replete with many different forms of expression, representation and implication. We need to draw upon the high production values of the blue chip school, and combine them with the aggressive information delivery of the conservationists. With those tools, we can tell stories meant to be beautiful emotional triggers, smart logical proofs, and engaging calls to action audacious enough to contribute to a common good. We, as filmmakers, and as audiences, need to stop ignoring the chronicles and stories of an ocean in danger. We need a filmic revolution to

bring about cultural revolution. The task may seem overwhelming, yet we need to, and *can* help save the life of the oceans, for ourselves and our children, by making and distributing new films. I am suggesting no less be done. I am suggesting we try it a new way.

Viva la revolution; Viva la green chip filmmaking.

WORKS CITED

- Andrew, J. D. *The Major Film Theories*. Oxford, Oxford UP, 1976. Print.
- An Inconvenient Truth. *Box Office Mojo*. n.d. Web. Feb 2 2011
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity, 2000. Print.
- Bousé, Derek. *Wildlife Films*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2000. Print.
- Chris, Cynthia. *Watching Wildlife*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2006. Print.
- Cronon, William. *Uncommon Ground*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995. Print.
- Dawes, R. M. and Messick, D. M. "Social Dilemmas" *International Journal of Psychology*. 35 (2). 2000. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. "No Apocalypse, Not Now." *Diacritics*. 14(2): 20-31. [Summer 1984]. Print.
- Di Chiro, Giovanna. "Author's interview with Alston, D." in "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice." in Cronon, W. *Uncommon Ground*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1995. Print.
- Dowling, Tim. "TV review: Horizon: The Death of the Oceans?" *Guardian.co.uk*. Oct 4, 2010. Web. Feb 2, 2011.
- Earle, Sylvia A. *The World is Blue*. Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2009. Print.
- Egan, Kieran. *Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1986. Print.
- Evernden, Neil. *The Social Creation of Nature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992. Print.
- Gaines, Jane. "Political Mimesis" in Gaines, J. & Renov, M. *Collecting Visible Evidence*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. Print.
- Hall, Howard "Nature Conservancy Presentation Hong Kong 2003." n.d. Web. Feb 2 2011.

- Hardin, Garret. "The Tragedy of the Commons." in *Science*. 162(1968): 1243-1248
Science. n.d. Web. Feb 2, 2011
- Hess, David J. *Science Studies: An Advanced Introduction*. New York: New York UP, 1997. Print.
- Kortenkamp, K. V. & Moore, C. F. "Ecocentrism and Anthropocentrism: Moral Reasoning About Ecological Commons Dilemmas." in *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. 21(3): 261-272 Academic P. 2001. Print.
- Kuhn, Thomas *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Third Ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. Print.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. "The Totalizing Quest of Meaning." in Renov, M. *Theorizing Documentary*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Mitman, Gregg. *Reel Nature*. Cambridge: U of Harvard P. 1999. Print.
- Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana UP. 2001. Print.
- Oceans* (2009 film) *Wikipedia*. n.d. Web. Feb 2, 2011.
- Palmer, Chris. "About Conservation Filmmaking." *Filmmakers for Conservation*. Web. Feb 2, 2011.
- Rosenstone, Robert. "The Future of the Past." in Sobchack, Vivian *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*. London: Routledge. 1996. Print.
- Scott-Heron, Gil. *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. Flying Dutchman Productions. 1970. LP.
- Sherman, Sharon R. *Documenting Ourselves: Film, Video, and Culture*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky. 1988. Print.
- Steiner, Jamie. "The Death of the Oceans? Review: 10,000 Defeats Under The Sea." *On The Box*. Oct 4, 2010. Web. Feb 2, 2011.
- Tobias, Ronald. "Survey of Science & Natural History Filmmaking." Montana State U, Bozeman. Nov. 2006. Lecture.