

## **The End of Life on Earth?: discourses of risk in natural history documentaries.**

### ***Biography:***

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In documentary theory wildlife documentaries seem to have been relatively neglected. I can recall no instance of a panel at a Visible Evidence conference devoted to natural history programming (despite the popularity of the form with audiences, and its 'respectability'). Indeed Aldridge (Aldridge and Dingwall 2003, 436) claims that the wildlife genre is not classed as documentary by cineastes, as the term documentary 'has long signified the scrutiny of social problems'. Wildlife documentaries may well be seen as a-political and lacking social context. At the 2008 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Philadelphia the panel on animated films on climate change included more fiction films (such as *Happy Feet*) than non fiction.

However, I want to agree with Harre *et al* that the time has come for a serious engagement with environmental discourses, to raise an awareness of how environmental matters are presented and talked about (Harré, Mèuhlhèausler, and Brockmeier 1999, 2). They make the point that environmental discourse has become part of everyday life, colouring 'the entire public sphere in the west' (Harré, Mèuhlhèausler, and Brockmeier 1999, 186). Certainly, there has been an increase in the literature around science journalism (Dispensa and Brulle 2003; Furnass et al. 2004; Harré, Mèuhlhèausler, and Brockmeier 1999; Scott, Canada. Environment Canada., and University of Waterloo. 2000) and much of that deals with climate change. I argue that 'natural history' or 'wildlife' programming, as one aspect of environmental discourse has been important in establishing a sympathetic ground for debates about the human impact on the environment, in particular on global warming.

In this paper I will discuss two cases, *Life on Earth*, an example of the genre of 'blue chip' wildlife series, and *An Inconvenient Truth* a documentary which, although it deals with environmental crisis, is more akin to the social issue documentary. I have chosen *Life on Earth* as it was the first 'blue chip' documentary series (Kilborn 2006) on nature, so it serves as a convenient starting point for such an historical examination. The series builds an explicit argument about the diversity and

interdependence of life on the planet which derive from evolution. Attenborough assumes an ecological perspective without which concerns about global warming make little sense.

Wildlife documentaries have been a major site for human understandings of the natural world in the modern era. In the discursive construction of nature in western culture (Lippit 2000), a common trope uses animals as exemplars, analogues or warnings for humans, a characteristic particularly relevant to documentaries about the human impact on the environment. One theme implicit in some programs has been the likely impact on animal species of such human activities as population growth, land clearing, mining, pesticide usage, and pollution, leading potentially to species extinctions. In some cases this claim is explicit, rather than implicit. For example the core argument of program two of the BBC series *Apes in danger* is that human actions in clearing forests for the palm oil industry in Indonesia threaten the survival of the orang-utang as a species (British Broadcasting Corporation 2006).

However, the risk of extinction has shifted so that the focus is now on humans and the future of the planet itself, a theme explicitly stated in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

With *An Inconvenient Truth* environmental discourse not only became the dominant focus of a single documentary, but that documentary achieved a large, mainstream audience and stimulated widespread debate in relation to climate change. So far, however, there has been little critical work that places wildlife programming into the context of debates around climate change. Documentary theory, in so much as it has dealt with wildlife films at all, has tended to skirt around their environmental implications.

The overall context of this paper is the view, which I take to be an element of social theories of risk, that environmental issues pose a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of industrial society, a crisis of industrial society deeply rooted in the foundation of its institutions, a central theme in Ulrich Beck's work (Beck 1996, 1998; Beck and Ritter 2007).

The two documentaries embody different aspects of the documentary project. The first is predominantly epistemological: *Life on Earth* as a natural history

documentary, has no overt political or social purpose, but rather seeks greater understanding of the natural world, through science. Attenborough begins with an implicit question, which he then sets out to answer within scientific discourse, using several levels of narrative: how did such a variety of forms of life develop on this planet? His answer is through the processes of natural selection, the basis of evolution.

In these programs we are going to survey the unmeasurable variety of animals that have been produced by natural selection ... as elements in a long and continuing story that began 1,000 million years ago and is still continuing today.

The second project of documentary relevant here is persuasive, or social educative. *An Inconvenient Truth* sets out to persuade the audience that anthropogenic climate change is a threat to all life on earth, and for the need for social action to prevent this from happening.

Gore begins with the belief that human activities have led to a situation of environmental crisis, 'a collision between our civilisation and the earth', and argues that this demands a human response. He uses a moral framework to understand this crisis, and in doing so constructs several interwoven levels of narrative also.

So, at this stage I am suggesting that both works participate in the project of documentary, but in different ways: the first as an epistemological work drawing on scientific discourse, the second as an ethical, persuasive, work drawing on a moral discourse, although it uses scientific data as rhetorical trope.

One way to approach these two works is in their treatment of 'nature'. The position of the two presenters is instructive here. David Attenborough is presented throughout in close proximity to animals and other natural phenomena about which he speaks. In one famous moment, in episode 12, he confronts a group of gorillas and, famously, says direct to camera:

There is more meaning and mutual understanding in exchanging a glance with a gorilla than with any other animal I know.

Several days later, in a sequence which was, due to misadventure, not filmed, the gorillas make physical contact with him (Attenborough 2003, 291). So Attenborough is presented as having a physical closeness and an empathy with the natural world. However, he is asking a scientific question and his explanatory framework is that of science - his understanding of the natural world, the processes of natural selection and the variety of animals and plants produced by those processes are mediated through scientific discourse, which assumes a separation between the observer and the observed.

At this stage I want to digress to make some comments about risk theory. There are two broad conceptions of risk which are relevant here. The first operates within a scientific, positivist framework, and understands risk as quantifiable and calculable. The second concept of risk (which in a sense is a critique of the former) has become firmly entrenched in sociological and critical discourses through the work of Mary Douglas, Michel Foucault and Ulrich Beck, and is particularly relevant to debates about anthropogenic, or human created, climate change, and to examinations of the shifting discourses around human impacts upon the natural world. 'Risk theory' argues for the central role of modernisation, with its key elements of consumerism and individualism in the increase in risk to human survival.

One of the features of the 'risk society' of late modernity is a shift in the 'nature / culture' binary. 'Nature' (like 'ecology' and 'the environment') is a category constructed in discourse, including in the discursive practices of wildlife programming and wider environmental discourses in the media. Barbara Adam (Adam 1996, 85) argues that the conditions of late modernity require a rejection of the belief in objectivity and the recognition of the 'constitutive power of our frames of meaning', including scientific discourse. So, while David Attenborough is presented as having some empathy with the natural world, he operates within a framework in which culture - or science - and nature as object of science, are separated. The detached scientist is able to both understand and operationalise nature.

Gore's engagement with 'the environment' is even more mediated, by his laptop, through the windows of motor vehicles and aeroplanes, through media constructions of nature, and through the evidence of global warming provided by his friends in the

scientific community. Gore's engagement, then, is mediated not only by scientific discourse, as is Attenborough's, but also by the technologies of late modernity itself.

In late modernity it is no longer possible to speak of nature AND culture, as there is an increasing realisation of the interdependence and interconnectedness of these categories (Adam 1996, 90). In this context Attenborough's argument is interesting. He takes an ecological perspective in which humans are part of that evolutionary process - humans evolved. They cannot, in this series at least, intervene in evolution. This is an important understanding for the argument being produced by Gore, as being part of the ecology humans cannot be immune from damage to that ecology.

Unlike Attenborough, who does not address questions of global warming in *Life on Earth*, although he does do so in a later series, *The State of the Planet* (Barrington et al. 2000). Al Gore's whole purpose in *An Inconvenient Truth* is to address the issue of global warming. This is an issue 'replete' with uncertainties, hence the clamour for proof:

insistence on certainty and "proof" for situations characterised by indeterminacy, unpredictability and multiple time-lags is central to much of the political complacency about environmental problems. (Adam 1996, 97)

Gore seeks to address this directly by his rhetorical deployment of 'accurate data and hardnosed science'. *An Inconvenient Truth* is structured by two interwoven narratives: a public presentation and a personal story. The public presentation draws heavily on quantitative data drawn from, and using the graphical tools of, empirical science: graphs, charts and diagrams, as well as photographs which are assumed to speak for themselves. This scientific perspective assumes that clear evidence of a phenomenon occurs when there is a directly observable link between input and output (Adam 1996, 97), that is, when there is a clear cause and effect relationship established between phenomena. For Gore's critics, seeking certainty before engaging in action, such a link has yet to be established. However, the argument of risk theorists is that in late modernity, the faith in science to provide that link is misplaced.

However, in fact, Gore draws upon another discourse. The personal story, a narrative of personal conversion and conviction, begins with the first shots of the film: a series of shots which appear to be home movie footage of a river from Al Gore's childhood farm. The overall tone of this narrative is one of nostalgia and simple American values. The voice is quiet (close to the microphone), peaceful and reflective. This narrative surfaces at moments in the documentary and serves as a transition to new phases in the public performance. A number of images are common throughout the personal story: images of Gore travelling, either to find out about global warming, or to spread the word about global warming. In most of these sequences he is either shown looking out of the window of a plane, or a car (in one case he is driving the car - back home to the farm); or he is looking at the screen of his laptop. Although the overall tone of this narrative is one of personal reflection his engagement with the world is always mediated by windows or screens. Even the story about the serious accident that nearly claimed the life of his son is represented by black and white photographs from the period, as are short sections about his public political life which are represented through archival footage.

In rhetorical terms this narrative serves to assert Gore's moral or ethical authority, important in providing the ethical proof of his arguments (Nichols 1991, 134), and positing an alternative discourse to science. It also provides, though regular anecdotes, personal stories of triumph over adversity (Horatio Alger like): the near loss of his son, and his election defeat by George Bush, 'well that was a hard blow, but what do you do? You make the best of it.'

This moral discourse is not restricted to the personal story. During the public presentation to the audience in the auditorium his tone shifts. He employs a less intimate, more public register. At times humorous, at times angry, this public presentation has elements of the lecture, the sermon and the political speech. The dominant discourse here is moral. Early on Gore argues 'the moral imperative to make big changes is inescapable', later, 'ultimately this is really not a political issue so much as a moral issue. If we allow [global warming] to happen it is deeply unethical' and the last words of the presentation (before a final return to the personal thread of the documentary) are:

I believe this is a moral issue. It is your time to seize this issue. It is our time to rise again to secure our future.

The presentation is structured as a series of stories or anecdotes, many provided by or about 'friends' ('my friend Carl Sagan', 'my friend Lonny Thompson' - both scientists) or inspirational teachers. Regular references to inspirational teachers (for whom he had a deep 'respect') are consistent with the moral discourse, as these friends and teachers are valued for their moral and ethical authority, and their roles in the moral formation of Al Gore. At the same time their ethical authority is in turn asserted by Gore's own ethical authority as supported by references to his personal experience, 'when I was in Antarctica I saw ...'. This comment is part of a second thread - constant reference to evidence provided by sight - the empirical basis of science.

Just as the relationship to nature is altered in late modernity, so is the relationship to time. Theorists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Barbara Adam have pointed to the the changing conditions under which time and space are organised (Adam 1996, 89, citing Anthony Giddens). Harré *et al* argue that 'all environmental discourse encompasses a thematic level of temporal concerns' (1999, 7) and so, in the analysis of environmental discourse, it is important to understand the use of temporal structures. Both documentaries are constructed by narrative, a time based discursive strategy. In the case of *Life on Earth* there are several levels of narrative, which construct complex temporalities. Heuristically these can be grouped as 'natural time' and 'cultural time' although this distinction is problematic (Adam 1996).

The narrative developed over 13 episodes is one such cultural time, but each episode is structured as narrative - sequentially and spatially, constructing unities of time and space centred on the figure of Attenborough.

A further level of cultural time occurs in the narrative of scientific method and the development of understandings of evolution. This narrative begins with the 'story' of Charles Darwin's development of the theory of natural selection and reaches some degree of resolution when Attenborough says, direct to camera:

Modern science is only some 2 or 3 hundred years old, and yet already it has provided us with some profound insights into the workings of the world around us. But there's still a very great deal that we don't know .... some scientists will claim that it's only a matter of time before we will provide a more detailed explanation.

The narrative of scientific discovery is largely confined to the last 300 years, much of it even more recent: 'since the development of radioactivity scientists have developed techniques of measuring the age of rocks' and later, 'for many years it was thought [by scientists] that all rocks of this great age were without any fossils and then about 30 years ago people realised they'd been looking in the wrong rocks, and in the wrong way'.

This narrative includes moments of explication of scientific process, such as the sequence of a machine slicing and then grinding rock samples as the voice over explains that 'first of all you have to cut a wafer thin slice of rock'. The temporality here is about scientific process, so the time scale is very restricted: to that of the immediate process.

Turning to 'natural' temporalities two are evident: evolutionary time and biological time.

Evolution assumes species are not fixed forever, they change over time and space, but in 'immense periods of time [which] baffle the imagination'. In this narrative mammals, including humans, are 'relatively recent arrivals on the scene'.

The narrative of evolutionary time is presented largely as a narrative of stages: 'that was a crucial stage in the history of life', and 'eventually the stage was set for a new dramatic step'. In this temporal model leaps in time are evident. However in other sections of the documentary a continuity is suggested between past and present. At Yellowstone Park Attenborough points to micro organisms like the earliest bacteria.

At a number of points in the narrative of evolutionary time being constructed there are moments of narrative stasis. These occur, for example, when Attenborough presents sequences taken with an electron microscope of very simple life forms such as amoeba, to explain the mechanisms of genetic variation 'as a result [of which] the

pace of evolution accelerated'. At this point the time scale is that of biological time: the temporality of cell development and splitting, of the life of an individual amoeba.

While the narrative draws on a complex conception of time, for much of the narrative this is a geological/evolutionary conception of time. It is this trajectory, determined by forces beyond the agency of humans, which global warming activists such as Gore, suggest could be brought to a catastrophic end by forces unleashed by the developments of modernity, including the imperious gaze of scientific discourse which understands humans to be outside nature itself.

A number of metaphors and images recur in *An Inconvenient Truth*, such as the regular reference to breath and breathing. The story about the crisis in his personal life in which his son is hit by a car turns on the moment when 'he finally took a breath'. At this point in the narrative Gore is heard to expel a sigh as he then says, 'everything could be blown off the calendar'. This story serves a number of functions. On the one hand it is a significant moment in Gore's recognition of what is important in life, on the other hand it is paralleled with a metaphor in which the earth is a living entity:

it's as if the entire earth, once each year, breathes in and out.

The anecdote of his son's accident serves to connect the personal and public: 'the possibility of losing what was most precious to me' is paralleled to the earth 'I felt that we could really lose it'. So this anecdote serves to connect individualistic, personal, moral actions with the necessity for public, collective action to save the planet. For Anthony Giddens

Ecological problems highlight the new and accelerating interdependence of global systems and bring home to everyone the depth of the connections between personal activity and planetary problems. (Adam 1996, 86)

This metaphor of the earth as a living entity is interesting for another reason: it suggests a slight move away from the view of nature as separate from and external to humans, towards a more organic view (and in contradiction to another metaphor Gore uses, of the earth as a machine). It also suggests that values other than material

values are important, again in some contradiction to the materialistic models of science and economics he uses in other places.

If there are two major narrative threads in the documentary there are two main temporal frameworks: individual time and historical time. The personal narrative is told entirely in individual time. It is a story of personal ethical formation and triumph over obstacles. The lesson being proclaimed is that global warming is an obstacle that can also be overcome, and that must be overcome. The time scale of the public presentation is not so much personal time as historical time. Gore recognises the role of natural cycles in the processes of global warming and cooling, but asserts that overlain on these cycles are changes produced in relatively recent times by human actions. He produces graphs to demonstrate his argument that the rate at which climate change is taking place is increasingly exponentially, starting with cultural and industrial changes of relatively recent times. He projects into the future to warn of the end of time for humans if action is not taken: the earth 'might not be here for our children', both asserting the possibility of a catastrophic end to time and of the existence of values other than material values.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to understand some of the discursive features of two documentaries which participate in environmental discourse. It has charted a shift from a concern with nature, ecology, and science to a concern with climate change and risk. The link I am suggesting is that documentaries such as *Life on Earth* laid much of the groundwork for *An Inconvenient Truth*.

The context of global warming and risk makes closer attention to environmental discourse (Harré, Mèuhlhèausler, and Brockmeier 1999) imperative in media studies. One aspect of this which is immediately available is closer attention to the role of the wildlife documentary in the popularisation of science, and more recently, through documentaries such as *Inconvenient truth*, popularising debate about climate change issues.

Both documentaries are linked, however in their use of conventional narratives, speaking positions, and regimes of truth and in their limited understanding of the

inter penetrability of the domains of nature and culture - the assumption that humans are somehow outside of nature. The two works use old discursive strategies and old discursive frames at a time when the challenge is to find alternate discursive modes compatible with late modernity, modes which address the changing perceptions of nature and changing, and rapidly accelerating temporalities.

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