

Rhetoric of Ecology in Visual Culture

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From Mindbombs to Firebombs: The Narrative Strategies of Radical Environmental Activism Documentaries

Od bomb umysłów do bomb zapalających: strategie narracyjne radykalnego aktywizmu ekologicznego w filmach dokumentalnych

Abstract

The article examines the narrative strategies of two documentary films that give insight into the direct-action campaigns of two radical environmental groups; Jerry Rothwell's *How to Change the World* (2015) recounts the birth of Greenpeace and its development of "mindbomb" communication strategies. Marshall Curry's *If a Tree Falls* (2011) chronicles the rise and fall of the Earth Liberation Front and its tactics of ecotage. Situating both films in the larger history of radical environmentalism in the United States, the article explores the affective side of their rhetoric on two levels: on the level of the activists' own communication strategies and on the level of the films made *about* these activists and their strategies. It argues that making a documentary film about radical environmentalist groups raises moral questions for the filmmaker and that, each in his way, Rothwell and Curry have both made films that straddle the line between ostensible objectivity and sympathetic advocacy for the individuals they portray.

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje strategie narracyjne dwóch filmów dokumentalnych, które dają wgląd w kampanie akcji bezpośrednich dwóch radykalnych organizacji ekologicznych. *How to Change the World* (Jerry Rothwell, 2015) opowiada o narodzinach Greenpeace i rozwoju strategii komunikacyjnych „bomby umysłowej”. *If a Tree Falls* (Marshall Curry, 2011) opisuje powstanie i upadek Frontu Wyzwolenia Ziemi (Earth Liberation Front) i jego taktykę ekotażu. Sytuując oba filmy w szerszej historii radykalnego ekologizmu w Stanach Zjednoczonych, artykuł przedstawia afektywną stronę ich retoryki na dwóch poziomach: na poziomie strategii komunikacyjnych aktywistów oraz na poziomie filmów nakręconych o tych działaczach i ich strategiach. Autorka dowodzi, iż kręcenie filmu dokumentalnego o grupach radykalnych ekologów wywołuje w filmowcach pytania moralne. Rothwell i Curry nakręcili filmy, które oscylują pomiędzy obiektywnością a empatycznym poparciem dla postaci, o których filmy te opowiadają.

Key words

eco-documentaries, radical environmentalism, environmental activism, *How to Change the World*, *If a Tree Falls*
eko-filmy dokumentalne, radykalny ekologizm, aktywizm ekologiczny, *How to Change the World*, *If a Tree Falls*

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From Mindbombs to Firebombs: The Narrative Strategies of Radical Environmental Activism Documentaries¹

Over the past two decades, environmental documentaries have grown quite popular. Interested viewers can now choose from a plethora of topics, from traditional nature and wildlife films to productions that tackle more politically charged topics such as natural gas fracking, species extinction, food waste, plastic pollution, and climate change. Many of these films are *activist* since they seek to intervene in the public discussion of a given environmental issue and steer it in a certain direction, even to inspire their viewers to become active themselves. There are also documentaries that focus on the histories and communication strategies of environmentalist activists, groups, and movements, including Mark Kitchell's *A Fierce Green Fire* (2012), ML Lincoln's *Wrenched* (2014), Avi Lewis's *This Changes Everything* (2015), Kelly Nyks's *Disobedience* (2016), and Nathan Grossman's *I Am Greta* (2020). As media scholar John Duvall has noted, such films often "use interactive or performative modes of storytelling, presenting to audiences inside perspectives on methods and tactics utilized by activists" (2018, 257). Duvall surmises that by doing so these films can help viewers "to move from despair to hope" (257), which may very well be the case. But it is worth noting that some of these films make a conscious effort to also reveal the darker and more painful sides of environmental activism.

This is especially true for films that seek to document *radical* environmentalism. In this paper, I will consider two films that give insight into the histories of two very different radical environmental groups: Jerry Rothwell's *How to Change the World* (2015) recounts the birth of Greenpeace and its development of "mindbomb" communication strategies at great personal risk for the activists; Marshall Curry's

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If a Tree Falls (2011) chronicles the rise and fall of the Earth Liberation Front and its militant tactics of ecotage. Both films tell the story of an entire movement by foregrounding the personal journeys of a selected group of individuals, and they both use striking visuals to communicate on a visceral level what it is like to risk one's one life to protect the natural environment. *How to Change the World* heavily relies on original footage from the Greenpeace archive that was shot by the activists themselves, much of it unseen for over 40 years. Lacking such an archive due to the very nature of the Earth Liberation Front, *If a Tree Falls* recreates ELF raids on the visual level as it interrogates the domestic terrorism charges against environmental activists.

Situating both films in the larger history of radical environmentalism in the United States, I will explore the affective side of their rhetoric on two levels: on the level of the environmental activists' communication strategies as they are presented in the films, and on the level of the films themselves. Moreover, I will pay attention to the specific challenges involved in making such films. As environmental historian Keith Makoto Woodhouse (2020) has shown, radical environmentalists have always been confronted with at least two central questions regarding their tactics, one being a moral question (what kinds of actions are permissible in the name of protecting the environment?), the other one being a question of effectiveness (what kinds of actions will successfully raise public concern or, conversely, turn public opinion *against* the activists?). I will argue that making a documentary about radical environmentalist groups raises similar questions for the filmmaker. Rothwell and Curry have both made films that combine spectacular imagery with interviews and biographical storytelling to engage and educate viewers about radical environmental activism while trying to straddle the line between ostensible objectivity and sympathetic advocacy for the individuals they portray.

The Challenges of Documenting Radical Direct-Action Environmentalism

Making an environmental documentary is no easy feat, not least because it requires filmmakers to interrogate their own standpoints on the issues portrayed in their films. As ecocinema scholar Helen Hughes has noted, "in making a film about the environment, understood as a political subject, the film-maker is involved in a special way" (2014, 5). The makers of eco-documentaries often find it difficult to stay as "neutral" as some modes of documentary filmmaking strive to be.² Many of them use what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have called "rhetorical

2. The perhaps best-known tradition of documentary filmmaking that strives to be objective is that of the BBC. As Alan Rosenthal points out, "the rules enshrined in BBC's handbook *Principles and Practice in Documentary Film* ... aimed at a formalized objectivity and neutrality and made it clear that in BBC programs all opinions should be personal and attributable" to the protagonists in the film (1980, 29).

form” (2008, 348), and are thus explicit, even polemical, in their arguments and use of emotional appeals.³ Films like Werner Boote’s *Plastic Planet* (2009), Kip Anderson and Keegan Kuhn’s *Cowspiracy* (2014), and Damon Gameau’s *2040* (2019) make no secret of their aim to educate viewers and move them to a new conviction, attitude, or action regarding their plastic use, their dietary habits, or their CO₂ footprints.

Hughes calls the strategies deployed in such films the “argumentative response” because they “are emotionally and intellectually charged words, images, and sounds that can be interpreted in different ways but that, for the film-makers, clearly add up to a central conclusion” (2014, 118). This type of eco-documentary is “generally called ‘activist’” (118) and does not shy away from openly pushing its arguments. Following in the footsteps of Michael Moore, their makers sometimes become protagonists in their own films, chronicling their own struggles with the issue at hand. Other rhetorical eco-documentaries are more muted in their approach, with the filmmakers taking pains to extricate their own opinions from their films and to present the matter as objectively as possible. The two films I want to consider here — *How to Save the World* and *If a Tree Falls* — can be understood better by putting them into this category, since both films pass themselves off first and foremost as cinematic histories of a radical environmentalist group, zooming in on the biographies of specific members at specific moments in time. Yet as Hughes also reminds us, even films that “use biographical narratives to frame their messages” can be “understood as films that put forward in many different forms a linked set of reasons to support a central argument” (2014, 217). And even filmmakers who consciously strive for an objective portrayal of their subject matter are inevitably implicated by the very way in which they portray it, what they choose to show, and what they foreground.

That is why a documentary about radical environmental activism can be a particularly challenging task, especially if it is a film about American activists, given that certain forms of radical environmentalism are classified as ecoterrorism under U.S. law. The legal concept of “ecoterrorism” has been in use for almost four decades, and it has had substantial consequences for activists who want to protect and defend the environment. David Thomas Sumner and Lisa M. Weidman explain that the term was “coined in 1983 in a libertarian magazine, inserted into federal law in 1988” and became “part of the FBI’s definition of terrorism by 2002” (2013, 873). According to the FBI’s definition, ecoterrorism is “the use or threatened use of violence of a criminal nature against innocent victims *or property* by an

3. According to Bordwell and Thompson, this form is marked by four attributes: (1) it addresses the viewer openly, trying to move him or her to a new intellectual conviction, to a new emotional attitude, or to action; (2) the subject of the film is a matter of opinion; (3) the filmmaker appeals to viewer emotions; (4) the film attempts to persuade the viewer to make a choice that will have an effect on his or her everyday life” (2008, 348).

environmentally oriented, subnational group for environmental–political reasons, or aimed at an audience beyond the target, often of a symbolic nature” (quoted in Sumner and Weidman 2013, 858; emphasis mine). Every radical environmentalist group in the U.S. that wants to go beyond mere lobbying activities has to take these facts into account. And yet, these are risks that these groups — to varying degrees — have been willing to take. As Woodhouse notes, the radical break within American environmentalism was structured by three elements:

First, frustrated activists subscribed to an ecocentric philosophy that placed nonhuman nature on an equal moral footing with people.... Second, radical environmentalists focused on wilderness preservation, the clearest and most vital example of ecocentric environmentalism because wilderness — as radicals conceived it — meant the absence of people. And third, radicals bypassed the incrementalism of liberal democratic processes through direct action, both because they prioritized natural over political processes and because they believed that where lawsuits and injunctions failed to stop bulldozers, human bodies could succeed. (2020, 96)

Radical environmental groups like Greenpeace, Earth First!, Sea Shepherd, and the Earth Liberation Front all started out embracing ecocentric philosophies. But even though they were motivated by the shared belief in “the moral equivalence of humans and nonhuman nature” (Woodhouse 2020, 97), these groups embraced very different modes of direct action.

The common denominator in using direct action is the willingness to put one’s own person, one’s own body at risk to physically stop imminent or ongoing environmental destruction and/or turn public attention to the fact of its occurrence. As Woodhouse points out, “radical environmentalist’s use of their own bodies to protest whaling, logging, and roadbuilding signaled a deep suspicion of “the government and legislative system” (2020, 128). Engaging in personal physical protest via direct action campaigns is a way for radical environmentalists to circumvent established political processes, thus expressing opposition to both the plundering of the natural environment and the established methods of mainstream environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club.

The first environmental group that successfully adopted radical, direct action environmentalism as a deliberate organizing principle was Greenpeace, which grew out of the 1960s counterculture and the post-Vietnam War peace movement. One reason for the group’s spectacular international success was that it combined strictly *non-violent* forms of direct action with media-savvy campaigning. As environmental historian Frank Zelko explains, the founders of Greenpeace “were the first environmentalists to adopt the Gandhian non-violent protest strategies employed by the peace and civil rights movements” and they “combined this with the Quaker notion of ‘bearing witness’ — the idea that a crime or atrocity can be challenged by observing it and reporting it to others — and hitched it to a media

strategy heavily influenced by Marshal McLuhan” (2017, 1). Greenpeace, writes Zelko, also succeeded in making environmentalism “look cool. Its vivid and confrontational communication style resonated with the antiwar demonstrators of the 1960s and 1970s” while fomenting “a consciousness revolution that sought nothing less than a radical change in Western culture” (1). Central to Greenpeace’s strategy was to get massive press coverage of its spectacular attempts at “bearing witness” to assaults on nonhuman animals and the natural environment more generally. And its “coolness” arguably was a function of the fact that the other founders of Greenpeace were part of the sixties counterculture and that they were addressing themselves to likeminded people. The other central factor in the movement’s success, however, was its radical commitment to staging what Woodhouse calls “audacious encounters,” which involved confronting its adversaries “in broad daylight” (129) and keeping the cameras rolling.

Both the counterculture vibe and the knack for radical actions that make for great media spectacles are foregrounded in Jerry Rothwell’s *How to Change the World*, which chronicles the early days of Greenpeace and its development of a notorious communication strategy that founding member Robert Hunter called “mindbombs” — an “image that sends a collective shock through the world leading to action” (Hunter quoted in Mathiesen 2015). A mindbomb is what John W. Delicath and Kevin Michael DeLuca have called an “image event,” a postmodern argumentative practice “that creates social controversy” and thereby “widens possibilities for debate” (2003, 315). These mindbomb tactics make for exciting moments in the film, and Rothwell knows how to use them to maximum effect, making ample use of a “goldmine of 16mm color footage” (Harvey 2015) from the Greenpeace archive. But Rothwell’s film is also deeply invested in the gestation of direct-action environmentalism, and in the controversies that emerged among the early proponents of Greenpeace about just how radical it should be.

“This is a Film Thing”: Dissecting the Mindbomb in *How to Change the World*

How to Change the World starts with James R. Schlesinger’s somber announcement of the U.S. government’s plan to detonate a 5-megaton nuclear bomb on the island of Amchitka. Caught on archival footage dating back to 1971, the announcement by the Chair of Atomic Energy Commission sets the stage for Greenpeace’s first direct-action intervention, aired at a time when the group did not even have a name. The announcement is followed by contemporary news footage showing the preparations on Amchitka, a volcanic island in southwest Alaska that the American government had selected for underground detonations of nuclear weapons.

It is at this point that the film’s first-person voiceover narrative sets in, spoken by the actor Barry Pepper but formulating words from the writings of Robert Hunter.

Unlike the other founding members of Greenpeace who are featured in the film, Hunter was no longer alive at the time of production (he died of cancer in 2005); using his writings in lieu of a personal interview allowed Rothwell to include Hunter's important voice.⁴ Hunter remembers that as a teenager he applied for art school to become a comics artist, but the Cold War and the Vietnam War showed him that "the American Dream was turning into a planetary nightmare." Drawing comics did not seem to be enough to deal with these terrifying realities, and so Hunter "burned [his] college acceptance letter on the steps of [his] high school and set off to change the world." The next shot shows Hunter at the U.S.-Canadian border in 1971, speaking to reporters at a demonstration against the nuclear test, code-named Cannikin by the U.S. government, and then the film fast-forwards to the pivotal moment when the small ship that Hunter and his fellow Canadian activists had chartered for their protest, the "Phyllis Cormack," leaves Vancouver Harbor and heads towards Amchitka. A journalist for the *Vancouver Sun*, Hunter is determined to stop the test by being physically present near the site — *bearing witness* to an environmental crime — and then to write about that experience. The next thing audible after the narrator stops speaking is a countdown, followed by a massive detonation. After the opening credit, a written line informs viewers about Hunter's "rule number one: plant a mindbomb."

It is only now that the film jumps forward to the present day and introduces the people who will be Rothwell's interview partners throughout the film, among them Greenpeace members David Garrick (also known as Walrus Oakenbough), George Korotva, Paul Spong, and Rex Weyler, as well as the two men who are no longer part of Greenpeace and who will become most important in the film's exploration of the group's conflicts over its degree of radicalism: Patrick Moore and Paul Watson. Weyler, a professional photographer, is the one who explains to viewers what their risky trip to Amchitka was all about: "Bob [Hunter] just realized that if you want to do a protest, you have to make a story that's going to travel well, an event that would impact millions of people in every corner of the world." And indeed, while the group was not able to stop the American government from detonating the bomb on Amchitka, their stunt did succeed in sensitizing public opinion to the ecological impacts of nuclear testing. It also was the prelude for the next, even more daring, direct action that made Greenpeace instantly famous (and notorious) around the world: the attempt to stop a Russian whaling vessel from harpooning a whale by navigating a boat full of activists into the fireline.

From the moment he first sighted the archival material, Rothwell was acutely aware of the cinematic potential of Greenpeace's early direct action and

4. The film's opening credits even announce that it is "based on the writings by Bob Hunter." Much of the voiceover commentary is taken from Hunter's *Warriors of the Rainbow: A Chronicle of the Greenpeace Movement* (1979).

communication strategies. In an interview, he explains that “the lovely moments in the archives are the bits where Bob Hunter goes ‘OK this is a film thing’ when they come across the first dead whale that they find. And the sense that primarily they are going out to capture a very specific David and Goliath image, which will play a certain way in people’s minds. That’s what Hunter pioneered” (quoted in Mathiesen 2015). In the film, viewers are prepared for this iconic image event with archival footage that shows Hunter’s encounter with an orca named Skana at the Vancouver Aquarium, following the invitation by Paul Spong, a cetologist who joined Greenpeace soon after. Spong remembers how, during the encounter, Skana opened her mouth “with a clear invitation for him [Hunter] to stick his head inside. And he did that.” In the voiceover, Hunter remembers this moment as follows:

She takes my whole head and holds me like a crystal goblet in a vice. I can feel her teeth make the slightest indentation at the back of my neck. Terror explodes in my chest. She could snap my head like an eggshell but chooses not to. Suddenly, I get it. She’s showing me exactly where my courage ends and my fear begins.

Combining the archival images with Hunter’s own recollections of his encounter with Skana, Rothwell makes clear that this emotional moment, the moment of complete surrender to the whale, was a turning point in both Hunter’s personal biography and the history of Greenpeace. By his own account, it made Hunter realize two things: that he needed to quit his job at the *Vancouver Sun* to dedicate himself full-time to environmentalism, and that Greenpeace needed to “save the whales.” In the film, it serves to engage viewers in that quest, inviting them to side with Hunter and the other activists when they develop their new mindbomb strategy, the new David and Goliath image they are going to create. As Ron Precious puts it in the film, “the concept was complete from the outset: we have to get between the whale and the harpoon” because, as Paul Watson adds, “harpooning a whale is not really a story, but people risking their lives to protect a whale, *that’s* a story.”

After weeks of hectic preparation, the David and Goliath moment has finally come as the Greenpeace activists race towards nine Russian whalers in their tiny zodiacs, off the coast of California. The climactic quest sequence consists almost entirely of archival material, carefully edited for maximum effect. It starts with the images of a dead sperm whale that is floating in the water, an underage animal that was illegal to kill. Paul Watson is seen climbing onto the carcass in the water, accompanied by somber music. His own voiceover explains:

That was certainly a turning point in my life, just how warm the body was, how hot the blood was that was coming out of the wound.... It just struck me in a flash that we’re insane, ecologically insane. From that moment on, I never looked upon myself anymore as working for people, but more working for whales and other creatures that live in the oceans.

This clear articulation of an ecocentric worldview and motivation still resonates when the next archival shot shows one of the bloodied, rusty whaling ships responsible for the illegal kill of the young sperm whale. Blood is pouring out of the side of the ship, an image of horror. On deck, a whale is skinned and ripped apart with the help of a crane. Tied to the stern and to the sides of the ship, several other dead whales are floating in the ocean. “The *Dalniy Vostok* is literally a slaughterhouse on water,” explains Carlie Truman, who was part of Greenpeace group. “It was highly mechanized killing.... And that’s when it got very, very, very real.” The music picks up, turning to the suspenseful, while the other group members take turns commenting on the archival footage. It shows Korotva and Hunter steering their zodiac between the kill ship (which accompanies and complements the slaughtering ship) and a fleeing whale, filmed from the two other Greenpeace zodiacs, while the Russian behind the harpoon gets ready to fire. A thundering shot can be heard as the video abruptly cuts away to a piece of unexposed, reddish, hand-painted film, leaving it open as to which target is hit by the harpoon, the activists or the whale. After this moment of uncertainty, it becomes clear that — zipping over Korotva’s and Hunter’s heads — it hit the whale. The water turns red, steam rising from the sea, the injured whale not yet quite dead, still blowing. Another scene of horror.

Once again, Greenpeace’s method of direct non-violent confrontation was not successful in preventing what it hoped to prevent, in this case the killing of the whale. But it very much did succeed in creating a mindbomb — spectacular and horrifying images that have a deeply visceral impact on their recipients. When these images were first released to the news media in 1972, they instantly traveled around the world. “Image is everything,” explains Hunter’s voiceover in the film. “The boat is an icon, a mindbomb sailing across an electronic sea into the front rooms of the masses.” The hope was that in those front rooms, the images would extend what film scholar Dirk Eitzen calls “an implied entreaty for special attention and concern” (2005, 184), triggering in viewers the “inclination to intervene” (190) that, according to Eitzen, marks the distinctive impact of documentary formats. Decades later, the same images engage viewers of Rothwell’s film in much the same way, but with an additional layer of meaning because they are contextualized within the story of Greenpeace’s larger quest to create visual events that will turn public opinion against the ruthless exploitation of nature.

As successful as it was at the time — and as stunning as it is in the film — Rothwell is aware that the early mindbomb tactics of Greenpeace might no longer be as effective today. At the Sheffield Doc/Fest Environment he said that in an era saturated with shocking images on every imaginable media channel “it’s much harder to make a single image have the same kind of impact” (quoted in

Mathiesen 2015). Greenpeace successfully adapted to this and many other societal changes. By the early 1980s, “it had grown into an international environmental powerhouse centered in Europe, with a complex hierarchical — some may say ‘corporate’ structure—and branch offices in numerous countries” (Zelko 2018, 1). But to this day, it has retained its direct-action style that first set it apart from other, more conservative environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, thus becoming what Woodhouse calls “a steadily burning fuse” (2020, 130). But *How to Change the World* also highlights that this growth and continuity came at a price. Hunter would eventually leave Greenpeace, as would two other founding members, Patrick Moore and Paul Watson. In all three cases, the reasons for the departure were disagreements about just how radical Greenpeace’s direct-action campaigns should be.

Moore has undergone the most remarkable transformation since his radical activism of the early 1970s. With a PhD in Ecology, he was the scientist on the group that headed for Amchitka island but, after leaving Greenpeace in 1986, he became a staunch critic of Hunter’s tactics specifically and radical environmentalism more generally. Today, Moore is an industry consultant, known for his advocacy of genetically modified foods and his denial of climate change. While his inclusion in *How to Change the World* makes clear that Rothwell wanted to give him the opportunity to present his view of the matter, the animosities between Moore and the other interviewees are palpable. This is especially true for Watson, who was nineteen years old when he boarded the Phyllis Cormack in 1971, and who freely admits in the film that he was “probably a bit more radical than the others.” If Hunter’s form of direct action turned out to be too radical for Moore, it was not radical enough for Watson. Ousted from Greenpeace in 1977 because of his penchant for confrontation, he went on to first found Earthforce — which embraced a form of non-violence “that is not pacifist but rather aggressive and obstructive” (quoted in Zelko 2018, 271) — and then the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a non-profit marine conservation organization whose anti-whaling campaigns have been criticized for their aggressive strategies and use of violence against property and people. As Zelko points out, “Watson’s expulsion represented Greenpeace’s rejection of a more radical form of direct action” (271), and it is this rejection that is advocated in *How to Change the World*. Returning to Hughes’ claim that even films “that use biographical narratives to frame their messages” tend to “support a central argument” (2014, 217), there is no doubt that Rothwell sides with Hunter. As Rex Weyler makes clear in the film, Hunter “was visionary, he could look into the future and imagine things that didn’t yet exist, and he could inspire and empower people to contribute.” Just as important, he embraced a non-violent form of radical direct action, and so does Rothwell.

However, the film also makes clear that Watson's more radical approach grew out of his experiences during Greenpeace's early anti-whaling campaigns. Even as "Greenpeace's commitment to peace and non-violence was absolute," notes Woodhouse, the group nevertheless "opened the door to a more aggressive style of activism, and Paul Watson walked through it" (130). There are times, Watson said in 1981, "when the only way you can stop outlaws is by becoming an outlaw yourself" (quoted in Schwarz 1981). And, as Rik Scarce puts it in *Eco Warriors* (2006), "for the Sea Shepherds, property destruction and radical tactics are a way of life, of getting noticed, of getting the word out, and most importantly, of saving life" (100). Over the years, Sea Shepherds became a close ally of another radical environmental organization — Earth First! — which, ironically, opened the door to an even more radical offspring, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Marshall Curry's portrait of the ELF in *If a Tree Falls* aims to help viewers understand the reasons that lead some environmentalists to become increasingly transgressive — and, ultimately, violent — in their direct actions.

'It's More Complicated than You Think': Probing Eco-Terrorism in *If a Tree Falls*

Even more so than *How to Change the World*, Curry's documentary attempts to provide an even-handed portrait of radical environmentalism, but it is framed not so much as a quest as that it integrates elements from the thriller and court room drama. This is perhaps a natural choice, given that the ELF's form of covert and disruptive direct action inevitably has an element of suspense and thrill to it. But it is also a tricky endeavor, considering that the FBI has labeled the group as domestic terrorists. In his review for *IndieWire*, Drew Taylor calls *If a Tree Falls* "a compelling ecoterrorism doc," and notes that one reason why the subject "hasn't been tackled in any kind of in-depth way" before "must surely be the thorny, morally complicated issue of ecoterrorism" and the fact that "anything involving the word 'terrorist' is a tough sell" (2011). Curry was aware of these risks when he embarked on the project and tried to approach the subject with the appropriate caution. While his film makes an effort to humanize the ELF members it portrays, it also gives voice to those who have been harmed by the activists or were responsible for prosecuting them.

The ELF came to prominence in the U.S. in the mid-1990s, right at the time when other radical environmental organizations such as Earth First! began to distance themselves from both ecocentric philosophy and militant acts of ecotage. Largely responsible for this move was the criticism these organizations had received for what was perceived as a disregard for social justice issues, along with the realization that controversial ecotage techniques bore the risk of turning

public opinion against the very causes they were fighting for. As Judi Bari of the Ecotopia Earth First! group in California put it in a 1994 article in the *Earth First! Journal*, “It’s time to leave the night work to the elves in the woods” (8). By the “elves” Bari was referring to the anonymous members of the ELF, who had taken their initial inspiration from the direct-action philosophy of Earth First! but then decided to go down an even more radical path. Their approach, explains Rik Scarce in *Eco-Warriors*, was “brutally straightforward... Destroy the tools of environmental destruction and do nothing else. There is no such thing as ELF street theater or an ELF treesit. ‘Burn baby, burn’ is its de facto motto” (2006, 268). This penchant for arson and other forms of property destruction is why the ELF has made so many enemies in the U.S. where private property is valued and protected to an extreme degree.

In addition to the moral and ethical questions that come with making a film about designated terrorists, one practical problem Curry was facing was getting access to a group of people who, unlike the highly visible Greenpeace activists, carried out their work anonymously, adamant about protecting their identity to avoid prosecution. Curry’s other practical problem was how to stay out of jail if he did manage to get such access. Associating with the ELF or other radical environmentalist groups can easily lead to legal consequences. To name but two examples: Scarce, who is a professor of sociology, was imprisoned for five months when he was a PhD student and working on the first edition of *Eco-Warriors* in the 1990s because he was suspected of having information on members of the Animal Liberation Front and refused to cooperate with a grand jury investigation.⁵ Craig Rosebraugh, who for several years acted as spokesman for the ELF without engaging in illegal actions himself, “has been arrested a dozen times for civil disobedience, was hauled in front of eight federal grand juries as a non-cooperating witness and target, was forced to appear and testify in front of U.S. Congress.”⁶ While both men wear their interrogations and imprisonment like badges of honor, their experiences make clear that gaining knowledge about radical environmental groups involves considerable personal risks. And so it makes sense that the film’s central protagonist is a *former* ELF activist whose identity has already been exposed: Daniel Gerard McGowan, who was charged in federal court on multiple counts of arson and conspiracy in 2005.

In fact, it was McGowan’s arrest that inspired Curry to make his film, which begins with a dramatic montage of archival images showing burning buildings or their smoldering remains. These, too, are image events, and they are accompanied

5. The information is taken from Rik Scarce’s faculty website at Skidmore College: <https://www.skidmore.edu/sociology/faculty/scarce.php>.

6. The information is taken from Craig Rosebraugh’s personal website: <https://www.craigrosebraugh.com/about>. See also his 2004 book *Burning Rage of a Dying Planet*.

in the film by somber music and the voices of TV commentators who explain that the ELF is responsible for the “fire-bombings [of] lumber mills, wild horse corrals, and two meat packing plants,” and that “so far, none of the cases has ever been resolved and authorities acknowledge they know next to nothing about the membership or the leadership of the organization.” From here, the film cuts to black and the opening credits, and then to images of a gray, snowy day in New York and Curry’s first-person voiceover. Unlike Rothwell, who has an actor doing the narration using Bob Hunter’s words, Curry chooses to use his own voice in the film to explain to viewers how he got involved in McGowan’s story: “On December 7th, 2005, four federal officers entered my wife’s office and arrested one of her employees, Daniel McGowan.” The arrest, he explains, was part of a nationwide roundup that netted fourteen ELF members. After McGowan’s sister put up everything she owned for bail, he was placed on house arrest in her apartment until his trial, and this is where viewers meet him for the first time, about three minutes into the film. There is not much about him that would give him the air of a dangerous terrorist. He looks like an average guy, which is precisely what Curry is interested in. As he has explained in an interview, he knew that McGowan’s “background was the opposite of one you might think a radical would have. He’d grown up in Rockaway, Queens. His dad was a cop in New York. He was a business major in college. I thought, how could this guy be somebody who winds up facing life in prison for terrorism?” (POV Interview).

It is this question that Curry explores in the film, and while he originally expected that the related question of whether McGowan had actually committed the crimes he was charged with would be of equal importance, he realized during the editing process that this was not, in fact, “the interesting story. What’s interesting is why and how this happened and what were the events that led him to do it” (POV Interview). As a result, he decided to edit the film in a way that ignored the fact that during much of the shooting process McGowan had insisted on his innocence until he had agreed to a plea bargain and was free to speak. The completed film starts with McGowan’s acknowledgement of his involvement in two arsons and his insistence that while his actions might seem “kind of crazy ... people just need to understand that this thing is complex and it’s not that simple.” He expresses a deep sense of injustice at being labeled a terrorist: “There was no one in any of these facilities,” he explains. “No one got hurt, no one was injured. And yet, I’m facing life plus 335 years.” For Curry “that’s the thesis statement for the movie. It’s more complicated than you think” (POV Interview).

The very fact that there is a thesis statement for the movie makes it clear that *If a Tree Falls* is an “argumentative response” (2014, 218) in Hughes’s definition, a response to the question not only of what makes an environmental terrorist

but also, more importantly, whether it is appropriate to label people like Daniel McGowan as terrorists in the first place. For McGowan, it all started with a meeting at an environmental center where “they played these movies that blew my mind.” We do not learn which films he saw at those meetings, but Marshall cuts to archival material that shows a piece of nature literally blown up with explosives and from there to the vast wasteland of a strip mine and the logging of redwoods. Images of violated, exploited nature that left McGowan “in perpetual mourning.” As the film follows his story from an activist who goes “to a lot of protests” and does “a lot of letter-writing” to a firebombing arsonist, it becomes clear that what is fueling the passions of people like him is a sense of despair over the apparent uselessness of all moderate means of communication and protest.

Curry makes use of a range of typical features of documentary films to tell his story, among them whatever was available in archival material and a range of interviews not only with McGowan and his family members but also with official ELF spokesmen and other former ELF members who were willing to speak, as well as with the owners of the places that were destroyed by the activists and with the agents involved in their prosecution. There is an obvious effort to show viewers all sides of the issue at hand—an effort that is never made to the same degree in *How to Change the World*—but the focus of *If a Tree Falls* is nevertheless on the activists and their motivations. The filmmakers also felt that they had to give viewers a sense of the personal risks and excitement involved in the actual raids. As Curry points out in the POV interview, “A lot of times when we were editing, Matt Hamachek and I would say, ‘Okay, if this were a fiction film what would happen now?’” (2011). It was presumably those questions that led him and Hamachek to stage some of these raids, including the arsons. Since, unlike Greenpeace, the ELF had no interest in capturing their own direct actions on film, the filmmakers did not have an archive of material to choose from. Knowing that compelling footage of the raids would make their film that much more engaging, they decided to create that footage themselves, using actors and manipulating the material in a way that it looks like animated film. Rendered entirely in black and white, it serves to illustrate on the visual level the information provided by the involved activists and investigators. Together with the suspenseful music score, these sequences give viewers a more visceral understanding of what it meant to be involved in these raids.

Curry walks a thin line with these directorial decisions, which might easily be construed as a glorification of criminal actions. In his review of *If a Tree Falls* for *IndieWire*, Drew Taylor nevertheless complains that the film is too timid: “Sometimes the, for lack of a better word, coolness of environmental terrorism, including the specifics of a number of the operations, is glazed over or rendered

too dry and academically procedural (probably because, as admirable as the participants come off, the documentary is quick to remind viewers that burning down buildings is a very bad thing indeed)” (2011). Taylor’s insistence on the “coolness of environmental terrorism” is reminiscent of what Zelko has called the “coolness” of the then-radical style of the early Greenpeace movement, but it likely is a form of coolness that only reveals itself from a certain political (and countercultural) vantage point. After all, Curry’s documentary is not a thriller or action film whose *sole* purpose is to entertain. Unlike such movies, it must balance that purpose with the “implied entreaty” (Eitzen 2005, 184) of the documentary form, which reminds viewers that the events portrayed happened to real people in the real world and that they are thus consequential. There have been consequences, for example, for McGowan. Because a “terrorism” label was applied to his verdict, he was sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment after accepting a non-cooperation plea agreement in 2006. At the time of the film’s release in 2011, he was incarcerated in a severely restrictive Communication Management Unit in Terre Haute, Indiana. In 2013, he was released on probation, but being a convicted terrorist will continue to impact his life.

While the film only follows McGowan’s life to the point of its release, it does argue, as Taylor points out, that “the punishment for [his] crimes [is] unjust and lopsided” (2011). Scholars, too, have taken issue with the FBI’s labeling of radical environmentalism as terrorism. Sumner and Weidman remind us that “the destruction of property is fundamentally different from the intentional killing of people” and that it is not only problematic but also outright dangerous to lump the two together (2013, 856). The legal scholar Rebecca Smith has argued that calling environmentalist direct action terrorism “is inappropriate because it diminishes the true meaning of the word terrorism, stifles political dissent, and is being used as a pretext to ensure the protection of private economic gains at the expense of efforts to protect the environment” (2008, 537). Including property into a definition of terrorism is thus as problematic as it is consequential, and it has been systematically used to vilify, prosecute, and deter environmentalist direct action in the United States. *If a Tree Falls* sheds light on these consequences, making a case not only for the complexities of radical environmentalism, but also against the disproportionate prosecution of activists under U.S. law.

Conclusion

A closer look at *How to Change the World* and *If a Tree Falls* demonstrates that documenting radical environmental activism can make for compelling and thought-provoking viewing experiences. By combining footage of spectacular

image events and engaging storytelling with nuanced portrayals of radical direct action on behalf of environmental causes, both films avoid the harsh verdict that documentaries with similar subject matters have received from critics.⁷ Rothwell includes elements of the quest narrative in his film, engaging viewers in an adventurous story about deeply committed people who put their own lives at risk to protect nonhuman animals and the larger natural environment from getting harmed by other humans. The film's use of previously unreleased archival material serves not only to chronicle the building of Greenpeace's famous mindbombs but also — in combination with the contemporary interviews and the excerpts from Bob Hunter's writings — reveals the ideological rifts and fault lines that emerge as the young activists struggle to define the kind of direct action the movement stands for and where it needs to draw the line in terms of radicalism.

The activists who populate Curry's film, in contrast, have chosen a path that is so radical that they would have much preferred to never have their personal stories told at all if that meant they would have remained unrecognized and free. While their direct actions are also aimed at creating spectacular events that draw attention from the media, the illegal nature of their actions necessitates anonymity. *If a Tree Falls* tries to engage viewers in their fates by shedding light on the experiences and motivations that lead an activist to the point where property destruction seems like the only way left to make the public aware of environmental issues that are too often ignored. Curry balances the somber theme of his film with reenacted action scenes that are captivating not least because they incorporate visual and narrative elements of the thriller.

In the end, their attempts at offering a fair portrayal of radical environmental activism notwithstanding, both filmmakers seem to have internalized Michael Moore's dictum that "the first rule of documentaries is: Don't make a documentary — make a MOVIE" (2014). Moore argues that nonfiction filmmakers should use the same aesthetic and rhetorical arsenal as fiction filmmakers because viewers "don't want to be lectured, they don't want to see our invisible wagging finger popping out of the screen" (2014). As Greenpeace activist Rod Marining puts it in *How to Change the World*, "you know what it's all about? It's putting on a good show." That is the credo behind the direct actions of much of radical environmentalism, which create image events to instigate social controversy and open up possibilities for debate. It also seems to be the credo behind the two films discussed here, which both seek to document and contextualize such direct actions in a way that engages viewers and thus further widens the possibilities for societal debates around pressing environmental issues and the people who try to expose them.

7. *A Fierce Green Fire*, which features some of the same protagonists, was called "as sleepy as a documentary can be" by Neil Genzlinger (2013) and criticized by Drew Hunt for its "formulaic trifecta of first-person interviews, archival material and news footage" (2013).

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