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## John A. Duvall: The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century

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# Fotografie und Film

## John A. Duvall: *The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century*

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Ecological decline has drawn attention of numerous filmmakers. Cinema is indeed rich with examples that tackle issues related to the environment. While fiction films, particularly those that focus on global warming and climate cataclysms, are popular among viewers, documentary representations of similar issues have only reached a smaller audience. Drawing audience attention to such portrayals, John A. Duvall's *The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century* is the first study that provides a thorough analysis of the existing environmental documentaries, focusing on examples released during the last few decades.

The current environmental problems remain inessential, probably because, as Duvall shrewdly observes, they are an „invisible crisis“ (p.1). That environmental documentaries visualize this crisis, that they make various crucial issues available and accessible to the general audience, finds the scholar particularly fascinating. His study discusses 44 cinematic examples that range from Hollywood to independent films, which helps the author to underscore not only the abundance of environmental documentaries but also

the cinematic variety and uniqueness of each text.

Duvall begins with an overview of the existing research on the issues of documentary and environment. The scholar contends that „any documentary production is [...] a complex tapestry that integrates content and form into an effective presentation of the filmmaker's vision, presented to an audience in a manner that hopefully will be received as informative and deeply felt, through the filter of the worldview that a viewer brings to the program“ (p.15). Therefore it is not surprising that the environment – defined by Duvall as „both a complex natural ecosystem, and a socially constructed abstraction“ (p.15) – and its various crises are interesting topics for documentary filmmakers because they are able to converse with the viewer, to touch upon their emotional side, thus aiming to provoke certain actions.

Duvall then turns to the history of the environmental documentary, briefly examining early films like *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Housing Problems* (1935), *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1935), *Coal Face* (1936), *The River* (1937), *Farrabique* (1946), *Great Adventure* (1953), *The Vanishing Prairie* (1954), *The Nature of Things* (1960), *Fata Morgana*

(1971), *The Animals Film* (1981), and *Cadillac Desert: Water and the Contamination of Nature* (1997). In this section and further in the book, Duvall is primarily interested in documentaries that „express a critical point of view about environmental problems and promote an activist stance in response to them“ (p.3). The scholar underlines that „the most powerful influence on world climate is the actions of humanity itself“ (p.23). While humanity's certain actions lead to ecological decline, it is also up to us humans to change the situation for the better. Duvall is convinced that the environmental documentary is one of the most effective means to spread ecological awareness and provoke necessary actions.

Duvall's study is organized in several sections, according to the issues that the selected films deal with: „Climate Change“, „Peak Oil“, „Pollution and Waste“, „Food and Water“, and „Animals and Extinction“. Each section covers a large number of documentaries of the past decade – from *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004), *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (2004), and *The Future of Food* (2004) to *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Call of Life: Facing the Mass Extinction* (2010), *Surviving Progress* (2011), *Trashed* (2012), and *Pump* (2014). Duvall also provides an overview of the documentaries that do not only call for action but also depict activism itself, thus illustrating the

power of action that humanity can take to stop ecological decline. The films that he examines in this regard include *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (2006), *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006), *Garbage Warrior* (2007), *Within Reach* (2013), *Just Do It! – A Tale of Modern-Day Outlaws* (2011), and *Rebels with a Cause* (2013).

Duvall's *The Environmental Documentary* is an outstanding book in many respects. It is not only the first to offer an exhaustive analysis of numerous activist films that were released in the 21st century – the time that the scholar terms as „a golden age for environmental documentary films and television programming, as well as a pivotal moment in ecological history“ (p.317) – but it is an activist narrative in itself. It gives the reader an awareness of the current environmental problems through meticulous examinations of multiple cinematic texts. In this sense, *The Environmental Documentary* is also a valuable contribution to the existing scholarship in environmental studies and documentary studies. Its intelligible discussions of the films make the book an excellent source for students in the related disciplines. The book is a must-read for everyone who cares about our planet, wants to learn more about the ecological problems that humanity faces today, and seeks ways to stop ecological decline.

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