

Afternoon session

Questions of Eco-Cinema.

Mark Nash. We have quite a full afternoon of film presentation then two papers and a discussion, followed by screening at the IMax and a reception together with the Wildscreen communicate people so I'll try to keep to the schedule. It is my great pleasure to introduce Andrej Zdravič who is an independent film and sound artist born in Ljubljana, Slovenia. When he was born there it was Yugoslavia and he studied experimental film and sound at SUNY at Buffalo in the United States and spent a lot of his adult life working and making films in the States before returning to Slovenia in the '90's. Andrej will say a little bit more about the project and then we are going to see the whole of his film *Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons*. Thank you.

Andrej Zdravič. Hello, thank you very much for being here and thank you for inviting me to the RSA and Michaela Crimmin and Mark Nash. It is an honour to be here and I find this symposium very fascinating for many reasons. I think this sort of event, I have a feeling it will grow to a larger degree in the years to come because there a very important issues and the whole media influence on Society and how we are conveying our messages and what we are doing with films. Fascinating issues were raised this morning through the speeches we heard, namely the saturation by media, our ability to perceive new things, the role of the Arts and so forth but I think I'll keep my introduction very short now to take a breather after lunch and just watch the film first. Then be back here, we'll have 10 minutes or say and we can say a few more words and talk.

Briefly, *Riverglass* came about from my fascination with natural forces ever since I was a child. I guess I was a lucky child to be growing up in an environment which was very natural and in a pristine state. I also didn't go to any pre-school or anything so I was just observing things up until I was about six and a half and I think that has a lot to do with the way I work. When I am doing these explorations of the world, I read a great deal, I study like in the case of water, I study scientific texts. I mean I spent at least 15 years reading books on water and the physics and I find those physical data very poetic but when I go and actually start filming, I try to throw everything away and my whole approach is to immerse myself in the subject I'm studying and let it speak to me and so I try to efface my knowledge and my ego and I'm just an instrument who is handling this camera and trying to transmit so this is the challenge that I go through with every film I do – it is to totally immerse myself in what I'm looking at and so I don't use any commentary, no words, no people and even I try to stay away from music in the traditional sense because I feel that music sometimes it

works beautifully but more often than not it tends to take away from your freedom to experience the film on your own terms. So therefore I am basing the sound more on natural recordings of sound and then I combine these sounds and make collages and some kind of music emerges. So the whole thing is just to immerse yourself and I often say to people 'try to see my film as you would listen to a piece of music in a theatre hall'. Meaning that you just sit there and listen and don't expect anything to be told, what to think, just experience it as music. Then see what happens. So this is *Riverglass*. It took me 5 years to make this film. It is a completely independent production. I do what I please to do. It does take me a long time to realise those things for that reason. Like someone said today, more often than before, artists spend a long time writing proposals, etc. and I can tell you I can empathise with that but, in the end, it is worth it because that's the meaning of one's own life is to explore and learn, so anyhow, thank you again, let's look at *Riverglass* and then we'll go from there. Thanks.

Riverglass: A River Ballet in Four Seasons, 1994, Andrej Zdravič.

Mark Nash. Thank you very much. I'll start the questions because I have so many questions and then we'll let people come up with their own.

I just wanted to ask you Andrej about the whole procedure of making the film. There was the equipment that you designed to protect the camera, so to speak and then whether the four seasons that we see represented in the film, whether that's strictly adhered to or whether it is actually poetically moved that is to say whether you moved between a series of locations throughout the seasons and then you edited it to follow the river in the four seasons. Then, of course, I have other questions which other people may have, one about the biology of the river such as the relatively few fish that we saw for example, and maybe a few thoughts or comments about how you set about making the film and putting it together over that 5 year period.

Andrej Zdravič. Well, firstly, about the seasons. It was shot randomly, you know, and the red line for me for this movie was that it is clear, it's very simple, that was the fascination the fact that you can walk around up to here deep in drinkable water. I mean I was pretty amazed by it and for years my father purchased an old house in this alpine valley in Slovenia so for many years I have fantasised about this film and how do it and so forth. I did some tests with a plastic bag and a Super 8 film camera a long time ago and so then when I actually started, it was just a process of going out and searching and I didn't even know how I would edit the film. The present form resulted from editing, just from studying the material but the stuff that was shot in the winter section was shot in the winter, the spring, obviously the thawing of the snow and from the sight of the trees it was early spring so summer is a bit of a grey area but in a way you can see that the river doesn't change

much. In the Fall you have milky water sometimes because it's full of sediment, what do you call it, limestone, so sometimes it gets milky and that happens basically in the Fall storms so the material is pretty much from those seasons but that is how the structure developed along the way. The filming – as I said I made many tests and I thought 'that will be great' you know, then actually how to do it, 10 years later I finally thought this is the now the right time to do it and at first I got a wet suit and I went in the river with this camera. I mean I bought a good housing, an aluminium housing and, as you see it was shot with modest equipment. It was a camera but, nevertheless, this housing was fine but I wasn't fine in the river. I mean I was bounced around in the river. It is a small river but it is torrential, it's quite rapid at times and you just sort of out of control you know. You don't see what you are doing and I realised it was the wrong way and then it occurred to me that how about if I put this housing on a stick and so then it took a lot of research. Also I must say that I researched even before I started what equipment I would use. I considered film also 16 and all kinds of things. So I then designed this ball with a cable going to the surface and I had a helmet like people who do fencing and I stuck a little monitor on the helmet in front of my face and I had this cable coming up and the ball was great. It was made out of aluminium tubing that they use for music stands and then some people machined some parts so that it was flexible, etc. It was collapsible so I could take it anywhere. It was lightweight but it enabled me to jam the camera against a rock or hold it down. So then I changed the method and I had fisherman's pants up to here and I was standing in water. It was a discovery process. At first I thought I would film also partially above water and then after I started under water, you know, it was so fascinating because you can see through the water that 'ah that will be interesting' you know but until you stick it in there, you don't see the little stones dancing whatever and it was just fantastic. You never know what treasure you would find here or there and I sort of gave up the idea of shooting above the water except that for the last shot stayed because it's kind of banal you know because many films have been made about this river before and anyway, I was just so excited about the underwater, I mean, above and below, so that's how the technology evolved. But the technology part is important – I start definitely with a vision with a feeling of what I want to do and there is a thread like I said, the line, but I always then think 'How can I do this, how can I do this differently?' so the technology has big part in it, how and what you do. Definitely, yes.

Question. Hello. The ice sequence – could you talk a little bit more about the sound or is it a secret how you gathered the sound?

Andrej Zdravič. No, it's not a secret. That sound was done with a little water flute. In Slovenia, one of the crafts is there are little flutes that you put water in and then you blow, so you blow through the water.

Then I sampled that. I slowed it down. I did some processing to slow it down, change the pitch, etc. so that was that wallowing sound and then some ice crack.

Same questioner. You seemed to have a child at the end.

Andrej Zdravič. Oh, do you mean at the end, the last shot? That was a fisherman. I mean I knew the fisherman was there, but it didn't bother me so I left that shot.

Same questioner. Did I hear child's laughter?

Andrej Zdravič. Yes, the child's laughter, that was a little reference to me as a child because we used to take vacations in this valley when I was 5 years old and I think, in a way, I was re-living my childhood during this film. It was like a children's view of things. I was amazed by this and that.

Same questioner. Were there trout?

Andrej Zdravič. Yes, there were trout. These are called rainbow, no, there is a special trout, it's a whole other story. There was a film made about that, it is being replaced by other species now they are trying to save it. Thank you.

Mark Nash. How much of the sound was natural? Was any of the sound sync sound? Any on location?

Andrej Zdravič. No it was all reconstructed subsequently. I went to record sounds in afterwards, apart from filming, so you know any given section has maybe 5 or 6 layers of river sound to make it thicker and whatever. Although the stones bouncing on the housing, that was picked up by the mike in the camera in the housing but, of course, that picks up also the noise of the camera but now I was able to get out the noise and just keep the clinking sound.

Question. I'm interested in your title *Riverglass* and I was wondering partly, when I was a child and first discovering that if you float up under water, you can see yourself reflected back and that was the first thing that you can see in the film which I thought was lovely to see the reflection of the river bed on the river glass. Again, something that is difficult to capture and you mentioned it, about recording the sound on the housing, is how to record underwater sound clearly because some of the sound seemed to have been recorded above the river as opposed to below, but was there a way that you could overcome that or record the underwater sound itself?

Andrej Zdravič. You can. There are so called hydrophones, microphones that you can use in the water and then there are home made solutions where people take a condom and put it on the mike and put the mike in the water. But I didn't find that sound so interesting in that case because it's just basically water coming into the mike and just the pressure of the water. Of course, you wouldn't hear subtle

things like bubbles so that wasn't satisfactory, so I just decided to just do it all above.

Timothy Collins. I'd be just curious to know, you dedicate this film to your mother, I am aware of a book called 'Water and Sexuality' which talks about the amniotic sea and it's written by the man who pioneered water births. Are there cultural references that are important to you? Did you dedicate it to your mother before you started it, or during, I'm just curious about the evolution of the relationship, you know, water and family and birth.

Andrej Zdravič. Well, OK all those connotations are deeply seated in us and we are born in this amniotic fluid, this water, but the dedication has nothing to do with that or thinking about our providence, etc. but it has to do with the fact that, my mother was a big supporter of my work and that was very important because when you do things like this, especially for 30 years prior to that, with no money, etc. they could have said 'Why don't you go out and get a job and try to make a living?' She was supportive because she was an artist herself and musician. But I dedicated the film to her because she passed away when I was editing it and the day she passed away, that morning, I was playing her bird sounds on the computer, she loved it, so it was simply that, because she would have loved to see that and she gave me so much. And, of course, you can say that the river is the mother, the river bed the earth, so that's OK too.

Mark Nash.

Thank you very much Andrej. (Applause)

We'll just take a very short break to get set up for the next session with Paula and David. (Break)

So, we'll press on and come back and talk a little bit more with Andrej in a final round up discussion. So, it's my great pleasure now to introduce David Ingram who is lecturer in film studies at Brunel University in London and he is author of 'Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema' and he is also a member of the Association of the Study of Literature and the Environment and also co-editor of Green Letters which he was telling me over lunchtime, Paula is also a member of, as was Scott McDonald who leans towards an Eco-Cinema which is very important for us. So I'll introduce David who can say more about his project of environmentalism and the Hollywood cinema. David.

David Ingram. Thank you. Just a mention of ASLE – the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment – it's been going for about 14 years, mainly literary scholars, studying literature, nature writing and environmental writing but also people like Paula and myself do stuff on film and other arts. There is a UK branch too, called ASLE UK so if you look on the web site and, as I say, we're trying to encourage people to get interested in what we are doing now so I'd like to just mention that.

OK, I feel what I'm going to do is slightly crass after what we've just seen but I'm going to be looking at Hollywood movies, in particular the movie *The Day After Tomorrow* and just try to generalise about the way Hollywood deals with environmental issues. So I want to look at two aspects of that, one the way in which Hollywood can be interpreted in two ways – as realism and as melodrama – and I think what we find with this movie is that the audience receive this movie in both these different ways. I also want to, following on from that, look at the issues of audience reception and what we've been talking about so far in this conference, assumes certain things about the way audiences watch films, TV programmes in relation to issues of public awareness of environmental issues. So I'm going to argue I think, looking at this movie *The Day After Tomorrow* that the meaning of the movie itself seems to me to be rather ambiguous and open to different interpretations so even though it's a Hollywood movie, which I guess is trying to be accessible and simple in its meanings, it can actually be interpreted in different ways and if we look, as I hope to do at some of the reception of the movie by different environmental groups, e.g. different aspects, different parts of the audience if you like. Again, the audience perceived the movie in different ways too, so the idea of audience reception I would argue is something that is complex and not necessarily a uniform experience.

OK, so the plot of the movie begins from the scientifically plausible premise that global warming caused by human made pollution has melted the arctic ice cap causing the North Atlantic current to switch off and consequently the climate in the Northern hemisphere to cool down. Now, as is obvious to anyone who's seen the movie, this realistically plausible premise is pushed into melodramatic excess, so the movie, as a disaster movie, can dwell on a series of spectacular weather disasters –we see tornadoes destroying Los Angeles, we see giant hail storms in Tokyo, deep snow in India, an ice sheet covering Scotland and a tidal wave that floods Manhattan. The narrative involves Jack Hall, a government paleo-climatologist, played by Dennis Quaid who embarks on a heroic mission which involves him walking in sub-zero temperatures from north of Philadelphia to the New York public library to rescue his 17 year old son Sam who was sheltering there. So what I want to do is play the last few minutes of the movie so that we get a sense of how all those plot issues resolve themselves.

Clip from *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004, dir. Roland Emmerich.

Ok thank you. Meanwhile, in the real world we've seen at this conference, environmental problems such as global warming, ozone pollution, industrial pollution, you name it. They're usually slow to develop, not amenable to fast solutions and are often caused by factors both invisible and complex. None of these facts fit easily into the commercial formulae of Hollywood or mainstream narratives like *The Day After Tomorrow*, which favour human interest stories in which

individual protagonists undergo a moral transformation or they resolve their problems through heroic actions in the final act. Now I'm going to argue that mainstream movies like this can be placed on a continuum between realism on the one hand and melodrama on the other and that audiences/film spectators read the movies in either or both of those ways. When interpreted in terms of realism, this film violates consensus notions of plausibility mainly by accelerating the time frame within which the effects of climate change take place. Indeed the movie is packed with events which are highly implausible from a scientific point of view and I could list any number of those. Air temperatures are so cold that people, buildings and helicopters all freeze instantaneously. The group of people sheltering in a New York public library survive by burning books in a fireplace, even though this would not be enough to counteract such extreme temperatures outside. If the temperature is really as low as this, Jack and his friend Mason would not survive to walk from Philadelphia to New York or certainly would not do it in the three days as depicted in this movie. There are lots of other implausibility's as reviewers took great pleasure in pointing out in this film. So concerning its basis in scientific knowledge, the film was widely seen by its critics as being a failure in terms of realism. This way of interpreting the film was central in Patrick Michael's of the Cato Institute for example. One of the so called 'contrarian scientists' who still rejects the theory of human created climate change. This company is not coincidentally funded by an oil company. Michael's pointed out that the scientific flaws in the movie should be something to be criticised for and it damned Hollywood for irresponsibly playing into the hands of liberal environmentalists by exaggerating the threat of global warming. For their part, many of the movie going environmentalists found the exaggerations in terms of science less important than what they saw it's more realistic portrayal of the American government's denial of the scientific evidence for global warming. As former Vice President Al Gore put it 'There are two sets of fictions to deal with: one is the movie and the other is the Bush administration and presentation of global warming. Al Gore joined with liberal advocacy organisation MoveOn.org who used the movie's release as an opportunity to organise a national advocacy campaign on climate change. Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman also used the movie as a chance for re-introduction of their climate stewardship act in Congress. Greenpeace on its web site summed up its response to the movie with the words 'Fear is Justified'. All of these groups saw the movie in terms of realism of portrayal of the American government policy and appropriated its meanings to further their causes. So I think that act of appropriation by these groups is I think very important when we're thinking of audiences reaction to these films. Now a second way, as I said, to interpret a movie like this through drama. As Marshall McLuhan suggested clichés can be what he called 'probes' and archetypes of a culture. But what are the

ideological implications of presenting environmental risks and melodrama. In *The Day After Tomorrow* I would argue that Hollywood has made environment apocalypse perversely attractive. The environmentalist Paul Hawkin writes that the concept of Doomsday 'has always had a perverse appeal, waking us from our humdrum existence to the allure of a future harrowing drama'. People may be emotionally attracted to apocalypse like Steven O'Learly in his book through a desire for consummation, narrative closure or absolute knowledge. O'Learly argues that apocalyptic traditions appeal to people because they are fundamentally about community building and give the opportunity for human individuals and collectivities to "Constitute their identities through shared mystic narratives that confront the problem of evil in time and history." In this film, unlike in Roland Emmerich's previous movies *Independence Day* and *Godzilla* antagonist is not evil personified as an alien from outer space or a monstrous lizard but is the more impersonal force of the earth itself. That's what we might call a natural disaster movie it works on a stark contrast between nature and civilisation. I would argue that it invites a kind of dual identification on the part of the film goer. In Hollywood terms 'we root for both nature and civilisation' during several points in the film. So the set piece of apocalyptic weather that I mentioned earlier exhibit the sublime power of wild nature – violent, chaotic, amoral, beyond human control. The audience is complicit in seeking thrills in the scenarios of mass death and destruction caused by this weather. That complicity is encouraged rather than questioned by the movie. As Steven Keen points out in his book about disaster movies, disaster must regularly feature television news reports that comments on the events that are taking place. But they do not make "the critical point that we are all electronic voyeurs". The issue of voyeurs is not raised in these kinds of movies. The narrative focus is on the heroic survivors rather than the suffering victims and therefore the spectator is isolated from the full implications on the violent trauma enacted on the screen. In these revenge of nature films the problem with identifying with wild nature transgresses ethical norms as we witness nature 'getting its own back' as it were for its mistreatment at the hands of human beings. Yet these aesthetics of the sublime have always been based on certain vicariousness. The spectator takes pleasure in the destructive forces of nature, or is invited to from the safe distance of their cinema seat and therefore the safe distance of human civilisation. So this film accordingly seeks out identification not only with wild nature, but also the forces of civilisation that try to control that nature. Choice of the New York public library as place of sanctuary and rescue is significant in this respect. One of the survivors makes sure he preserves a Guttenberg bible for not because he believes in God he says, but as the first book ever printed, it represents "the dawn of the age of reason. If Western civilisation is finished", he adds, "I'm going to save one little piece of it". Central to the values of Western civilization

according to the film is science. Unusually for a Hollywood movie, scientists in this film are not evil but provide clear and unambiguous knowledge necessary for survival. Moreover, as to the action adventure genre to which the disaster movie is related, advanced technology is a force for good. Jack is able to locate his son in the library because of his friend's hand held satellite navigation system as we just saw. He also drives a hybrid car when we see him earlier in the film - so recent science technology will win the day ultimately. The values of civilisation find in those terms are also contrasted with the destructive forces of wild nature. In the scene where a wild pack of wolves have escaped from the Central Park Zoo return to attack Sam and his friends when they are out searching for food and medicine. Linda Wilson writes that melodrama is all about "Retrieval and saving of innocents". In this film the melodramatic plot of father rescuing son as we just saw makes the moral point – and I guess we all got it – that hard working fathers need to take a more active role in bringing up their sons. As usual, the rescue narrative also trumpets the male physical value of heroism and the effectiveness of individual action. Both Jack and his son Sam combine intelligence, physical bravery, duty, self sacrifice and love ultimately, the values necessary for survival. Individual action and American goodwill the film reassures us can make a difference. In this context, the penultimate image of this film showing the people being rescued by helicopters from the top of Manhattan sky scrapers is a kind of therapeutic anti image I would suggest to the television coverage of September 11th 2001, a wishful Hollywood image of survival and deliverance repairing the trauma of recent American history. So is the film therefore too reassuring, is it like a therapy that is likely to make people less interested in environmental issues or can they take encouragement from the idea that individuals can make a difference. Well from an environmentalist prospective, the resolution and melodrama is ideologically ambiguous I would argue. The idea that humanity through its ingenuity can survive whatever nature can throw at us is an argument used by conservatives to justify a non-interventionist attitude to the environment. This suggestion is compounded by the final image, as we saw, of the beautiful calm planet earth as seen from outer space. The astronaut comments that he's never seen the air so clear. The storm has passed confirming Jack's earlier opinion that the storms will last 'until the imbalance that has created them has corrected by a global re-alignment'. No matter what human beings do, it appears, the earth will heal itself. Now this message resembles the right wing version of the Gaia apothecia, the British chemist James Lovelock idea that the earth as a whole is a self-regulating system in a constant state of homeostatic balance. In his 1990 called 'Hard Green: Saving the Environment from the Environmentalists' Peter Huber, senior researcher at the right wing think tank, The Manhattan Institute uses the concept of Gaia to justify a conservative manifesto that includes the dismantling of existing

environmental regulations. Huber argues "That the most efficient way to control pollutants such as green house gases is not to worry about them at all, let them be, leave them to Gaia". So the notion of Gaia we should notice is not solely the property of New Age fundamentalists or deep ecologists. So this possible conservative interpretation of the film is offset by another more implicit message which came through at the end there I think advocating for liberal environmentalism. The film was released in an election year too and the director has spoken about very much wanting to contributing to that kind of environmental discourse as he saw Bush neglecting. Now earlier in the film Vice President Becker played by an actor who bears an obvious resemblance to Dick Cheney, refuses to listen to the advice from scientists on global warming arguing to take action would harm the American economy. In another reference to George W Bush's presidency, the administrator in the movie, has also refused to sign up to the Kyoto protocol on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. At the end of the movie, Becker who we just saw, he speaks to the nation as we saw of his new found sense of humility, he apologises to the nature and says he was wrong which is possibly the most unlikely bit in the whole movie perhaps! He says that Americans can no longer simply consume natural resources without taking the consequences. Becker in that final speech echoes the words of the homeless African American man who is one of the guys who is trapped in the library who refers to people as 'their exhausts and they're just polluting the atmosphere' so we do get this kind of reformists message as well. The disaster is wake-up call for America and a new start will allow for the changes in life style and technology necessary for a more sustainable future. Now this ideological ambiguity that I suggest is in the movie is open to both liberal and conservative interpretations. It's typical of what Steven Prince calls 'the ideological conglomeration of Hollywood movies derived from the industry's commercial intention to maximise profits by appealing to as wide, and therefore diverse, audience as possible by making movies which ideologically speaking, seem to have it always at once. Now that kind of ideological analysis I've just done of the ethical and aesthetic aspects of the movie implies questions of audience reception which is the way I want to end this paper. According to an influential branch of psycho-analytical film theory so called 'post-structuralist positioning theory' as it's called in the trade, Hollywood movies tend to render spectators passive because of their conventional narrative form so this was a theory that very much came through in the 1970's. Under the influence of Bertolt Brecht theories of narrative so films academics like Colin McCabe, Steven Heath argue that only modernist or avant-garde narratives can produce a more active or revolutionary even film spectator. As the 1992 textbook 'New Vocabularies in Film' puts it, psycho-analytic film theory 'Sees the viewer not as a person a flesh and blood individual but as an artificial construct produced and activated by the cinema apparatus'. Now in

his book called 'The Crisis of Political Modernism' D N Roderick exposes the flaws in this kind of thinking I think. 'The politics of political modernism' he writes assume 'an intrinsic and intractable relation between text, films and their spectators regardless of their historical or social context of that relation'. But film viewers are flesh and blood and individuals as well as members of social collectives and when they are treated as such by film theorists and film researchers, the practical film reception becomes much more complex and less stereotyped as imagined by that crude version of subject positioning theory. Empirical audience research tends to show that we don't all watch the same movie in the same way and that audiences responses are complex and defined by a long list of variables such as nation, region, locality, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and last, but certainly not least, individual temperament and history. When we look at the public perception of *The Day After Tomorrow* in this light it is clear that the movie was appropriated in different ways by different groups as we've seen already so the affect of movies on their audiences should not be taken for granted I would argue or viewed too simplistically. Nevertheless, I would argue that Hollywood movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* their sole or perhaps their main source of environment should still worry. Hence the importance therefore of those acts of reappropriation that I've just mentioned by advocacy groups such as I've just mentioned MoveOn.org. and Greenpeace who use the particular movies like this to encourage environmental debate that I guess we're trying to have today. O.K. thank you very much.

Mark Nash. Thank you David, that raises a lot of interesting issues to take up, once we've heard from Paula. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi is a Professor at the School of Communication and the Arts in Marist College in New York State and she teaches on film aesthetics, history and theory as well as on particular filmmakers and on social and environmental justice. She has edited books by Peter Greenaway and Pedro Almodovar and written also on Goddard and a range of Hollywood and European art and directors and writers. She is currently editing a volume of Essays on an eco-criticism which she says is tentatively entitled 'Framing the world: Eco-criticism and Film'. So Paula, many thanks.

Paula Willoquet-Maricondi. Thank you, it's a pleasure to be here and very nice to have the opportunity to leave the United States and gain a different perspective. Since the title of this panel or this series of events is Towards an Eco-Cinema I thought that perhaps I should attempt a definition of the term to begin my talk. So let me now suggest Eco-Cinema refers to documentary fiction and experimental films that explicitly express issues of ecological import to further environmental awareness, protection and preservation and in a more general sense encourages us to reflect on the general term of what it means to us to be part of the environment, the eco system, to belong

to the biotic community. Over the last 10-15 years there has been a proliferation of environmental film festivals world-wide and other ecological orientated events such as this one dedicated to addressing these concerns. The films shown at these festivals are often documentaries on subjects ranging from global warming, to the world's hunger crisis, the impact of globalisation on people's environments, water contamination, genetically modified seeds just to name a few. Films like *Darwin's Nightmare* for example which we saw last night. That film was also shown at the DC Film Festival a few months ago. I would like to mention a few other documentaries that address this issue and might be of interest to the audience. One of them is *Thirst* made in 2004 by Alan Snitow. This film traces the struggle of water rights as a catalyst for community identity and resistance in Bolivia, India and the US and I will say a little more about this film later. Another film to which I will also return later which is worth mentioning is *Power: One River Two Nations* made in 1996 directed by Magnus Isaacson and produced by the National Film Board of Canada. This film documents the Cree people's struggle to protect their land and water rights from development by Hydro Quebec and it was instrumental in the State of New York cancelling its contract with Hydro Quebec for electricity. Another film is *The Future of Food* directed by a lady married to the *Grateful Dead* – Gerry Garcia. This film was released in 2004 and examines the changing agricultural landscape prompted by the introduction of genetically modified seeds, the patenting of these seeds, the increasing susceptibility of traditional crops, the diminishing access to seed stocks and traditional agricultural practices and the world wide corporate intrusion of farms. One last film I would like to mention is *Exporting Harm; The hi-tech Trashing of Asia* which in 23 minutes effectively documents the affects of the export of toxic computer waste to China. This film is produced by the Basil Action Network which is a Seattle based international activists working to halt toxic trade and if you Google the name of the film you'll get a lot of information about it. Everybody knows Google here. So while there's been a growing interest in ecology and environmental justice issues on the part of film-makers, there has not been sufficient engagement on the part of audiences including in particular film critics and theorists. No engagement with these issues I just mentioned nor with the nature of film as a genre or more generally, with the issue representation of nature in films. There has been even less engagement with the view of technology vis a vis the natural world, the way that it impacts our world and shapes our relations to it and our representations of it. So Mark Nash suggested that we might ask some uncomfortable questions so I will do my best to put forth some provocative ideas and I will take the black and white approach, no nuances here. I wanted to actually begin by reading the question that was asked of Hubert Sauper, the maker of *Darwin's Nightmare* which was in this hand-out that I picked up when I came in yesterday. The question was 'you talked about how

the consumer democracy and form of capitalism has won the global struggle in the Darwinian sense, do you think there is any way to stop the kind of things we see in this film?' That's a very good question, I'm sure we would like an answer to that. And he says 'there are two ways, the first is to get much wider awareness of what we are doing by opening these markets. The other possible solution is global breakdown. I don't see how current developments can keep on going. There is a big difference between knowing and awareness. You don't need me to tell you that kids are starving in Africa but I can give you a different awareness in the language of art. There isn't anything new in my movie, it's all known, I just give it a face.' Somehow that transforms our knowing into understanding, at least that's what I hope and I hope we'll get a chance to talk about that film.

So I'd like to begin by inviting us to talk about some of the recent nature films that have been immensely popular. One of them is *Winged Migrations* released in 2001, a film that in many ways defies the genre of nature documentary and the other one is *March of the Penguins* which is due to be released here and I promise I won't spoil it too much for you. Like many nature documentaries, both of these films tap into our investment in technology as an agent of knowledge not understanding therefore solutions to problems as an agent of progress. It is thanks to the technology in this case of cinema, that we can know and presumably appreciate the amazing birds featured in *Winged Migrations*. While the experience of seeing the birds in both films actually may enchant us, these films ask us to be in awe primarily in the role of technology in bringing birds to us. *Winged Migrations*, particularly after the release of the DVD which contains a documentary of the making of the film, is a testament to human skill and ingenuity. We learn about the specialised cameras and the array of flying devices used, the successful imprinting of birds on humans, the simulated migrations and how the birds were made to get used to all things human. Even if we don't feel terribly informed about the birds' migratory habits in this film – and we do not – we are amazed by their beauty, their resilience, their stoicism, heroism and loyalty which the film and other technologies enables us to witness. I realise that you haven't seen the film but please do go see the film when it gets released. We all aware generally only those nature talks that are visually appealing and dramatic show well on film will get communicated at the expense of the less visually spectacular situations and problems. Nature films that are informative and vocational are often guilty of the same approach. We get to see the exciting moments and are spared the boring bits. As Gregg Mitman points out in a book called 'Real Nature: American's Romance with a Wild Life on Film' the drama of nature we see in these films do not match our every day experience of the natural world and 'Nature is not all action. Conditioned by nature on screen, we may fail to develop the patience, perseverance and passion

required to participate in a natural world with all its mundanity as well as splendour.' What drives all these nature films and narratives is drama and the biographical individualistic approach. The *March of the Penguins* has had so much success in the US grossing about £36.6B in part because it is filled with drama and reflects back to us our own cultural assumptions and ideas. It was a second gross seeing documentary after Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. The film is selectively anthropomorphic and does nothing to advance the viewer's awareness of sensitivity or engage with eco systems or the inter-dependence of living organisms, the dangers to these eco-systems from global warming or mercury contamination for example. In *March of the Penguins* death is shown to be a very very sad thing but the word 'death' is never mentioned. Penguins don't die, they just don't make it or disappear. The film appeals to our emotions when the penguins show their heroism, form couples or are the victims of predators, seals and gulls but glosses over the fact too that penguins need to eat to survive. In fact, what the film stresses is the number of months that the penguins go without food in order to procreate. Following up on what David said about reception (and I swear we did not plan this together!) in the US the film is being discussed in radically polar ways. As promoting monogamy, parental sacrifice, family values and is making a strong case for intelligent design on the one hand and as being a feminist exploration of parenting relationships and evidence of evolutionary practises that lead the penguins to develop a system of reproduction that guarantees that they will not over populate and outstrip their food supply. But the film only in passing pays lip service to evolution. It opens with Morgan Freeman's narration and I'm assuming you'll get the English version with his narration, rather than the French version, so I quote "For millions of years they have made their homes on the darkest, driest, windiest, coldest continent on earth and they've done so pretty much alone." They are lone frontiersmen, a concept most Americans will identify with. As far as addressing current issues such as global warming the film hardly brings up the point. The film-makers claim they wanted to create a film that would have wide appeal and reach a large audience and that would communicate issues in other ways than by lecturing audiences. They wanted to leave it open to any reading. Well, they succeeded in that. So we do need to consider the implication of such films for understanding our relationship to the natural world. Do they reinforce or bridge the gap between the experience of nature and our expectation of nature? Do they re-affirm culturally established patterns of thoughts and action, vis a vis the natural world or do they challenge them? The term Eco-Cinema also refers to an avant-garde film such as *Riverglass* which we have seen today. They represent the environment as no mere landscape but as place and as being. The avant-garde film critic and historian Scott McDonald who first introduced me to *Riverglass* has applied the term eco-cinema to films and videos which use the

technology to “Sing the value of the particularities of the physical world and to create an evocation of the experience of being immersed in the natural world”. *Riverglass* does just that, it focuses our attention on particularities, on experience and on emersion. It also invites us to adopt a different relationship vis a vis the natural environment, of which we are a part and on which we depend for survival, by making us adopt a different relationship to film spectatorship and I’ll say a little more about this in a moment. Eco-cinema however is only problematically useful as a term to describe films that are environmentalist in the sense understood by David in that films on environmental issues are central to the narrative but where the environmental issues as addressed in the films are merely backdrop to human drama. In such films, environmental terms are simply another topical issue at Hollywood’s disposal and a case in point is Steven Soderberg’s *Erin Brockovich* a film about an environmental justice issue in which the contamination soil, water and human life and by the end of the film is upstaged, not only by the individual courage and heroism of its female protagonist, played by Julia Roberts, but also by the material rewards that come with such heroism - the expensive down town, high class/high rise office, the shiny red, gas guzzling SUV, the 2M\$ in the bank and, of course, the media notoriety. Now I don’t mean to be cynical or dismissive of the real Erin Brokovich’s dedication to raising the awareness of water contamination and potential corporate malpractice after all many environmental organisations still use the film to raise awareness about such issues, as I do in my classrooms. The point that I want to make here is, by the end of the film, not only are the working class affected families and environments forgotten by the film but so is any serious discussion on the way of life that demands every increasing dependence on non- renewable and polluting sources of energy, not to mention the obscene profit margins. By focusing on chromium 6 rather than, say, mercury contamination, the film exploits our fears only to reassure us that we have nothing to fear –Brokovich is here. In fact, our dependence on non-renewable energy from chlorine clinical plants and cold fire power plants is one of the principal sources of mercury contamination in streams, wetlands, reservoirs and lakes. Scientific studies continue to show widespread mercury contamination in fish. The US Environmental Protection Agency has established fish consumption advisory because of mercury contamination for all US States but seven. The same is true with a 2004 global warming disaster movie *The Day After Tomorrow* which David discussed. The film’s reliance on dramatic exaggeration, instant consequences and on dazzling sci-fi affects, its apocalyptic premise, its minimal attention to science and emphasis on the individualist heroic actions of the main protagonists to save the world and if not the world, at least the family, upstaged any real concern and engagement with the reality of global warming. While we wait for scenarios like those in *The Day After Tomorrow* to unfold and for heroic individuals to come

forth and save the day shall we ignore the less spectacular standards but much more real and devastating impacts of human action on the biosphere. How many tsunami and Katrina's will it take, and I'm not suggesting that I can prove that Katrina is the result of global warming but I think we can't just – that's not really what we should be trying to prove a one to one relationship – so we will talk more about that. What we might be hard pressed to make in these two films is instances of eco-cinema, simply on the basis of their environmental topics. We must, however, as viewers, adopt an eco critical standpoint towards these films and through that standpoint analyse a critique, the values beliefs and patterns and working of culture. Patterns that are counter to an ecologically sound and sustainable way of being in the world - we need eco-cinema but we also need ecologically informed and orientated perspectives on films that are explicitly or not about environmental issues. But whose representation of nature reveals much about the ideology that informs the production of these films. My particular interest then is not simply in environmental films or in cinema but in adopting an eco-critical stance towards all forms of cultural production. So for me, *Riverglass* can help us practise eco-criticism by engaging us in an exploration of the local and global implications of our culturally determined representations of natural features and eco-systems. As we become more conscious of the ways we represent the environment as well as the ways we process as audiences these representations, we become more sensitive to the ideological origins and impact on our lived relationships to peoples and places. How their relationship is understood and lived directly informs a position and responds us to specific issues such as global warming, ground water pollution or the control and ownership of water. So as mentioned last time, yesterday, what we perhaps need is a paradigm shift. In *Towards An Eco-criticism*, the author argues that our static appreciation of nature, and our representations of nature, literature, photography, film, advertising, has paradoxically worked to avail the causes and effects of environmental degradation. I would like to spend a few moments exploring the problematic issues of the aesthetic appreciation of nature in relation to representation which is linked to the issue of technology by discussing my own reactions to *Riverglass* and, again, I wrote this before I knew that *Riverglass* was going to be shown. I was really thrilled that it was going to be shown and Andrej was going to be here. As we have the opportunity to experience it, *Riverglass* immerses us into the crystal clear waters of the river Soča in Slovenia. *Riverglass* is not an overtly activist, polemical or political film. It does not deal with issues in the traditional sense. It is not about injustices. It has no human characters more or less. No dialogue, no story. However, the demands of the film's lengthened approach put on viewers are political. They are the product of a political action because they are transformative of our perceptions and awareness of nature and our experience of ourselves as consumers are representational and members of the biotic

community that includes us and the river. By challenging our habits of perception, our relationship to real and filmic time as well as our expectations about the representation of nature, *Riverglass* opens up a space in which we may meditate on our relationship to the natural world and how that world has come to function in representation and in reality. As Scott McDonald pointed out 'Film viewers are conditioned to experience beautiful landscapes as "Not something deserving of sustained attention and commitment"'. *Riverglass* challenges this conditioning by giving us something else to focus our attention for 41 minutes but the flow of the river from within the river through the span of the four seasons. At the same time, *Riverglass* does not allow us to forget that we are watching a recorded manufactured image of the river although it does not idealise the technology which produced the images. *Riverglass* transforms our condition in relationship to time by demanding that we be patient and appreciative of something to which rarely lands our attention. It asks us to see the river in its own terms, not in ours, to experience the river for itself not for what it can provide us with. It challenges our position in relation to space as well by making us uncomfortably aware of the dark screening situation and when I wrote this I was thinking of my class room, the hard chairs, the noisy audience and I wasn't thinking of this hall. But we're also captivated by the space represented in the film on the river. So *Riverglass* creates the conditions for an exploration of a different kind of relationship to the non human world. What Aldo Leopold, one of the founders of the Wilderness Society defined as 'a relationship founded on the land ethic that enlarges the boundary of the community to include the land in the broadest sense.' This says Leopold 'Changes the role of homo sapiens from conquerors of the land to plain member and citizen of it'. *Riverglass* does this subtly and indirectly by slowing down time, by demanding that we notice the insignificant details of the life of the river, by suggesting to us through its self reflective element that there is no dichotomy between the river as object and the human as subject. By proposing the experience of the river in the film is an expression of being in nature, unlike *Winged Migrations* the making of *Riverglass* did not require that nature adapt to our needs. So the film can be seen as a metaphorical expression of a symbiotic relationship between people and nature, suggesting the possibility of a healthy exchange and co-existence. For me, *Riverglass* is a visual evocation of an insight expressed by the Canadian David Suzuki. Following his initial encounter with first nation's people, Suzuki noted "We framed the environmental problem in the wrong way – there's no environment out there for us to interact with, we are the environment because we are the earth. For me", says Suzuki "it began a whole shift in the way that I look at the issue of life and the way we live on this planet." So shift in perception, shift in the way that we look at the environment, the way in which we see our own position in relation to the rest of the biotic community. It is fundamental in bringing about a

shift in the way we live, that is essentially what *Riverglass* compels us to do. To re-adjust our perception. To greatly simplify matters, I would put forth the provocation that the central problem that needs to be addressed as we address specific manifestations of social and material degradation and injustice is the problem of perception or misperception. We have erected a social structure, a civilisation based on a perceptual error since the visual arts deals in matters of perception and representation, perhaps they can help us regain a more proper perspective. The perceptual habit or ideology that defines nature in either aesthetic or utilitarian terms, nature as beauty or nature as resource and raw material, are the same ones that have defined indigenous people and lands as invisible and under-developed. The opening of Magnus Isacsson's 1996 documentary *Power: One River Two Nations* for example enacts a critique of this ideology by giving us a bird's eye view of another Quebec territory that is explicitly designed to evoke the way film has historically supported the rhetoric need for invisibility and casting the land and its people as remnants of a forgotten wild and desolate frontier. This portrayal is immediately challenged by the caption asserting that 'Most of the world's great rivers have been damned and destroyed by hydro-electric projects'. I wasn't going to show clips but I decided, after all, to do so, so could we have the first clip please, thanks.

Film clip: Power: One River Two Nations, 1996, Magnus Isacsson (produced by the National Film Board of Canada).

There's more to this story than I had hoped for, but that's for another time. This film is an apt example of eco-cinema for not only documenting the 5 year battle of the Kri people to protect their land but, more importantly, for asking its audiences to re-think the understanding of land not as scenic landscape or empty space or economic resource but as place and as intimately linked to culture, identity and survival. The film especially addresses a non-indigenous audience and one of its challenges is to make its audience sympathetic to the plight of a people that for many in the industrialised world are invisible. The film's greatest challenge is to evoke a different kind of understanding of the human relationship to land. To achieve this, the film consistently shows an inter-dependence of people and land visually and verbally as, for example, when a Kri woman says "The land is our connection to re-strengthening our spirit as a people. The more our land is destroyed, the more our spirit is destroyed". Next clip please

Film clip: Power: One River Two Nations, 1996, Magnus Isacsson (produced by the National Film Board of Canada).

The construction of dams and hydro-electric projects are but two examples of the over exploitation of river systems affecting communities all over the world in developed and developing

Andrej Zdravič. Yes

Same questioner. OK. The second question is to do with ratings. I understand the importance of ratings and I understand, and I used to be teacher, the importance of being quantitative and justifying improvement and everything else and justifying the production. But isn't there a danger with ratings that the democracy within the ratings system could actually mean that we lose art to popular culture and it ends up being what people want to see and we lose the independent films that need to be aired? Well I believe need to be aired. Thank you.

Andrej Zdravič. I would just like to briefly follow up on the ((discussion about)) Hollywood films and ((people who)) say it's not too bad, it's just entertainment, but I think it's not to be taken lightly. I think Hollywood is making a huge impact in the way people perceive the world, and everything becomes a commodity and nothing has any value, it's all big heroes and it's kind of a subversive packaged affair that is invading all media, television as well, and I think it creates a very de-sensitised population. I think it has a huge potentially damaging affect and it already done. One last thing, Jonathan Carr-West said today in his very informative lecture that artists do not have accountability while scientists do and I think that artists have huge responsibility and I think that these people in Hollywood and whoever is making movies should think about what they are doing because media has a huge impact on people and I am especially referring to violence. I think the damage they are doing to the world is enormous so we do have a big responsibility.

Mark Nash. Thank you Andrej. I also wanted to add as a footnote as I haven't brought Timothy into this discussion that in a way the work of Timothy and Reiko and that group in Pittsburgh could be seen as the sort of very kind of enviable exercise of accountability and responsibility in a sense taking over something which the local state isn't doing. I want to, if you don't mind, draw things to a close now because in a sense there isn't a close, this is part of an ongoing series of debates and discussions. We hope that this will be reflected in the website that the RSA will be developing and, as Michaela has said, there will be other events later on and she is coming down to the front now to sort of lead us off Piper of Hamlin like to a couple of other events around the corner. I think we have managed to raise a whole lot of really fascinating issues from a range of different perspectives, both academic and artistic perspectives and so I'd like everybody to thank all the contributors and I look forward to hearing more from you all over the coming months and years so thank you all very much.

(Applause)

Michaela Crimmin. I just have to say that this absolutely has to be a continuum and I have been pulled up short, quite rightly, you know

there is a lot of work going on that's not always visible to me and the work that we're doing is not always visible to other people and so on so between us, I think it's really important that it is all incremental and is increasingly joined up in some sort of way I mean I would hate to lose so much of the ground that has been covered today. I know that I have changed a lot, I had a crisis of confidence last night and I'm sure there will be many more and I think there have been a lot of things today which have been constructive actually so keep in touch. We do need to move now quite fast and it would be great if you came too to the IMax to a different audience and a different agenda to some degree but before we go, of course, on behalf of the Arts Council, The RSA and all of us, I'd like to give a very big thank you to Mark for bringing us all together around these issues. Thank you Mark.

(Applause)