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FILM & EVERYDAY ECO-DISASTERS

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FILM & EVERYDAY ECO-DISASTERS

ROBIN L. MURRAY AND JOSEPH K. HEUMANN

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: Cinematic Eco-disasters and Our Basic Human Needs.	xi

Part 1: Human Approaches to the Ecology of Air, Water, and Clothing I

1. At the Boiling Point: The Aesthetics of Atmospheric Pollution and Climate Change in Documentary and Feature Films	3
2. James Bond and Water Wars in Contemporary Film: A New Eco-warrior?	24
3. Ready to Wear? From Fashion to Environmental Injustice	46

Part 2: Eco-documentaries and the Rhetoric of Food Production 67

4. Contemporary Eco-food Films: The Documentary Tradition	69
5. Flipper? We're Eating Flipper? Documenting Animals Rights and Environmental Ethics at Sea	92

Part 3: Negative Externalities of Housing and Energy Industries 113

6. Give Me Shelter: The Ecology of Homes and Homelessness	115
7. Activism in Mountaintop Removal Films: Turn Off the Lights for Sustainability	137
8. The Search for the "Golden Shrimp": The Myth of Interdependence in Oil Drilling Films	159

Conclusion: Can the Film Industry and the Environmental	
Movement Mix?	183
Filmography	191
Works Cited	199
Index.	211

ILLUSTRATIONS

<i>How to Boil a Frog</i>	xii
<i>Happy Feet Two</i>	xviii
<i>Red Desert</i>	4
<i>Total Recall</i>	5
<i>No Blade of Grass</i>	13
<i>How to Boil a Frog</i>	18
<i>Chinatown</i>	25
<i>Quantum of Solace</i>	33
<i>Gasland</i>	39
<i>Mardi Gras</i>	47
<i>Maquilapolis</i>	59
<i>Maquilapolis</i>	64
<i>Blood of the Beasts</i>	70
<i>Food, Inc.</i>	76
<i>Our Daily Bread</i>	86
<i>The Cove</i>	93
<i>The End of the Line</i>	95
<i>Darwin's Nightmare</i>	100
<i>Blue Vinyl</i>	116
<i>Libby, Montana</i>	131
<i>Rise Up! West Virginia</i>	138
<i>Mountain Mourning</i>	157
<i>Louisiana Story</i>	160
<i>Thunder Bay</i>	170
<i>Mountain Mourning</i>	184

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INTRODUCTION

Cinematic Eco-disasters and Our Basic Human Needs

Steven Spielberg's *War Horse* (2011), an epic antiwar drama confronting the fight for survival of a Devon horse named Joey in the no-man zones of World War I France, addresses our relationship with the environment in a variety of ways. It effectively illustrates the connections between humans and the natural world with its focus on the relationship between Joey and his owner's son, Albert Narracott (Jeremy Irvine). The scenes before, during, and after battles also demonstrate the horrific consequences of modern warfare for people, animals, and the natural world, a devastating human and ecological disaster leaving clear evidence that, as the film tells us, "The war has taken everything from everyone."

But the film moves beyond more traditional disaster themes by illuminating everyday eco-disasters associated with our basic needs. For example, Joey, a swift and strong Thoroughbred, must prove he can plow a field for turnips to ensure that the Narracott family maintains its shelter and the surrounding land that provides its food. When the turnip crop fails and war is declared, Albert's father, Ted (Peter Mullan), sells the horse to the British army to pay the farm lease and, again, secure those basic needs. Joey's horrific war journey, then, is caused by a family's drive to simply survive.

Film and Everyday Eco-disasters examines our basic needs in relation to the changing perspective toward everyday eco-disasters reflected by

How to Boil a Frog: The atmospheric cost of energy production

filmmakers from the silent era forward. Maurice Yacowar provides a base reading of such eco-disaster films in his seminal “The Bug in the Rug: Notes on the Disaster Genre,” which delineates eight basic types of disaster films, all of which have as their essence “a situation of normalcy [that] erupts into a persuasive image of death” (261). Yacowar’s categories of disaster films include a category most aligned with environmental disaster, “Natural Attack,” which pits a human community against a destructive form of nature, such as animal attacks, an attack by the elements, or an attack related to atomic mutations.

The natural attack disaster film has evolved in contemporary film, however, and now includes everyday eco-disasters, such as those associated with industrial farming and energy generation. These films serve as examples of ecocinema, a term that critics, especially ecocritics, are just beginning to debate. Although some define ecocinema narrowly to include only those films that “actively seek to inform viewers about, as well as engage their participation in, addressing issues of eco-

logical import” (10), as does Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, others take a broader approach.

Although we too see the best ecocinema, especially eco-documentary, as inspiring viewer action, we agree with the more general view of ecocinema that Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt postulate in *Ecocinema and Practice*: “All films present productive ecocritical exploration and careful analysis can unearth engaging and intriguing perspectives on cinema’s various relationships with the world around us” (3). In other words, every film is potentially an example of ecocinema, one of the media included in definitions of eco-media, a term that encompasses nonprint media from still photographs and cinema to music and videogames.

According to this definition these filmic representations of everyday eco-disasters are ecocinema ripe for ecocritical readings. To begin this study, our work will explore a sampling of eco-films in relation to three primary ecocritical approaches: human approaches to ecology like those of Ellen Swallow Richards, the rhetoric of the eco-documentary, and the repercussions of negative externalities, the term corporations producing everyday eco-disasters use to mask practices that potentially have a negative effect on both humans and the natural world.

Human Approaches to Ecology

This text centers exclusively on films associated with our basic needs (air, water, food, clothing, shelter, and energy) and the everyday eco-disasters associated with their exploitation. Such exploitation is typically associated with a “fair use” model of ecology, which grew out of economic approaches to the environment connected with social Darwinism. Human approaches to ecology, however, maintain the worth of our basic needs, either as separate from or part of the natural world. Whether defined by psychologist Abraham Maslow as physiological needs, by Reality therapist William Glasser as survival needs, or self-determination theory as competence in dealing with the environment, our most basic needs all highlight our connection with our external ecology.

The worth of our basic needs has been calculated in the United States and around the world in the last decade to determine the lowest income necessary for a family’s survival. This calculation resulted in the Self-

Sufficiency Standard. According to Diana Pearce and Jennifer Brooks, “the Self-Sufficiency Standard measures how much income is needed for a family of a given composition in a given place to adequately meet its basic needs—without public or private assistance” (1). This standard differs from the federal poverty measure in multiple ways: it takes into account regional differences, changing demographics, and new needs. As Pearce and Brooks explain, “there are many families with incomes above the federal poverty line who nonetheless lack sufficient resources to adequately meet their basic needs” (1–2). For a working adult in Illinois, for example, an hourly wage of at least \$8.57/hour was necessary in 2002 to earn the \$1,508 per month (with 176 hours per month of work), or \$18,096 per year, necessary to meet housing, food, transportation, miscellaneous, and tax expenses (Pearce and Brooks 8). For a family of four, with two working adults, a preschool child, and a school-age child, an hourly wage of at least \$10.07 per adult was necessary in 2002 to earn the \$3,545 per month (for 176 hours per month of work), or \$42,516 per year, required to meet these same basic needs, as well as child care expenses (Pearce and Brooks 8).

This Self-Sufficiency Standard makes clear that at least some of our basic needs have become commodities, which consumers must purchase for survival, a dilemma chemist Ellen Swallow Richards examines in her multiple explorations of human ecology at the turn of the twentieth century. The human ecology movement grew out of the work of Richards, who translated Ernst Haeckel’s work from its original German and, according to Robert Clarke, introduced the concept of ecology in the United States. Richards defined human ecology as “the study of the surroundings of human beings in the effects they produce on the lives of men” (*Sanitation in Daily Life* v).

Instead of “fair use” approaches to ecology, with an ultimate goal to maximize benefits of nature for humans, chapters 1–3 explore how Richards’s human approaches to ecology are manifested in documentary and feature films addressing air pollution, climate change, water rights, and the clothing industry. This approach also points to sustainable development as an alternative to resource exploitations and the everyday eco-disasters associated with them. Our exploration of everyday eco-disasters demonstrates some of the disastrous consequences of applying

an economic approach that condones overdevelopment and exploitative overuse and commodification of resources sustaining our basic needs.

The Rhetoric of the Eco-documentary

Although many would argue that all texts, including documentaries, are inherently rhetorical, since they address an audience from a particular standpoint, historically the rhetorical documentary presents an argument and lays out evidence to support it. In *The Rhetoric of the New Political Documentary*, however, Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee assert, “The rhetorical potential of documentary film . . . relies not on an audience who merely provides the rhetor with resources that might be exploited in persuasion but instead on an audience who is actively engaged in judgment and action” (137).

Audiences do not merely mimic the action on the screen, according to Benson and Snee. They interpret the actions documented, and invent and engage in acts of their own that respond to the film’s rhetoric but from the viewer’s perspective. Chapters 4 and 5 highlight this rhetorical potential in relation to food industry documentaries. The best of these eco-documentaries fulfill Paula Willoquet-Maricondi’s definition of the role of such films, “to play an active role in fostering environmental awareness, conservation, and political action . . . , that is, to be a member of the planetary ecosystem or ‘ecosphere’ and, most important, to understand the value of this community in a systemic and nonhierarchical way” (10).

In the films we explore in this section, documentation of actions also seems to adhere to the criteria Karl Heider outlines for ethnographic filmmaking, when explaining that “the most important attribute of ethnographic film is the degree to which it is informed by ethnographic understanding” (5). According to Heider, first of all “ethnography is a way of making a detailed description and analysis of human behavior based on a long-term observational study on the spot,” (6). Second, Heider suggests that ethnography should “relate specific observed behavior to cultural norms” (6). The individual narratives these films provide also support Heider’s third criteria for an effective ethnography: “holism” (6). These interconnected stories are “truthfully represented” (7) according to Heider’s final criterion for an effective ethnographic film, all in service to the films’ rhetoric.

Repercussions of Negative Externalities in Everyday Eco-disaster Films

The term “externality” comes from economics and refers to “an economic choice or action by one actor that affects the welfare of others who are not involved in that choice or action” (Goodwin et al). Although externalities can be positive, as when “a landowner, by choosing not to develop her land might preserve a water recharge source for an aquifer shared by the entire local community” (Goodwin et al), environmental externalities are most often negative. As Neva Goodwin explains, “a negative externality . . . exists when an economic actor produces an economic cost but does not fully pay that cost. A well-known example is the manufacturing firm that dumps pollutants in a river, decreasing water quality downstream.”

Environmental externalities resulting from everyday eco-disasters continue to have negative effects on water, air, and landscapes. For example, oil remains from the 1979 Ixtoc oil spill disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, and cleanup continues after the 1989 *Exxon Valdez* accident, ominous foreshadowing of the possible aftermath of the 2010 BP environmental catastrophe caused by the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion. Negative externalities have a detrimental effect on workers in various industries, including fishing, drinking water, air quality, mountains and forests. See, for example, the December 23, 2008, coal slurry dam breach caused by mountaintop removal mining in Tennessee or the April 10, 2010, West Virginia Massey mine explosion that left twenty-nine dead.

Natural gas drilling also causes negative externalities, as documented in *Gasland* (2010), threatening upper water supplies in the Delaware basin, for example. Genetically engineered seed has produced resistant superweeds, and carp introduced into the Chicago River are threatening other fish in Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes. Environmental externalities have a global effect negatively impacting water, air, and the quality of human and nonhuman life around the world.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 examine representations of negative externalities associated with housing and energy production in documentary and feature films. Instead of advocating for the fair use politics associated with the term “externality,” however, these films embrace sustainable development. A fair use model rests on conquest more than conservation. In “The Law of Increasing Returns,” for example, Ronald Bailey

promotes a fair use model when he asserts, “It is in rich democratic capitalist countries that the air and water are becoming cleaner, forests are expanding, food is abundant, education is universal, and women’s rights respected. Whatever slows down economic growth also slows down environmental improvement” (Salon.com). Unfettered economic growth, then, promotes environmental conservation, according to Bailey, so resources should be used as needed to advance economic development and thus environmental consciousness. Wise use and sustainable policies, on the other hand, disagree with Bailey’s premise. According to an article in *Environment*, “the Brundtland Commission’s brief definition of sustainable development as the ‘ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ is surely the standard definition when judged by its widespread use and frequency of citation” (Kates et al. 10).

Illustrating Everyday Eco-disasters in Film

Recent documentaries and feature films explore and argue against these everyday eco-disasters. With explorations of films as diverse as *Dead Ahead*, a 1992 HBO dramatization of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster; *Total Recall* (1990), a science fiction feature film highlighting oxygen as a commodity; *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), a comment on the fashion industry; and *Food, Inc.* (2009), a documentary interrogation of the food industry, this project explores documentaries and feature films as film art to determine how successfully they fulfill their goals. We assert that the success of the films we explore as arguments against everyday eco-disasters and the negative environmental externalities they produce depends not only on the message the filmmakers convey but also, and most importantly, on the rhetorical strategies they employ.

This work examines both documentary and fictional feature films but provides a unique focus: everyday eco-disasters. With multiple coal-mining accidents, oil spills, and food-borne diseases in recent news, explorations of films examining consequences associated with everyday environmental problems seem not only relevant but also imperative. Scientists agree that our human “carbon footprint” has accelerated global

Happy Feet Two: Mumble's son Eric with the Mighty Sven

climate change, but ecologists from the early twentieth century forward demonstrate that humanity contributes to the toxicity of our planet's food, water, and air primarily by serving what are seen as our daily needs. This work explores filmic representations of everyday eco-disasters, the environmental externalities associated with delivering these daily needs.

Happy Feet Two is a case in point. Even though most reviews of *Happy Feet Two* claim that the film has subsumed the original film's environmental critique of overfishing with an entertaining story of species interdependence, we see it as a powerful critique of humans' toxic contributions to climate change and water pollution in order to fulfill basic needs without the restraint necessary for sustainable development. Lisa Schwarzbaum's *Entertainment Weekly* review of the film argues, for example, that "earnest messages about bad climate change and good parenting skills have been replaced by a we-all-share-a-planet sense of fun that's more *Finding Nemo* than National Geographic." Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* goes further, asserting that the film is merely "an amiable sequel with not much on its mind other than funny and creaky jokes, and waves of understated beauty."

For us, however, despite the film's weaknesses, *Happy Feet Two* embraces a broader environmental message than the original film. *Happy Feet* illustrates a clear eco-problem: overfishing. But the film offers a single unrealistic solution: human intervention to ensure sustainable fishing practices and protect penguins because they dance and sing like

humans. *Happy Feet Two*, however, illustrates at least two devastating everyday eco-disasters caused by humans: oil spills and fires, and, more devastating for penguins and humans alike, global warming, both of which connect with humans' exploitation of resources that meet their basic needs.

With a more subtle approach to its message, *Happy Feet Two* looks more like a subtle enviro-toon than a didactic sermon. As Jaime Weinman argues, a model enviro-toon "never preaches." Unlike cartoons with anthropomorphized animals or plant life alone, what Weinman calls "enviro-toons" not only humanize nature; they comment on abuse of nature and the natural, especially by humans. For us, enviro-toons are animated shorts or feature films that address environmental concerns and embrace an environmental message that responds to their historical and cultural contexts.

Happy Feet Two meets these criteria well. It shows us scenes of Ramon (Robin Williams) struggling to escape an oil spill and watch the spill flame up in a spectacular oil fire. It also explains The Mighty Sven's (Hank Azaria) dilemma to introduce the film's central conflict, the negative repercussions of global warming. Sven has lost his icy home to global warming. With warming temperatures, the ice melted, revealing open waters and green grasses that are uninhabitable for puffins.

The emperor penguins face a similar plight when rising temperatures cause glaciers to break off, or "calve," isolating them in a large crevasse encircled by icy walls. Although the film suggests that the solution to this disaster is cooperation (working together to collapse a wall, so the penguins can relocate), the green patches showing through snow and ice tell a different story: climate change is stealing these penguins' home. Unlike in the original *Happy Feet*, humans' attempts to help the penguins fail. Instead, penguins and their puffin friend are left alone to adapt to a changing landscape caused by humans. Despite the weak link that additional characters like Bill and Will Krill (Matt Damon and Brad Pitt) provide, *Happy Feet Two* succeeds as an enviro-toon and an illustration of the everyday eco-disasters (externalities) associated with obtaining and overusing our resources to meet our basic needs.

By examining fictional and documentary films with these everyday eco-disasters at their center, our work, then, seeks to fill a gap in both

film studies and ecocriticism. Works like Jhan Hochman's *Green Cultural Studies: Nature in Film, Novel, and Theory* (1998) and Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) look at the representations of landscape in American mainstream film outside the field of ecocriticism, for example. Most texts that examine environmental movies explore nature documentaries or independent films in which environmental messages are blatant, not popular films where the message is subtle, unintentional, or embedded in relation to cultural context (see Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature: America's Romance with Nature on Film* and Scott MacDonald's *The Garden in the Machine*).

Our book builds on work begun in David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*; MacDonald's *The Garden in the Machine: A Field Guide to Independent Films about Place*; *Wildlife Films* (2000), Alison Anderson's *Media Culture and the Environment* (1997); Sean Cubitt's *Eco-Media* (2005); Willoquet-Maricond's *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (2010); and parts of Deborah Carmichael's *The Landscape of Hollywood Westerns: Ecocriticism in an American Film Genre* (2006) and Michael Dana Bennet and David W. Teague's *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (1999). *Everyday Eco-disasters* seeks to extend this conversation and examine documentary and fictional features addressing everyday eco-disasters associated with our daily needs from three ecocritical perspectives.

Human Approaches to the Ecology of Air, Water, and Clothing

Chapter 1, "At the Boiling Point: The Aesthetics of Atmospheric Pollution and Climate Change in Documentary and Feature Films," examines the commodification of oxygen in science fiction films such as *Total Recall* (1990) and the consequences of polluting the air in features and documentaries including *Red Desert* (1964), *No Blade of Grass* (1970), *Safe* (1994), and *How to Boil a Frog* (2009) in relation to Ellen Swallow Richards's human approaches to ecology. Since Richards viewed humans as part of nature, she considered urban problems like air and water pollution as products of human activity imposed on the environment and, subsequently, best resolved by humans. This chapter explores the consequences of taking this stance.

Chapter 2, “James Bond and Water Wars in Contemporary Film: A New Eco-warrior?,” explores the multiple environmental consequences of an industry devoted to providing drinking water for a price. By examining documentaries such as *Blue Gold: World Water Wars* (2008), *Flow: For the Love of Water* (2008), and *Tapped* (2009), as well as recent and twentieth-century feature films from *Chinatown* (1974) to *The Road to Wellville* (1994), *A Civil Action* (1998), and *Rango* (2011), we evaluate the films’ arguments against environmental externalities associated with the water industry with a primary focus on their popularization in *Quantum of Solace* (2008).

Chapter 3, “Ready to Wear? From Fashion to Environmental Injustice,” focuses on environmental consequences of the textile and fashion industry in films such as *Norma Rae* (1979), *Ready to Wear* (1994), *Life and Debt* (2001), *T-Shirt Travels* (2001), *China Blue* (2005), *Mardi Gras: Made in China* (2005), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Maquilapolis* (2006), *The Last Train Home* (2009), *Baytar Environmental Clothing Industry Documentary* (2010), *Thread: A Documentary* (2013), and *Cotton Road* (2013). Although fashion films primarily emphasize their industry’s product—high-end fashion—documentaries exploring both textile and clothing production reveal the human and the environmental exploitation behind the clothes.

Eco-documentaries and the Rhetoric of Food Production

Chapter 4, “Contemporary Eco-food Films: The Documentary Tradition,” asserts that food documentaries have become popular in the last few years, with films from *Supersize Me* (2004) to *We Feed the World* (2005) and the recent critically acclaimed *King Corn* (2007) and *Food, Inc.* (2008). We assert, however, that *Our Daily Bread* (2005) provides the most effective argument against the move to industrial farming because it eliminates verbal explanation altogether. With only background sounds and voices to support its visual rhetoric, this avant-garde rhetorical documentary conveys its message more effectively than either *Food, Inc.* or *We Feed The World*. Because it relies exclusively on visual rhetoric, we assert that *Our Daily Bread* works as a powerful rhetorical tool, undiluted by either ambivalent multiple viewpoints or a voice-over that sometimes disguises the consequences of industrial farming on display.

Chapter 5, “Flipper? We’re Eating Flipper?: Documenting Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics at Sea,” explores differences between animal rights and environmentalism in relation to the fishing industry. Recent documentary films interrogating the fishing industry bring this debate to life, either from a particular case, as in *The Cove* (2009) and *Darwin’s Nightmare* (2007), or in the more broadly based *The End of the Line* (2010). *The Cove* draws on animal rights arguments in its strong advocacy for the dolphins of Taiji. *Darwin’s Nightmare* and *The End of the Line*, however, immerse themselves in wise-use environmental arguments similar to Aldo Leopold’s land ethic. While *Darwin’s Nightmare* foregrounds human rights issues in Tanzania and *The End of the Line* more logically connects with long-term global environmental solutions, because *The Cove* meets its goal to end dolphin slaughter, at least temporarily, at the film’s site and slow its progress elsewhere, the film employs the most effective rhetorical strategies, strategies grounded in the animal liberation movement’s claims that all animals are equal because, like humans, they feel pain.

Negative Externalities of Housing and Energy Industries

Chapter 6: “Give Me Shelter: The Ecology of Homes and Homelessness,” highlights the environmental externalities associated with the housing industry in films such as *Dark Days* (2000), *Blue Vinyl* (2002), and *Libby, Montana* (2004). These films examine multiple externalities associated with the housing industry, from toxic building materials to overdevelopment, but they also explore the concept of housing in relation to environmental justice.

Chapter 7, “Activism in Mountaintop Removal Films: Turn Off the Lights for Sustainability,” explores the repercussions of coal-generated electricity on the environment in relation to feature films such as *Gomorra* (2008) and recent anti-mountaintop removal (MTR) mining documentaries including *Razing Appalachia* (2003), *Black Diamonds* (2007), *Burning the Future: Coal in America* (2008), *Mountain Top Removal* (2007), *Coal Country* (2009), and *The Last Mountain* (2011). Although all twelve of the anti-mountaintop removal documentaries we viewed successfully demonstrate the disastrous effects of mountaintop removal mining, only B. J.

Gudmundsson's *Mountain Mourning* (2006) and *Rise Up! West Virginia* (2007), and to a certain extent, *The Last Mountain* (2011) successfully support arguments against mountaintop removal mining while offering viable non-fossil fuel energy alternatives, alternatives that, according to the films, will eventually end America's addiction to coal and Appalachia's over-reliance on a coal mining economy.

Chapter 8, "The Search for the 'Golden Shrimp': The Myth of Interdependence in Oil Drilling Films," examines consequences of our dependence on oil. Although the consequences of the April 2010 BP oil well blowout are still unfolding, the primary example to which this ecocatastrophe is compared is the March 24, 1989, *Exxon Valdez* spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska. We analyze documentary and feature films that examine this event and others like it to make externalities associated with such spills transparent. See, for example, *Dead Ahead: The Exxon Valdez Disaster* (1992), *Crude: The Real Price of Oil* (2009), and *Black Wave: The Legacy of Exxon Valdez* (2009), in the context of films valorizing the oil industry, including *Louisiana Story* (1948) and *Thunder Bay* (1953), in an attempt to restore lost historical memory or environmental destruction.

Our conclusion, "Can the Film Industry and the Environmental Movement Mix?," synthesizes our arguments regarding the aestheticization of environmental externalities in rhetorical and multigenre feature films in relation to the environmental consequences of the film industry. We explore environmental progress made in films foregrounding everyday eco-disasters associated with our daily needs and evidence supporting the greening of Hollywood both in the film content and the production process of recent blockbusters and eco-films.