Emotion, Space and Society 6 (2013) 108–116

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Emotion, Space and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/emospa

Troubling spaces: Ecological risk, narrative framing, and emotional engagement in *The Age of Stupid*

Alexa Weik von Mossner*

University of Klagenfurt, Department of English and American Studies, Universitätsstraße 65-67 9020 Klagenfurt, Austria

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 31 January 2011
Received in revised form
20 November 2011
Accepted 23 February 2012

Keywords:
Documentary film
Emotion
Ecological risk
Cognitive film theory
Climate change communications
The Age of Stupid

ABSTRACT

Franny Armstrong's *The Age of Stupid* (2009) presents itself as a documentary about ecological risk and environmental injustice in different geographical regions, while at the same time appealing strongly to our emotions by showing us something we are not yet able to see: the possibly catastrophic future consequences of our present behavior. Through the use of spatial and temporal framing, Armstrong creates a strong cognitive and affective link between the documentation of current social and environmental practices and the imagination of future ecological devastation. Drawing on the pioneering work of cognitive film theorists and other scholars interested in the emotional appeal of non-fiction film, I investigate how *The Age of Stupid* mediates threatened ecological spaces and associated environmental risks in order to provoke strong affective and cognitive responses from viewers and, ideally, move them to action.

1. Introduction

We are writing the year 2055. London is flooded, the Sydney opera house is up in flames, the Taj Mahal is destroyed, and Las Vegas is literally drowning in sand; what is left of humanity lives a miserable life in make-shift shelters and refugee camps. These post-apocalyptic images open Franny Armstrong's 2009 drama-documentary hybrid *The Age of Stupid*. After rushing breathlessly through millennia of evolution – the last three seconds of which represent all of human history on earth – the film confronts us with a matter-of-fact look into our "future": a dark, silent, and dying world wrecked by the consequences of unmitigated climate change. A male voice welcomes us to the Global Archive, a vast storage structure that – 800 km north of Norway – protrudes out of the endless body of water that has now replaced the Arctic icecap. It belongs to an old archivist, who, as one of the last human survivors, is in charge of humanity's cultural artifacts as well as pickled specimens of extinct animals and enormous banks of servers that contain "every film, every book, every scientific report" ever produced by humankind. The Archivist sits in front of a transparent touch screen and looks back melancholically through "historical" documentary footage of the years 2005–2008, what is now known as the "the age of stupid." The audience is invited to accompany him on that journey into the past, invited to ponder with him the two questions that seem to torment him: "Why didn't we save ourselves, when we could?" and "What does that say about us as a species?"

These fictitious first scenes of *The Age of Stupid* are loaded with images of pain, decay and disaster, and the melancholic questions of the Archivist – played by the Academy Award nominated British actor Pete Postlethwaite – are likely to haunt the viewer long after she has left the theater. The documentary portion of the film is presented to us as a historical record of a "happier" time, a time in which mindless consumption and wasteful practices seemed to make sense, and in which one seemed to be able to ignore the writing on the wall. What gives the film its particular edge is that this happier time is in fact our own time: the immediate past of the audience at the time of the film's release. Mixing documentary images of actually existing geographical spaces in the present with those of an imaginary and dystopian ecological space in a speculative future, Armstrong evokes feelings of compassion and a sense of loss and remorse in viewers, in order to then remind them of their own carbon emissions and their ethical responsibility for the cultural and ecological spaces that are *not yet* of the past.

The ecological spaces we encounter in *The Age of Stupid* are, of course, mediated and thus *cinematic* rather than directly experienced geographical space. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they are less important for our understanding of environmental issues than our encounters with the actual world out there. As Jennifer Foster (2009: 98) has pointed out, our experience of the

* Tel.: +43 (0) 463 2700 2526.
E-mail address: Alexa.WeikvonMossner@aau.at.

1755-4586/$ – see front matter © 2012 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
doi:10.1016/j.emospa.2012.02.003

world is "both mediated by sensory emotional engagement and cognitively framed by knowledges that accumulate over time;" and our environmental ethics is thus "cultivated by the accretion of socially constructed knowledge" that is "mediated by culture". Not only is our direct sensory engagement with the natural environment infused with affect; cultural mediations of such ecological spaces similarly evoke emotional responses. The renowned environmental historian William Cronon (2009: xii) even argues "that we now sometimes experience virtual nature with greater intensity and emotional power than we do the non-virtual nature we physically inhabit". While this may be something to bemoan or regret, the fact remains that like other cultural representations, documentary film is a mode of gaining access to the actual world.

This access is crucially determined, however, by the way in which filmmakers present their material. As I will argue in section two of this paper, documentaries, much like fiction films, frame subjects in specific ways, and the nature of the framing has significant effects on viewers' understanding of these subjects. This is particularly interesting in the case of climate change documentaries, which are concerned with highly elusive ecological processes and with potential future developments they hope to avert. Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and Nadia Connors and Leila Connor Peterson's *The 11th Hour* (2007) are recent examples of openly political documentaries – what Thomas Waugh (1984: xiv) has called *committed* documentaries – that rely on a combination of visual information, scientific knowledge, and emotional appeal to get their message across. This seems a sensible strategy given that Paul Slovic (2000: xxxi) and other decision research scientists have found out that emotions matter at least as much as analytical thinking in both risk perception and decision making. In section three I will thus turn to cognitive approaches to film emotion, which, like Slovic, draw on recent research in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, arguing that emotional responses are not only what makes the film viewing experience pleasurable (Carroll, 1999: 24), but that they are also central to our cognitive understanding of the meaning of a given film (Plantinga, 2009: 3). As I will argue in section four, cognitive approaches have not yet paid enough attention to the emotional power of cinematic environments, which, along with other components such as character, plot, and music, can have considerable effects on viewers. Section five will then turn to *The Age of Stupid*, which is a particularly interesting contribution in this regard because of its unusual framing device.

Armstrong's film presents itself as a documentary about ecological risk and environmental injustice in different geographical regions, while at the same time appealing strongly to our emotions by showing us something we are not yet able to see: the possibly catastrophic future consequences of our present behavior for the ecology of planet Earth. As science fiction scholar Tom Moylan (2000: 4) explains, such building of alternative future worlds as a means to criticize the present is a standard feature of dystopian narratives[1]; however, what makes Armstrong's film unusual is that it uses contemporary *documentary* footage to criticize the grave stupidities of the film's "past" from the perspective of a fictional future. Drawing on the cognitive film theory laid out in section three, I will investigate how the mixing of fictional and non-fictional material – together with the unusual use of spatial and temporal framing – creates a strong cognitive link between the documentation of current social and environmental practices in different places in the world and the imagination of future ecological devastation. As I will demonstrate in the conclusion of the paper, empirical studies suggest that the emotionalizing rhetorical strategies of *The Age of Stupid* have significant effects on audiences.

2. Documentary film versus fiction film

As non-fiction films that "document reality", documentaries are often thought to be categorically different from fictional feature films.[2] Film scholars have long debated and heartily disagreed about the differences between fiction and nonfiction film, and the latter's exact relationship to reality.[3] It is, in fact, quite difficult to draw a clear line between the two categories, since fiction films often have some non-fictional elements in them – they may, for example, be based on a "true story" – and makers of nonfiction films sometimes use techniques we tend associate with fiction films.[4] But even if documentaries do not contain such fictional elements, we should keep in mind that, like fiction films, they are creative cultural texts and the product of directorial choices. "To take the documentary film as a mere photographic document", argues Carl Plantinga (2005: 495), "ignores the 'creative shaping' that is an ineluctable element of all documentary films, and that occurs in diverse registers such as narrative or rhetorical structure, editing, cinematography, sound design, and more controversially, reenactments and even the manipulation of profilmic events". Although documentaries may make use of documents, maintains Plantinga (2005: 496), it is a problem if we reduce them to the provision of *documentation*, because such an understanding neglects the manifold ways in which documentary filmmakers actively frame and shape the filmic worlds they present to their audiences.

In what way, then, is a documentary different from a fiction film? Noël Carroll (2006: 166) suggests that "films come labeled or indexed" either as fiction or nonfiction film, and that as viewers we thus expect a certain kind of film when we buy a ticket to see it. Other scholars have argued that it is really up to the viewer to decide which film she understands as documentary and which one as fiction film, regardless of how the films are intended or labeled (Branigan, 1992: 88; Eitzen, 1992: 92). Dai Vaughan (1999: 84) similarly claims that what makes a film "documentary" is the way it is looked at by the viewer and that "the history of documentary has been the succession of strategies by which film-makers have tried to make viewers look at films this way". The special appeal of the documentary form thus lies in its actual or perceived relationship to the world outside of the movie theater or television screen. As Plantinga (1996: 310) puts it, a nonfiction film "asserts, or is taken by the spectator to assert, that the states of affairs it presents occur or occurred in the actual world". As we will see in the next section, our cognitive and affective responses to a given documentary film depend very much on this assertion of actuality.

3. The rhetoric and emotional appeal of documentary film

Cognitive film theorists with an interest in the emotional appeal of film explore the means by which films elicit emotional responses from viewers. Greg Smith (2007: 6) suggests that films are "objects that are well constructed to elicit a real emotional response from

[1] Moylan (2005: 4) argues that one of the most central feature of a science fiction text's "particular mechanics" is "its ability to generate cognitively substantial yet estranged alternative worlds".

[2] For discussions of the theoretical issues raised by documentary see Nichols (1992), Thomas and de Jong (2008) and Ward (2006).

[3] A number of different and often conflicting views can be found in the literature. Scholars have argued that there is no significant difference (Renov, 1993: 3), or that all fiction films are also documentaries (Nichols, 1992: 1), or that all documentaries are also fiction films (Aumont et al., 1992: 77).

[4] Noël Carroll (1996: 286) states that "the distinction between nonfiction and fiction was never really based on differences in formal techniques" because "when it comes to technique, fiction and nonfiction filmmakers can and do imitate each other, just as fiction and non fiction writers can and do".