It's About Us: Extinction, Contradiction, and the Mourning of Modernity in *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*

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Abstract: Despite their worldwide viewership, popular eco-documentary treatments of biodiversity loss and the ecological grief they evoke have received scarce attention from critics. Addressing this gap in scholarship, this article posits that understanding the grief and mourning affected by these cultural texts requires attention to the numerous contradictions inherent to the form. More concretely, this paper argues that a thorough exploration of the contradictory nature of the eco-documentary, as a media genre that is imbricated in the modernity whose impact on the natural world it critiques, renders the genre into a critical junction at which to interrogate the cultural meanings of the mass extinction of biodiversity. This is done through an analysis of *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*. This study suggests that popular eco-documentary representations of biodiversity loss such as this remain entrenched in an anthropocentric instrumentalism characteristic of the modernist paradigm. Acknowledging the unwavering popularity of such films, this study concludes by positing that it is through attentiveness to rather than a wholesale rejection of eco-documentaries like *A Life on Our Planet* that scholars and viewers alike stand to grasp the extent of the fallacy and the fall of modernity and its worldview.

Keywords: extinction, modernity, mourning, documentary, contradiction

My first experience of ecological grief evoked by the prospect of mass extinction was on March 17, 2017. On that night, Transitie Cinema collaborated with *Partij voor de Dieren* (the Dutch Party for the Animals) to host a screening and discussion of Louis Psihoyos's 2016 documentary *Racing Extinction* at Het Nutshuis, a prestigious arthouse in The Hague. The film had premiered a year before and its depiction of activists around the world working to raise awareness about the coming of the sixth mass extinction in the natural history of our planet had been the object of rave reviews. Thus, the event was a full house, drawing a diverse audience that included, as I recall, citizens from across the European Union, Africa, South and East Asia, North and Latin America, and the Caribbean. More striking, perhaps, was the affective overlap in their responses to the film despite their cultural differences – emotional resonances that surfaced in the discourse that drove the conversation upon the film's conclusion. There was overwhelming agreement that the prospect of an anthropogenic mass extinction was both an outrage and a tragedy. There was a fearful urgency too in the questions viewers posed to the party representative about what was being done to avert this prospective crisis. But above all, there was a sense of grief, a mourning that became most palpable when several members of the audience shed tears after another broke the news that the last Panamanian golden toad, a species featured in the documentary, had just passed.

In hindsight, this anecdote illustrates several of Ursula Heise's most noteworthy insights concerned with the cultural representation of environmental loss (2008, 2015). The diversity of the audience, for one, accords with her conclusion that environmentalist texts are increasingly likely to appeal to what she calls *eco-cosmopolitanism*, a way of 'thinking about environmental allegiances that reaches beyond the local and the national' and is grounded on 'a cognitive understanding and affective attachment to the global' (*Sense* 21, 59). Moreover, the central theme in *Racing Extinction* recalls several tenants in her exploration of what she calls the 'cultural meanings of endangered species' (*Imagining Extinction* 206). Firstly, the medium and setting of the event appear to align with her argument that despite having been traditionally understood as biological matters, public notions of biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, 'questions of what we value and what stories we tell' (*Imagining Extinction* 5). Secondly, it confirms her sense that over the past half century, the growing

awareness of species loss has translated into a profusion of popular-scientific cultural texts (*Imagining Extinction* 33), such as Elizabeth Kolbert's bestseller *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), CNN's *Vanishing* series (2017), and, of course, documentaries like *Racing Extinction*. Finally, *Partij voor de Dieren*'s involvement and the emotions that the audience experienced through the documentary appear to confirm her assessment that explorations of extinction in this cultural form 'frequently rely on the politically mobilizing power of mourning' (*Imagining Extinction* 35).

Heise pays only scant attention to documentaries about extinction,[1] dismissing their frequent appeal to mourning as melancholic, evocative of a nature nostalgia that 'is all too often deflected' and 'thoroughly commodified' (35). In my view, her dismissal of a genre that should otherwise be of utmost relevance to studies of the cultural meanings of biodiversity loss and conservation is symptomatic of what Christie Milliken and Steve F. Anderson (2021) describe as a remarkable willingness in cultural and documentary studies 'not only to neglect works that may be considered popular but actually to malign them' (2). The neglect of popular documentaries, they add, extends to works in the subgenre that has come to be known as the *eco-documentary* (7). Following the groundbreaking study on this emerging subgenre by Helen Hughes (2019), the eco-documentary can be broadly understood as 'documentaries on environmental themes' such as climate change or mass extinction. Crucially, Hughes agrees with Milliken and Anderson, noting that while the eco-documentary's politicization of environmental issues represents one of the most significant developments in activist filmmaking (4-5), the subgenre remains considerably under-studied (4), possibly due to its recent sedimentation. Yet following these authors' contributions, I argue that the immense popularity of the eco-documentary suggests that the discourse, figures, and affects that populate the form shape cosmopolitan perceptions of ecological issues such as the sixth extinction in the history of our planet to a degree that must no longer be overlooked. Thus, this paper embarks on an analysis of one of the most widely seen and significant works of eco-documentary in recent years; *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (directed by Alistair Fothergill, Jonathan Hughes, and Keith Scholey, 2020).

The significance of *A Life on Our Planet* cannot be understated.[2] Though not the first eco-documentary on mass extinction,[3] it is perhaps the most momentous, not least because of its unrivalled popularity. As of today, the documentary boasts a respective 96% and 97% score by critics and audiences on Rotten Tomatoes, an 8.9/10 score from 34,000 user votes on IMDb, and an 8.5 user score on Metacritic.[4] Yet the most culturally noteworthy aspect of its film may be its confrontation with this global environmental crisis through David Attenborough, the individual who has most influenced the relationship between public culture and nonhuman nature (Smaill 'Historicising David Attenborough's Nature' 344). This is because, as Belinda Smaill explains, most titles in which Attenborough has featured over the course of his eight-decade career consist of natural history programming whose form is closer to what Derek Bousé calls *wildlife film* (Smaill 'Historicising' 360). This genre, writes Bousé, is primarily distinguishable from the documentary in its lack of engagement with the *discourses of sobriety* (15), matters such as history, politics, and economics which foremost documentary scholar Bill Nichols considers foundational to the documentary's reputation as 'the most explicitly political form' (ix). The 'absence of politics' and the 'little or no reference to controversial issues' that Bousé observes in wildlife films is evident (15), I argue, in the failure to meaningfully address issues like climate change and mass extinction in titles like *Life on Earth* (1979) or *Blue Planet* (2001). Yet as the film's promotional material states, *A Life* is a 'witness statement' (IMDb); a film in which the broadcaster 'recounts his life, and the evolutionary history of life on Earth, to grieve the loss of wild places and offer a vision for the future' (Netflix). This biographical focus and environmentalist plea lend a particular cultural relevance to *A Life*, rendering it the most personal and political work featuring the perennial British naturalist to date and, in a decided shift away from wildlife and natural history film, his first eco-documentary on mass extinction.

The problem of how to analyse eco-documentaries such as *A Life* is a salient one given their operation at the intersection of art, advocacy, and entertainment. Hughes, for instance, argues that its audiovisual construction of perspectives on socio-ecological issues to advocate for political action situates the form somewhere 'between exposition and propaganda' (5). For this reason, she writes, the form may be better understood and analysed 'in the context of communication rather than aesthetics' (5). The inroads made in studies of the eco-documentary

within this purview are indubitably valuable; however, I contend that a more meaningful account of nonfictional moving images advocating for ecological matters such as biodiversity loss emerges from analyses that attend to the intense emotions that these cultural works evoke. I am hardly alone in this. Scholars like Smaill (*The Documentary*) and Alexa Weik von Mossner ('Introduction: Ecocritical Film Studies') demonstrate a latent interest in the emotional appeal of eco-documentaries. Indeed, the latter author has compiled an outstanding collection dedicated to the role that *affect*,[5] broadly defined, plays in viewers' experience of and attitudes toward works of eco-cinema, including eco-documentaries. Emotion occupies a more peripheral space in Smaill's exploration of how the contemporary documentary archive 'works to structure knowledge about animals and the relations between humans and animals' in response to the growing awareness of the human impact on the nonhuman world (*Regarding Life* 2-3). Still, her analysis of how documentaries on endangered species are capable of 'conjoining the biophysical and emotional worlds of humans and animals' remains informed by her earlier interest in the genre's 'capacity to harness and focus emotions in ways that have a unique bearing on the social world and individuals they represent' (*Regarding Life* 87; *The Documentary* 6).

I wish to engage with these insights on the emotional and socio-ecological effects of eco-documentaries while attending to another defining characteristic of the form, namely, that it is 'fraught with contradictions' (Hughes 10). Though primarily associated with Marxist critique and perhaps most closely with the work of Frederic Jameson, eco-critics have noted the importance of attending to the contradictions inherent to moving images. Among them is Adrian Ivakhiv. Drawing from Jameson's notion of the *geopolitical unconscious*, the idea that 'all thinking today is also, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such' (Jameson 4), Ivakhiv argues that Jameson's world system can 'hardly be thought today without reference to a larger – and until recently unthinkable – totality of the ecological system which both sustains and interpenetrates with the political-economic system' ('Stirring' 99). Thus, he adds, the fact that 'the ecological crisis is a consequence of the process of capital-accumulation that is inherent to the modern world-system' constitutes 'the "second," i.e., ecological, "contradiction" of capitalism' ('Stirring' 99-100). And as Sean Cubitt writes, ecological works of fine art and popular media are not only symptoms of their age but also vehicles that 'voice its contradictions

in ways few more self-conscious activities do because both want to appeal directly to the senses, the emotions and the tastes of the hour' (*Ecomedia* 2-3), including 'ideologies of nature' such as wilderness conservation (2). What this suggests is that any attempt to understand the significance of the emotions evoked by eco-media depictions of environmental paradigms like biodiversity and mass extinction must attend to the contradictions that inform these cultural works.

I draw inspiration from these observations to focus on how the ecological contradiction of capitalist modernity informs the grief that eco-documentaries preoccupied with the coming of mass extinction seem to evoke. My thesis is that attention to the contradictory relationship between eco-documentary treatments of mass extinction and the late capitalist modernity from whence they spawn offers a crucial avenue to understanding their significance to this cultural system. More concretely; if, as Heise writes, public perceptions of biodiversity and extinction are 'a measure for what we value about nature as well as, more indirectly, about ourselves' (Heise *Imagining Extinction* 23); and if, as scholars like E. Ann Kaplan (22), Claire Colebrook (94), and Heise herself argue, affects like trauma, mourning, melancholy, and grief constitute the characteristic affective climate of cultural texts concerned with the Anthropocene and its mass extinction of life, then their contradictory representation in the form that most actively 'shapes audience expectations and knowledge of the (nonhuman) world' and the emotions these stir become a crucial junction at which to interrogate the cultural meaning of biodiversity and mass extinction (Smaill *Regarding Life* 7). Thus, I now turn my attention to an eco-documentary whose popularity, contradictions, and affective impact most readily evidence the tensions that capture my proposal.

A Life is evidently symptomatic of contradictory trends inherent to the production of nonfictional moving images concerned with environmental issues. Chief among these is that while 'film is imbricated in the modernity that it critiques' (Hughes 5), this contradiction boils to the surface of eco-documentaries in their attempts to 'justify the role of filmmaking in environmental degradation through what films offer to the global dissemination of environmental consciousness' (5). This self-justificatory drive underpins the political economy of *A Life.* Because rather than another collaboration between Attenborough and the BBC Natural

History Unit that he has come to embody, *A Life* and *Our Planet* (2019) – a blue-chip series released shortly before and in association with the documentary – constitute his first productions in partnership with Netflix (Gouyon 248). As Jean-Baptiste Gouyon explains, this move was at least partly motivated by producers' frustration with the BBC's timid engagement (247), if not systemic avoidance (248), of the environmental issues threatening the wildlife it put on display. Thus, writes Gouyon, *the* difference between these Netflix productions and their BBC counterparts is that they no longer ignore these threats (248). Instead, climate change and mass extinction function as the backdrop to explorations of biological interconnectivity in *Our Planet*, while the latter drives the narrative in *A Life.* Indeed, the documentary seems to appropriate the ethos Attenborough accrued through his association with the BBC, drawing credibility for its account of 'the devastating changes he has seen' from his reputation as the 'man [who] has seen more of the natural world than any other' (IMDb). Thus, while both production companies are inextricably participant in the material media economy driving climate change and mass extinction, Netflix's production faces the historical reality of these environmental issues, forcing it to rationalize its entanglement in these processes. In the case of *A Life,* this is done by framing Attenborough's witness statement as a warning of 'what could happen to the planet … were human activity to continue unchanged' as well as advice on how to 'prevent these effects and combat climate change and biodiversity loss' (IMDb).

Yet there are deeper contradictory connections between the ecological perils that *A Life* grieves and seeks to warn viewers about and the technological modernity from which it stems. The film gestures at these from the opening scene. Here, flyover and panoramic shots of dilapidated apartment blocks and public buildings overgrown with vegetation transport viewers to present-day Chernobyl. As Ivakhiv writes (2020), this is a site whose technological ruin can be conceptualized as 'a microcosm of the tensions held together within the twentieth century Cold War, within industrial modernity, and within the geological Anthropocene' ('Chernobyl' 219). It is from within the spectral vision of the potential of modern technologies for humanitarian and ecological catastrophe that Attenborough first appears on screen to deliver an on-site account of the anthropogenic causes of the Chernobyl nuclear accident and its perturbing long-term effects on the Zone of Alienation created in its wake. What follows is an analogy.

First, the film cuts to a violent montage of ecological annihilation featuring shots of fires and deforestation. The sequence then cuts to a closeup of Attenborough, whose sullen face identifies the preceding images as part of 'a far larger threat' than Chernobyl, yet one whose origins are similarly rooted in 'bad planning and human error'; namely, that 'The way we humans live on Earth *now* is sending biodiversity into a decline' (00:00:00-00:04:17, my emphasis). In this way, mass extinction is linked to modernity both homologically and temporally; the former by literally situating the scene within one of the most recognizable tragedies of industrial modernity, the latter via a temporal qualification that suggests an idyllic past when humans did not pose a threat to biodiversity.

The establishment in the opening sequence of the detrimental effect of modernity on biodiversity is characteristic of contemporary narratives of mass extinction. According to Heise, stories tracing the endangerment or extinction of species situate their decline 'as part of the cultural history of modernity' with the aim of 'expressing unease with modernization processes or for an explicit critique of modernity and the changes it has brought about in humans' relation to nature' (*Imagining Extinction* 32). In this light, the use of 'we' is telling. A recurrent device throughout *A Life*, it initially suggests both an attempt to align viewers with Attenborough as well as to appeal to the sense of eco-cosmopolitanism Heise describes. Further, it recalls interrogations and debates concerned with attempts to construct humankind as a species by scholars working at the intersection of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, such as those by Dipesh Chakrabarty and Elizabeth DeLoughrey.[6] But presently, I turn my attention to how this device constructs humans in contradistinction to (nonhuman) nature, and to the work of Val Plumwood in this regard (2002). In her study of what she describes as 'the environmental crisis of reason', Plumwood traces the origins of the ecological crisis to the onset of a 'rationalist hyper-separation of human identity from nature' in the Enlightenment, whose 'historical projects of subduing and colonizing nature have come to full flower only in modernity' (8, 15). I would argue that the use of 'we' in reference to humankind's impact on biodiversity in Attenborough's narration echoes this human/nonhuman dualism. Moreover, consider Heise's insights regarding the critique of changes in humans' relationship to nature in extinction narratives alongside Plumwood's argument that this hyperseparation of culture from nature

provides the framework for a 'dominant narrative of reason's mastery of the opposite sphere of nature' predicated on 'human superiority, reason, mastery and manipulation, human-centredness and instrumentalism' (5, 11). Together, they seem to gesture toward a concern in *A Life* with how modernity's assault on biodiversity has altered 'our' relationship with the nonhuman Other that is simultaneously subordinate and foundational to human identity.

Admittedly, the use of emotionalizing devices in this sequence and throughout *A Life* does not readily lend itself to this reading. Plumwood links the hyper-separation of culture/nature in Western rationalism to the Cartesian dualism that entailed the 'split of mind from body, reason from emotion' (4), resulting in a cultural disengagement from what are seen as 'nature's contaminating elements of emotion, attachment and embodiment' (5). Conversely, the sombre music, mournful inflection in Attenborough's voiceover, and the focus on the distraught expression on his face all seem to encourage viewers to feel the grief that the decline of biodiversity seems to provoke in the naturalist when he declares that 'The natural world is fading. The evidence is all around. It's happened in my lifetime. I've seen it with my own eyes' (00:04:17-00:04:42). Indeed, lingering closeups of Attenborough's face recur throughout the film, suggesting a purposeful deployment of what Suzanne Keen calls 'broadcast strategic empathy' (2007). Keen defines this as a narrative strategy that 'calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations' (71-72). As Weik von Mossner explains, filmmakers deploy this strategy through closeups or POV shots that cue viewers to feel with and for 'heroic human identification figures who fight on behalf of disenfranchised nonhumans' (*Affective Ecologies* 122, 124). Coupled with the style of 'strongly subjective affective commentary' in Attenborough's narration that Smaill suggests is aimed at 'heightening the advocacy role' of eco-documentaries (*Regarding Life* 82), *A Life* seemingly invites audiences to grieve for the loss of the world's wilderness with Attenborough. Still, a potential problem arises from this strategic foregrounding of the naturalist's emotions. In my view, it anchors any ensuing ethical engagement by viewers with the matter of mass extinction on Attenborough rather than on the nonhuman world. In other words, it remains anthropocentric.

Further echoes of tropes that Plumwood associates with rationalism become perceptible in *A Life* as its critique of the modern world's detrimental effect on biodiversity unfolds from its emotional and ethical anchorage on Attenborough. Following his inaugural warning about the fading of the natural world from Chernobyl, the film fades into a collage of shots appropriated from some of the naturalist's most memorable wildlife films. Such appropriations and repurposing of scenes from the naturalist's oeuvre is another recurrent device in *A Life.* The logic behind this strategy is evident. As Evi Zemanek writes (2022), Attenborough is 'a global brand' (140), a figure whose wildlife films have, in Smaill's terms, facilitated mediated proximity to nature for audiences 'in a way that is unrivalled' (Smaill 'Historicising' 345). Thus, this is likely an appeal to audiences' familiarity with Attenborough and their nostalgic attachment to his works. More intriguing is how the documentary exploits viewers' appreciation for his historical contribution to wildlife cinematography to position him as mediator between them and the historical reality of the natural world in modernity. This is evident through the documentary's use of intertitles. Tracing the roots of Attenborough's extraordinary career back to his childhood, *A Life* cuts away, first to sepia images of a boy cycling down a country road, then to white text on a black screen. The latter is the first in a series interspaced throughout the film, dates the scene to 1937 and records this as a time when the world population totalled 2.3 billion, the carbon in the atmosphere was 280 parts per million, and the remaining wilderness covered 66% of the world's surface. These figures change in accordance with the dates in subsequent intertitles. Thus, the device not only earmarks different segments of the film as pertinent to specific historical points but also relates these through Attenborough and his oeuvre as the respective observer and record of a(n) (un)natural history (00:04:50-00:06:18).

The anthropocentrism afforded by Attenborough's multifaceted role persists even as *A Life* moves on to extol the complex bounty of earth's biodiversity. This becomes evident in a complex expositional montage dedicated to the earth's evolutionary history. Following shots in which the naturalist reveals the sepia images constitute a reenactment of his childhood interest in fossils and natural history from the same fossiliferous quarry he visited as a youth, he proceeds to narrate what he describes as the 'painstakingly slow' process of natural selection and its periodic disruption by catastrophic mass extinctions over translucent images of oceanic creatures,

closeups of fossils, and panoramas of geological formations. The sequence then turns to the aftermath of the most recent mass extinction event 65 million years ago, at which point the pace of the collage cuts away from one shot to the next quickens. Similarly, the figures in the shots become more vivid and dynamic; from time-lapse shots of fruiting mushrooms and aerial footage of thriving forests to cetaceans cruising the seas and predators tracking herds in the great African plains (00:06:25-00:12:33). Several of these shots are recognizable from prior wildlife films featuring voiceover narration by Attenborough; indeed, the sequence initially suggests a return to the apolitical edutainment of the BBC Natural History Unit. What follows, however, does not. For having presented the radiation of life following the last mass extinction event, *A Life* turns its attention to 'our time', the Holocene, a period whose remarkable stability is established through images of thawing ice, seasonal storms, and turning foliage. What follows is a visual and discursive exposition of how humans invented farming and broke free of natural constrains thanks to this seasonality. In quick succession, viewers observe images of a family and a horse ploughing a small plot, farming terraces, villages, archaeological sites, and a celebration of Holi, all testament that 'the pace of progress was unlike anything to be found in the fossil record' enabled by 'our intelligence' (00:12:34-00:14:31).

It is worth delving here into how the themes in this montage in *A Life* reminisce the three ecological dimensions of cinema that Ivakhiv identifies in his process-relational analysis of cinema. In its exposition of the earth's deep history, the first segment recalls what Ivakhiv describes as the medium's *geomorphic* qualities, its capacity to create visual narratives in which 'the world is presented as given' (*Ecologies* 10). Meanwhile, the later emphasis on wildlife and biodiversity suggests an appeal to cinema's *biomorphic* aspect. This facet, writes Ivakhiv, is the way in which the moving image 'shows us things that see, sense, and interact… an interperceptive relationality of things' (*Ecologies* 8). Predictably, the focus of the final segment of the sequence is *anthropomorphic.* This is true both in the sense that the segment concludes with a decided focus on human figures and capacities and in the way in which it is through this centring of the human that the world 'is presented as open to action and change… as agency' in *A Life* (*Ecologies* 10). What is troubling here is not the presence of humankind and the way we interact with the environment in this segment; indeed, it is the absence thereof in the wildlife and

natural history films that define much of Attenborough's career that has come under scrutiny due to the inherent erasure of environmental issues that ensues. Rather, what becomes problematic is that the foregrounding of anthropomorphic figures in *A Life* occurs within an evolutionary narrative and alongside an exaltation of what are depicted as agential capacities exclusive to our species, particularly our use of cognition to control the environment. The result, I would argue, is an account that reproduces the modern rationalist worldview that, as Plumwood writes, 'sees life as a march of progress' and whose construction of reason as the pinnacle of a naturalized hierarchy underlies Western civilization's project of conquest and domination of the Other (Plumwood 19), both human and nonhuman.

This emphasis on progress continues and intensifies in further segments. In one of these, Attenborough resituates the film's historical narrative within the context of his life and career. As he recalls that the start of his career 'coincided with the advent of global air travel', intertitles fade in, transporting viewers to 1954, a time when, as the voiceover and appropriated grayscale shots reveal, the world still teemed with 'sparkling coastal seas', 'vast forests', and 'immense grasslands'. Yet again, viewers are perhaps more likely to notice Attenborough, whose youthful figure in these shots reveals these as segments from some of the naturalist's earliest works, attesting to his 'privilege of being amongst the first to fully experience the bounty of life'. 'It was the best time of my life. The best time of our lives,' he declares, cueing a transition to an archival collage of television ads from the time featuring people enjoying new cars and electrical appliances. Surely enough, this segment re-centres Attenborough as both historical mediator and affective anchor. In this case, however, these devices operate alongside an emphasis on how 'technology was making our lives easier. The pace of change was getting faster and faster' (00:14:31–00:16:40). The intention of this sequence in *A Life* may be to maintain viewers' affective engagement, re-engaging their nostalgic attachment to the naturalist and his oeuvre, perhaps by recalling their early experiences of natural history programming featuring him. Yet I would argue that by pairing audiences' emotional attachment to Attenborough's natural history programming with narration and imagery exposing the purported benefits of modern technology, *A Life* risks, or perhaps voices, a similar affection toward technological progress.

The root of this unintentional or unconscious affective slip lies in the inextricability of Attenborough and his role as historical mediator for the nonhuman world from technological modernity and its ideological substrate. Consider the crucial way in which the proliferation of modern technologies underlies the naturalist's career beyond the onset of air travel. His entrance into the world of natural history programming, for instance, coincides with the development of a full-scale wildlife film industry in Britain in the early 1950s (Bousé 73). Yet as Bousé writes, 'The history of wildlife film must begin at the beginning of all film' (41), and it is to these beginnings that we must turn to comprehend how the tension between technological progress in modernity and nonhuman life informs the historical trajectory of his works. Akira Lippit's analysis of the relationship between animal imagery and technological media is insightful here (2008). Lippit describes a scenario wherein the onset of modernity, its technologies, and its hyper-separation of humans from nature led to the disappearance of animals from daily life (19). In his view, the vanishment of the nonhuman lifeforms that had been 'the natural supplement of the human' (25), that is, the nonhuman counterpart in opposition to which human identity had been constructed, precipitated an epistemological crisis that was ultimately resolved with the emergence of new technologies onto which the spectre of animality was transferred and rethought. Chief among these was cinema. Lippit argues that the illusion of animacy in moving images facilitated an 'alliance between animals and cinema' whereby the latter appropriated the former's 'symbolic and actual powers' (23), becoming 'a technological supplement of the subject' that also 'allowed modern culture to preserve animals' (25).

Lippit's theorem casts a damning light on Attenborough's intimations regarding his early career in *A Life*. It suggests that the naturalist's recollection that 'in the beginning it was quite easy [because] people had never seen a pangolin before' alludes to his participation in the modernist transfer of vanishing animality onto technological media of mechanical reproduction (00:15:00). Indeed, I would argue that rather than merely perpetuating this process, Attenborough's oeuvre is representative of its intensification. As he declares in reference to the mobility and technologies afforded by developments in the mid-20th century, he 'grew up at exactly the right moment' (00:14:31), a time that has come to be known as the Great Acceleration. This period has historically been conceived as the onset of postmodernity and,

more recently, its stratigraphic signature has been proposed as a potential marker of the Anthropocene (McNeill & Engelke 207-8). Yet if, as Cubitt argues, the Great Acceleration is better understood as the technological amplification of the mechanisms of modernity rather than a departure therefrom ('Supernatural Futures' 237), then the commercial and cultural success of Attenborough's career emerges as consequent to the acceleration of modernity's extirpation of nonhuman life in that period. Indeed, the naturalist hints at this through his acknowledgement that it later became 'noticeable that some animals were becoming harder to find' (00:23:29). To be fair, the documentary attempts to frame the acceleration of industrial modernity as excessive. This is most evident in a later segment dedicated to a 1971 film in which Attenborough journeyed to New Guinea to locate an uncontacted tribe whose sustainable life is presented in 'stark contrast to the world I knew. A world that demanded more every day' (00:35:07). Nevertheless, *A Life* also posits modern technologies as conducive to environmental consciousness.

There is an emphasis on technologies of vision throughout *A Life*. In a segment on the Serengeti, for one, Attenborough remarks on how aerial surveys of the plains in the 1960s revealed that the ecosystem 'needs protecting' (00:19:05-00:19:17). In another, Attenborough recounts his involvement in the broadcast of the Apollo 8 mission in 1968, tracing the birth of cosmopolitan environmentalism back to photographs like 'Earthrise', on whose vision of 'Our planet, vulnerable and isolated' the camera lingers (00:20:01–00:20:47). Later still, footage of Canadian activists confronting a Russian whaling ship in blood-stained waters is used in support of the claim that while it was whales' mournful songs that first changed people's opinions about the slaughter of these animals, it was only once 'that it was visible, [that] it was no longer acceptable' (00:26:50-00:27:08). That visual technologies have the capacity to *move* us, as Ivakhiv puts it (*Ecologies* 12), toward greater ecological awareness is a widely held belief – or perhaps, hope. Indeed, Bousé notes that members of the wildlife film industry have often cited 'making viewers more concerned with wildlife protection' as the primary raison d'être of the genre (30). But whereas wildlife film has largely failed to make visible the environmental issues surrounding the need for conservation, *A Life* actively advocates for the use of technologies of vision as a pathway toward solving these problems.

Much can be said about the confidence in the ecological capacities of technologies of vision in *A Life*. One concern voiced by Bousé is that the proliferation of images of endangered species and extinction could be counterproductive to conservation, 'perhaps overtime blunting concern among viewers over species extinction' (16). On a similar note, John Drew argues that a commitment to a 'politics of sight' such as that seen in *A Life* could devolve into a negative feedback loop of shock wherein 'the more transparent animal atrocities become, the more the public could become desensitized to their suffering' (255). Yet my interest is in how the film's advocacy for the use of visual technologies as tools for conservation operates in parallel with its centring of human reason and progress seen above. As Plumwood writes, contemporary scientific discourse has tended to update rather than supersede modern rationalist ideas (221). Thus, she continues, the narrative of progress formerly used to rationalize humankind's dominion over nature has itself evolved into a new 'scientific fantasy of mastery' wherein the new human task becomes that of saving nature (221, see also 245). Central to this fantasy, she notes, is, the notion that 'heroic male-coded techno-reason [that] will solve our current problems' (19). These claims resonate with two crucial observations from film studies. First, they recall the field's concern with a particular kind of instrumental vision that, as Laura Marks states, 'uses the thing seen as object for knowledge and control' and is thus 'aligned with mastery' (131). Second, it agrees with Tommy Gustafsson's identification of the 'eco-hero' as a recurrent figure across eco-documentaries (153). Considering these observations, I would argue that in his role as eco-hero in *A Life*, Attenborough's affirmation of technologies of vision and their purported capacity to evince and thus mitigate the threats faced by biodiversity channels the techno-scientific fantasy of mastery that Plumwood describes.

That the documentary subscribes to a view of technology as central to man's dominion over nature becomes evident as the documentary returns to the matter of mass extinction. Again, Attenborough plays a pivotal part here. Following a collage of shots from the 1979 production *Life on Earth* in which Attenborough recounts realizing that 'the process of extinction … was happening right there, around me, to animals with which I was familiar' during the filming of the series (00:24:11-00:24:30), *A Life* proceeds to recontextualize images from his career along the lines of biodiversity loss. Underwater images of vast oceanic shoals

drawn from the 'astonishing vision of a completely unknown world' revealed in *Blue Planet* (1997) are crosscut with those of industrial fishing fleets and markets as Attenborough reveals that humans have 'removed 90% of the large fish in the sea' (00:35:31-00:39:12). Subsequently, the film juxtaposes images of the naturalist interacting with seals and penguins from *Life in the Freezer* (1993) and *Frozen Planet* (2011) to shots of fuming chimney stacks and melting glaciers, relaying the effects of anthropogenic climate change on biodiversity (00:41:50-00:44:20). Indeed, biomorphic figures appeared overpowered by anthropomorphic ones at this point. In an aerial shot, the camera hovers over parcelled farmland, zooming out to reveal the earth-shattering scale of modern agriculture; in another the screen becomes crowded by hens in battery cages, revealing the brutality of industrialized poultry farms. Then at last, the camera lingers on a lone zebra journeying across the desert. If the intention is, as Attenborough states in the voiceover, to demonstrate that 'Our imprint is now truly global' and that '[the] nonhuman world is gone' (00:44:50-00:47:50), then industrial technologies are figured as instrumental to this conquest.

A Life thus seems to oscillate between a mournful recognition of the hand that technological modernity has had on the extirpation of nonhuman life worldwide and the hope that the visualization of this crisis by other (albeit related) technologies may offer a solution to these problems; a contradiction whose root surfaces as Attenborough offers his 'vision for the future'. Having established that the natural world depicted in the films that made his career masked '[a] story of global decline', the naturalist goes on to construct a horrifyingly apocalyptic scenario. He does this by introducing 'a series of one-way doors' presumably based on current scientific models. Initially, these focus on the exacerbation of the extinction crisis. Were things to continue as usual, warns Attenborough, the world could experience a catastrophic wave of species loss by 2030, an accelerated rate of global warming due to thawing permafrost by 2040, and the death of coral reefs around the world brought on by the growing acidification of the oceans by 2050. But as the vision worsens, its focus shifts towards the impact that these changes would have on humankind. Though the images remain fixed on the haunting prospect of a mass extinction, from shots of African wildlife struggling to stay cool in the scorching sun to a burned forest besieged by dust devils, the voiceover speaks of a 'global food production … crisis as soils

become exhausted' by 2080 and of '[m]illions of people … rendered homeless' by 2100 (00:49:24-00:51:53). As Attenborough states in a shot of his speech at Cop24 – Katowice UN Climate Change Conference in 2018, his vision's warning is about 'the collapse of our civilizations', something 'none of us can afford' (00:52:33-00:54:34). In short, *A Life* appears invested in the perpetuation of the form of life engendered by technological modernity and its paradigmatic centring of human reason, progress, and control.

This becomes even clearer in the alternate vision for the future that Attenborough offers in *A Life.* Admittedly, this is not immediately apparent. In contrast with the doomsday scenario that precedes it, this greener vision consists of a collage of steps whose collective goal is to alleviate humankind's impact on the global ecology. First, an exposition of the concept of ecosystems' carrying capacity over images of shorebirds nesting on an island segues into a plea 'to slow, even to stop population growth' accompanied by references to Japan's success in this regard and a list of goals through which this can be done, such as 'working hard to raise people out of poverty' and 'giving access to healthcare'. Later, images of foliage soaking in sunlight provide the backdrop for a brief explanation of photosynthesis that then transitions into an extolment of Morocco's inroads in solar power production and a reminder of the need to phase out fossil fuels and transition to renewables. The stress on consumption continues as the segment turns its attention to the matter of food. Footage of healthy reefs in Palau foregrounding the nation's marine conservation efforts prompt Attenborough to claim that the creation of similar 'no fish' zones over a third of the world's coastal seas would restore the oceans' biodiversity and fisheries. Finally, images of cheetahs remind viewers that 'carnivores are rare in nature', cueing a call 'for us to change our diet' to one that is 'largely plant-based' and thus requires 'only half the land we use at the moment' (00:56:00–01:07:43). To be fair, these proposals are commendable. This is particularly true given the reluctance by both wildlife films and some documentaries to entertain unpopular solutions like population control and plant-based diets (Duvall 240). Yet in addition to the lack of concrete pathways for their implementation on a global scale, a closer inspection of the solutions proposed in *A Life* reveals a resolute commitment to anthropocentrism and technological modernity.

That the green vision for the future in *A Life* remains devoted to the perpetuation of this anthropocentric paradigm is evident from its preface. Here, Attenborough declares that 'We must rewild the world', an imperative that reiterates not only the documentary's understanding of our species as uniquely capable of dictating the ecological direction of the historical world but also its subscription to the modern rationalist fantasy of techno-scientific mastery (00:55:05). Indeed, this fixation on technology also returns in the eco-hero's push to embrace 'low-tech and hi-tech solutions' to food production as well as in his characterization of forests as 'the best technology nature has for locking away carbon'. Far more subtle but just as crucial is the spotlight on how the suggested solutions will enable the indefinite fulfillment of our needs and demands. This is palpable throughout the segment, from its call to 'run our world on the eternal energies of nature' to its sanctioning of marine reserves that 'would be sufficient to provide us with all the fish we will ever need' (00:56:00–01:07:43). In addition to furthering the contradictory notion that more technologies of control are the solution to the mass extinction of biodiversity set off by technological modernity, I would argue that the green vision for the future in *A Life* appears primarily motivated by self-preservation. In short, the imagery and discourse in this segment suggest an *instrumentalist* purview. As Both Hughes and Smaill note, instrumentalism is inherent to the form in the sense that environmental documentaries are both 'means to disseminate knowledge and encourage debate' as well as 'a form of preservation' by way of the production of archival imagery (Hughes 8, Smaill *Regarding Life* 73). My position, rather, is that the problems and solutions presented in relation to the biodiversity crisis in both of *A Life*'s visions for the future reproduce a paradigm wherein 'nature's agency and independence of ends are denied, subsumed in or remade to coincide with human interests' (Plumwood 109).

Plumwood identifies this form of instrumentalism as proper to modern rationalism. Following the split characteristic of modernity, she writes, this is a view wherein 'ethical considerations apply to the human sphere but not to the non-human sphere' (109), thereby 'reduc[ing] nature to raw materials for human projects' (109). Thus, she continues, instrumentalism 'distort[s] our sensitivity to and knowledge of nature, blocking humility, wonder and openness in approaching the more-than-human' (109). To be sure, none of these

observations are readily apparent in *A Life.* Indeed, I do not discount the possibility that the countless shots of sublime natural landscapes, breathtaking ethological sequences, allusions to the earth's evolutionary history, and Attenborough's narrative description of ecological processes in the documentary may awaken a certain appreciation for biodiversity, perhaps even the kind of 'sensitivity to nature's own creativity and agency' that Plumwood considers paramount to countering instrumentalism (113). Still, these are composites of wildlife cinematography, collages that appropriate from wildlife films not only their imagery but also their merely superficial resemblance to the ecologies they represent (Bousé 31). Thus, whether these distorted representations can offer 'a first step toward meaningful action' as producers of both wildlife and eco-documentary films hope is, at best, unknown (Bousé 31). In any case, the imperative to rewild the world and restore its biodiversity in *A Life* remains instrumentalist, a task to be done not because nonhuman lifeforms are worthy of ethical consideration but because, as Attenborough states, they are '[t]he thing we rely upon' (00:54:08). Or as he ultimately confesses, 'it's about saving ourselves' (01:14:00).

What we are left with amounts to what Plumwood calls *enlightened self-interest* (115), the rationalization that 'our insensitivity and injustice towards nature is a prudential hazard *to us*' (115, my emphasis). Though she agrees that prudence alone should lead to a rejection of transgressions against the nonhuman sphere (115), Plumwood opines that this way of addressing the connections between human interests and environmental injustices 'tries to stay within the framework of rational egoism by assuming some kind of purely contingent and temporary convergence between our fully-considered interests and those of the other' (Plumwood 116). Thus, she argues that 'we must still place the recognition of injustice first' (115). As above, the argument could be made that *A Life* adheres to this precept through its recurrent use of images and discourse that foreground the catastrophic effects of anthropogenic industries on biodiversity and the global ecology at large. But by stressing the humanitarian rather than ecological threat that mass extinction poses, Attenborough's green vision for the future tilts *A Life* decidedly in favour of the self toward its conclusion. Thus, the identity of the *self* in *A Life* must not be overlooked. Because even though the recurrent use of 'we' aims to establish Attenborough as the purported mediator between the human and nonhuman realms, his earlier juxtaposition of

'the world [he] knew' to that of the Indigenous tribes of New Guinea betray his references to 'our world' as pertinent to a distinct form of human life. Namely, they confirm that Attenborough's world – 'our world' – is the *Western* world of technological modernity. If *A Life* is in many ways a biopic, I would argue, it is this particular *bios* that it seeks to dramatize and redeem. Herein lies what I argue is the film's most salient contradiction: its belief that it is by rewilding our planet that 'we' will save the same technologically modern world responsible for the instrumentalization and annihilation of wildlife. Or in Heise's words, if biodiversity is 'a measure for what we value about nature as well as, more indirectly, about ourselves' (*Imagining Extinction* 23), then *A Life* narrativizes a view of the matter wherein its value derives primarily from its capacity to sustain the Western supremacist form of human life driving mass extinction.

I will conclude by suggesting that this contradiction informs much of the melancholy, grief, and mourning evoked by popular eco-documentary representations of mass extinction like *A Life*. To do this, I return once last time to Attenborough and his multifaceted role in the film. Recall that in addition to mediating between viewers, history, and ecology, the naturalist lends affective purchase to the film. As seen above, this is primarily done through the strategic use of emotive voiceover that encodes certain moods onto specific sequences, as well as closeups of Attenborough's face that invite viewers to feel as he does. Such is the case when, having recounted the loss of biodiversity over the course of the naturalist's lifetime, *A Life* cuts to a closeup of Attenborough, lingering on the dejected look on his grandfatherly face as he recharacterizes his life's work as 'an illusion' and laments that 'human beings have overrun the world'. While some may question the sincerity or performativity of his emotional outpour, it seems to me that the grief that mass extinction causes Attenborough is palpable. Yet my concern is with the work of empathy here. Emotions are slippery, as Sara Ahmed writes (2014), and 'words of feeling and objects of feeling, circulate and generate effects' (14), 'becoming stuck only temporarily, in the very attachment of a sign to a body' as they 'slide across signs and between bodies' (64). And it seems to me that the effect of sequences such as the one at hand is not the 'slip' or circulation of the grief for the loss of biodiversity that Attenborough feels onto the audience that *A Life* seeks; rather, the grief 'sticks' or attaches to the naturalist, moving viewers to mourn not the loss of the natural world, but a patriarchal emblem of Western

rationalism whose aging face betrays our inability to forestall the impending death of 'our world', that of technological modernity. Contrary to what Attenborough claims in the documentary, then, it is the problem rather than the solution that 'has been staring us in the face this entire time' (00:54:41).

Oddly enough, the contradictory effect spurred by this affective slip may offer a pathway to recuperate *A Life,* and popular cinema depictions of biodiversity and extinction. Considering the popularity of this intersection – from the millions of people around the world that continue to enjoy natural history programming featuring Attenborough (Zemanek 140); to the surging popularity of the eco-documentary genre as attested by their proliferation in streaming services as well as the numerous festivals dedicated to this genre; and the cosmopolitan origin of the audiences that gather at screenings of such films the world over such as the one that met that fateful night in The Hague – figuring a reparative framework through which to study cinema representations of the mass extinction currently unfolding on our planet is a task of foremost relevance. Humanities scholars concerned with the detrimental ecological effects of the civilization in which our Western institutions operate simply cannot – must not – ignore cultural texts with such influence on public understandings of more-than-human worlds. What an excavation of the contradictory figuration of technological modernity at the heart of films like *A Life* unearths, then, is a reconceptualization, or perhaps a reminder, of what it means to watch such works.

Meghan Sutherland recalls that for most of its etymological history 'to watch' referred primarily 'to the wakefulness of religious rituals' (52). Indeed, Michael Renov has explored the possibility that documentary depictions of annihilation, such as those concerned with the Shoah, may operate as a ritual for the work of cultural mourning. Drawing from Lacan's observations on the ritual value of mourning as the fulfillment of an obligation to what he calls the memory of the dead, Renov advocates for the ritual value of the documentary genre as a work of mourning, one with the potential to create 'therapeutic communities, joined by bereavement, loss, and the need for healing' (129). Yet as Susan Hayward reminds us, rituals are not only cathartic but also 'about the fear of loss of control, of mastery' (450). What this suggests, indeed, what I have been suggesting, is that attention to the contradictions at work in *A Life* and similar eco-documentaries reveal these as sites of mourning, not for biodiversity (at least not entirely), but

for the Western world of technological modernity whose instrumentalist control and extirpation of nonhuman Others has pushed its own existence to the edge. This ritualistic outlook, in turn, unveils our consumption of these films as having little to do 'with actually seeing something bad or good, pleasurable or unpleasurable' (Sutherland 53); instead, it emerges as an inclination to wakefully witness the death of the dream of Western technological modernity and its anthropocentric instrumentalization of the 'endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful' whose lives and pleas we must yet learn to truly see (Darwin 864).

Notes

[1] Heise glosses over Scott Croker's *Ghost Bird* (2009) and Orlando von Einsiedel's *Virunga* (2014), both of which may be considered popular works of eco-documentary. And while she devotes considerable attention to *Qapirangajuq: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change* (2010) by Zacharias Kunuk and Ian Mauro in her project's coda, this title received a limited release and audience.

[2] Hereafter *A Life*, for short.

[3] Other titles include films like *The Sixth Extinction* (Jose Ramon Da Cruz, 2003), *The Next Great Extinction Event* (Andrew Thomson, 2018), and, naturally, *Racing Extinction* (Louie Psihoyos, 2015).

[4] For comparison, *Racing Extinction* has a respective 82% and 83% critic and audience scores on Rotten Tomatoes, an 8.2/10 score based on just over 8,100 user votes on IMDb, and an 81/100 score on Metacritic. This suggests that while critics may consider Psihoyos's film to be a more accomplished work of cinema, *A Life on Our Planet* has probably been seen by a larger audience or, at the very least, elicited greater audience engagement.

[5] As Weik von Mossner writes, the terms *affect* and *emotion* are often used interchangeably and convey different meanings to different critics. In this paper, *affect* refers to the capacity of cultural texts like documentary to evoke emotional responses from viewers. Thus, *emotion* refers to the reactions that a film evokes.

[6] Chakrabarty, for example, explores the tension between lingering doubts over whether the idea of species serves 'to hide the reality of capitalist production and the logic of the imperial' even as it serves as a useful concept to describe our geological impact on the world (216, 221).

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