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Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century by Helen Hughes

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Green Films, Grey Argument

Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century by HELEN HUGHES

Intellect, U of Chicago P, 2014 \$36.00

Reviewed by **DAVID M. LAWRENCE**

By the time I started wrestling with what to write in this review of Helen Hughes' *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century*, I found myself with a problem. This book—to steal a play from Walter Brennan in the John Sturges' film *Bad Day at Black Rock*—left me consumed by ambivalence. *Green Documentary* does not move me much in any direction, neither negative nor positive.

Hughes writes that the goal of the book is “to give sustained critical attention to such award-winning and critically acclaimed cinema documentaries on environmental themes made in the first decade of the twenty-first century” (4).

Part of my problem—or absence of passion—about this book may stem from Hughes' stated understanding of environmental documentary, “not as a means to disseminate knowledge but as a response in itself to the ideas, beliefs and emotions that emerge in the process of audio-visual research into the environment” (5).

In my professional life as a scientist, writer, and photographer, my primary concern has been with how effectively I can “disseminate knowledge” through my work. Most of my colleagues in these fields are likewise more concerned with dissemination as well.

Still, I might have felt more engaged with Hughes' book had I a better

understanding of why she chose the filmmaker's (and film-viewer's) response as a means of organizing her discussion.

Hughes book—which is just 175 pages long—is divided into six chapters. The first two are the introduction and a chapter discussing the institutional context for twenty-first century environmental documentaries. The remaining four chapters are divided into: 1) the contemplative response, 2) the ironic response, 3) the argumentative response, and 4) the material response.

Despite several readings of the introduction, I still came away without a clear understanding of why those four categories were chosen, of how they were chosen, or even of what they are supposed to mean. While I can kind of *grok* the meanings from the context of Hughes' discussion, a clear statement of what those categories are and why they were selected (i.e., a bit of unambiguous knowledge dissemination) would have been greatly appreciated.

Hughes does try to justify using response as a means of organizing her discussion in the chapter on institutional context:

Part and parcel of understanding environmental documentaries as a body of films and as responses to environmental questions involves an analysis of their integration into the broader context of discursive activity. As reactions to ideas and events, documentaries themselves are designed to become interventions in ongoing and growing debates rather than definitive responses to specific questions. In this sense, each documentary is an incomplete

artefact, like a single utterance in the flow of dialogue, seeking to steer or frame rather than wrap up the issues. . . .

. . . From the outset the 'eco-doc' becomes defined as a fluid form that attempts to fit into a social space at the same time as it aims to change it. (23)

Her argument for using response as an organizing principle does make sense. I just wish I came away with a better understanding of the nature of the spaces she chose to organize her own discussion.

Hughes highlights specific films to frame her discussions. For the introduction, the primary film is *Into Eternity: A Film for the Future*; for the institutional context chapter, it is *Earth Days*; for the contemplative response chapter, it is *Manufactured Landscapes*; for the ironic response chapter, it is *Everything's Cool*; for the argumentative response chapter, it is *Gasland*; and for the material response chapter, it is *The Gleaners and I*. Each chapter, of course, discusses a number of other films that highlight key themes. While I was somewhat adrift with respect to my understanding of the rationale for the organization of Hughes' book, I appreciated her choice of films given the narrow time window she chose. Even though I might not have completely followed her arguments, I found her discussions of individual films stirred my interest in seeing them myself.

For example, Hughes discusses how Raymond Depardon, in his film *La Vie Moderne*, juxtaposes interviews with members of an agricultural community struggling with tensions between a centuries-old way of life and the demands of modern economies. She writes:

The film as a whole can thus be read as the gradual opening up of the community to outside influence, to wider debates about the role of the farmer and creative thinking about transferring farming from one generation to the next while respecting history. Its interview strategy is a mirror of traditional respect for the elder, and yet while it rigorously maintains its appreciation for the achievements of the older generation, it does not shy away from demonstrating the need for an educated, articulate and open-minded farming community, namely a modern one. (72)

It is this aspect of *Green Documentary*—the discussions of specific films—that I am enthusiastic about. Hughes, through those discussions, greatly expanded my bucket list of documentaries to watch. I only wish I had found in the book a more comprehensible framework upon which to build my understanding of environmental documentaries and a better guide to what I could do to become a more effective environmental communicator.

DAVID M. LAWRENCE is a journalist, scientist, and professional scuba diver who would love to learn how to flawlessly white balance his cameras when shooting underwater. His first book, *Upheaval from the Abyss: Ocean Floor Mapping and the Earth Science Revolution*, was published by Rutgers University Press. He is currently working on his doctoral dissertation—an eco-literary work focused on ocean conservation—in the Media, Art, & Text program at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, USA.