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Conspiratorial Storytelling and Environmental Crisis

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ABSTRACT

What happens when the narrative of conspiracy theory is used to represent the ecological crisis? Among climate scientists, conspiracy theories are often considered harmful, because they spread doubt about the global scientific consensus on climate change. In recent years, however, the rhetoric of conspiracy theory has become increasingly common among environmental filmmakers who use its narrative conventions to tell stories about complex environmental issues. This article explores this trend by analysing the Netflix documentary, *Seaspiracy* (2021), which portrays the oceanic crisis as the result of global corruption. The article demonstrates how the film's high narrative velocity, its negotiation of individual agency, and its construction of 'hierarchies of scale' create an ambiguous depiction that is both overwhelming and reductive, yet also highly engaging and, potentially, empowering. Reflecting on this ambiguity, the article argues that this emergent subgenre provides insights into our shifting relations with the ecological crisis and its representational challenges.

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Introduction

When Donald Trump, as part of his 2015 US presidential election campaign, expressed his scepticism about global warming by claiming that it was a hoax invented by the Chinese, he provided an example of why climate scientists across the world tend to perceive conspiracy theorists with apprehension. In part, this is because conspiracy theories about climate change are usually considered anathema to the implementation of environmental policy, as they manufacture doubt about the science that such policies are built upon. Consequently, the journey of conspiracy theory from the fringes of society into the political mainstream is an event that has been lamented by environmental scientists and political commentators alike. With its popularisation of anti-intellectualism and political extremism,

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conspiracy theory is today often regarded – both in academic literature and public opinion – as an anti-democratic, if not harmful, aspect of contemporary culture (Gentleman 2023).

And yet, in recent years, the discourse of conspiracy theory has been undergoing a rearticulation within the environmental movement. This shift has been particularly noticeable within the last decade of environmental documentary, where filmmakers have begun to draw upon the tropes of conspiracy theory to tell engaging stories about complex environmental issues, as seen, for instance, in documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The Cove* (2009), *Gasland* (2010), *Greedy Lying Bastards* (2012), *Cowspiracy* (2014), *Merchants of Doubt* (2014), *Racing Extinction* (2015), *What the Health* (2017), *Seaspiracy* (2021), *Milked* (2021), and most recently *Christspiracy* (2024). What unifies this body of environmental documentaries is the tendency to portray the ecological crisis as the result of malicious conspiracies, whose perpetrators deliberately sacrifice the health of the planet in order to attain selfish – and often financial – gain. Whether they address global warming (Davis Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)), the meat industry (Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn's *Cowspiracy* (2014)), the fishing industry (Ali Tabrizi's *Seaspiracy* (2021) or Louie Psihoyos' *The Cove* (2009)), the dairy industry (Amy Taylor's *Milked* (2021)), fracking (Josh Fox's *Gasland* (2010)), the medicine industry (Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn's *What the Health* (2017)), religion (Kip Andersen and Kameron Waters' *Christspiracy* (2024)), or even the disinformation industry itself (Robert Kenner's *Merchants of Doubt* (2014) or Craig Rosebraugh's *Greedy Lying Bastards* (2012)), these films exemplify how conspiracist thinking and conspiracist narratives have gained foothold within the environmental movement. Considering this growing popularity, this article asks: Why has conspiracy theory – a highly stigmatised trope – become such a compelling representational strategy within contemporary environmental media? What narrative devices and visual strategies do such films use to appeal to their audiences? And what are the implications of this narrative form for our perception of ecological issues?

This article explores such questions by analysing the popular Netflix documentary *Seaspiracy*, which portrays the global fishing industry as fraught with criminal activities and corruption. Since its release in 2021, the film, which is directed by the British activist filmmaker Ali Tabrizi, has been the subject of debate amongst environmental activists and marine protection organisations, most notably due to its stark portrayal of the oceanic crisis and its critique of marine conservation organisations (Berretta and Bryson 2021). However, the film did more than just stir controversy. It also succeeded in attracting a relatively large audience, as evidenced by the film becoming one of Netflix' Top 10 most watched programmes soon after its release (McVeigh 2021). In what follows, we present a detailed analysis of the film's rhetorical strategies and visual tactics, which we claim offer a prototypical example of *the conspiratorial environmental documentary* – a seemingly powerful subgenre that remains understudied by environmental critics. Situating this genre in relation to recent writings on the oceanic crisis, we argue that the use of conspiracist narratives can be understood as an attempt to overcome some of the representational challenges posed by the Anthropocene, as an era characterised by increasing complexity and ecological devastation.

Representing the oceanic crisis

Ecocritics often discuss the environmental crisis as a crisis of representation (Clark 2015; Delbecke 2022; Morton 2013; Nixon 2011). What is usually meant by this notion is that the sheer scale and complexity of the crisis is so vast and intertwined that it tends to escape human understanding. In this context, Timothy Morton's much-debated concept of 'the hyperobject' offers one attempt at describing this condition (2013). According to Morton, individual events, such as the loss of marine biodiversity, can never fully encapsulate the ecological crisis, but rather serve as indices for much larger, intricate assemblages. Theorising such assemblages as objects that fundamentally defy our comprehension, what Morton's onto-epistemological concept highlights is the fact that 'there is no outside, no meta-language' through which we can see and understand the ecological crisis in absolute transparency (2013, 5). As a result, Morton considers any totalising attempt to explain – or even represent – the environmental crisis in its entirety as increasingly difficult, given the limitations of our restricted and situated perspectives. Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence' does related work, defined as 'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2011, 2). This concept calls attention to events such as radioactive fallout, plastic pollution, and overfishing, which take place over several years, if not even decades or centuries. As a result, this ephemeral nature makes it difficult – if not impossible – to pinpoint the parties responsible for the occurrence of such events. Thus, for both Morton and Nixon, the environmental crisis is characterised by a fundamental epistemological uncertainty that inhibits the work of representation – whether literary, visual, or otherwise – in giving form to its devastating realities.

Looking to the devastation of marine ecosystems, this uncertainty is amplified even further. In part, this is because the oceanic crisis – used in this article as an umbrella term for ocean acidification, the loss of marine biodiversity, global eutrophication, the dying of the coral reefs, and the proliferation of marine debris – takes place in spaces that remain physically inaccessible for most people. In *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* (2021), Sidney Dobrin describes this condition as a 'terrestrial bias' which refers to our predisposition to focus on land-based ecosystems or organisms, thereby overshadowing aquatic beings and environments. She writes:

> We can see the terror of human inscription on the terrestrial, the land cut and burned in harvest, deforestation, mining, erosion, canalizing, wounded, and scarred by anthropocentric incursions. However, ocean's fluidity hides its many wounds, the blues and blacks of a bruise not always visible in the dissipating aquatic flow. (Dobrin 2021, 201)

Ultimately, this bias presents a formidable challenge to our representational practices: How to convey the devastation of environments that are so disconnected from the lives of ordinary citizens around the world?

The turn to conspiracy, we suggest, can be understood as a representational strategy to overcome exactly these kinds of barriers. Here, we draw on conspiracy

scholar Mark Fenster's definition of conspiracy theory as referring to 'the conviction that a secret, omnipotent individual or group covertly controls the political and social order or some part thereof' (2008, 1). Conspiracy theories rest on the contention that nothing is like it seems, that no one can be trusted, and that we must connect the dots if we wish to unearth the hidden truth(s) about Western society, its uneven distribution of power, (in)justice, privilege, and so on. In this sense, conspiracy theory is inherently productive, because it offers a counternarrative to the fragile epistemic condition of postmodernity, suggesting instead that a totalising theory can be used to explain social reality: 'By questioning collective conventions of reality, conspiracy theories provide coherent explanatory models in the same breath, transforming the disturbing crisis of perception into a solid order' (Amlinger 2022, 182). *Seaspiracy* shows precisely this dynamic at work: By asserting that a global conspiracy is responsible for the devastation of marine ecologies, the film provides a seemingly plausible explanation for the otherwise bewildering processes that drive the destruction of the marine environment. In what follows, we explore this representational strategy and its attempt to regulate the disorientation and despair commonly associated with the environmental crisis.

Conspiracy theory and its discontents

One of the most widely held views within scholarship about conspiracy theory is the contention that conspiracy theories offer misleading, simplistic, or false statements about reality (see Hofstadter 1966; Popper 1963). Their existence, consequently, is often explained as a pathological form of paranoia that attracts people in search of 'an epistemological quick-fix' that can explain the problems that plague their lives (Knight 2000, 8). Accordingly, the approach taken in many academic engagements to conspiracy theories has been to debunk their erroneous, often dangerous, claims. In recent years, this approach has been especially prominent in work reviewing conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic (Romer and Jamieson 2020) and the US presidential election in 2020 (Albertson and Guiler 2020). Within literary criticism and cultural studies, one of the most frequently cited examples is Fredric Jameson's critical description of conspiracy theory as 'the poor person's cognitive mapping' (Jameson 1990, 356), defined as 'a degraded attempt [. . .] to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system' (Jameson 1991, 37). In such accounts, conspiracy theories are presented as the result of a perceptual conflation: What is mistaken for a conspiracy is in fact the global capitalist system itself and its negative social and environmental effects (Hristov 2021, 10). However, this approach also has several shortcomings (De Wildt and Aupers 2023; Fenster 2008; Knight 2000). One issue, for instance, is that the critics of conspiracy theory often mirror the very thing they are trying to critique by simply replacing one grand theory (conspiracy) with another (be it capitalism, neoliberalism, modernity, industrialisation, and so on). Consequently, what the critics of the critics of conspiracy theory often point out is that the tendency to dismiss conspiracy theory because of its reference to powerful hidden structures is itself not that different from the forms of critique that are practiced in much contemporary humanities and social science research (Latour 2004, 229–230).

In this article, we adopt a less sceptical, more affirmative approach. Instead of approaching conspiracy theories with suspicion, we follow Fenster's assertion that conspiracy theories – rather than being a threat to democratic institutions – constitute an integral, if not necessary, aspect of democratic society (2008, 11). From this perspective, conspiracy theories' rejection of the existing political order can be seen to intersect with the interests of other socio-political movements such as the environmental movement, which – much like conspiracy theory – is characterised by a dissatisfaction with the political establishment and its failure to take adequate action in response to ecological issues. Inevitably, this critical attitude has found expression among activist filmmakers, whose documentaries have offered an alternative to the commercial news media and its lack of critical, in-depth engagements with environmental topics. Especially in the past two decades, the number of documentaries about environmental issues has increased drastically, and with several award-winning films such as *Chasing Ice* (2012) and *Before the Flood* (2016), the genre is gaining popularity. It is within this corpus of films that we wish to conceptualise the *conspiratorial environmental documentary* as a rapidly growing subgenre. Yet despite this growing prominence, environmental critics have paid little attention to this trend – Helen Hughes *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the Twenty-first Century* (2014), Rayson Alex and Susan Deborah *Ecodocumentaries: Critical Essays* (2016), and John Duvall *The Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century* (2017) do not address the theme of conspiracy, nor do any of the individual publications that analyse documentaries exhibiting conspiracist features, as outlined in detail below (Walker 2013; Weik Von Mossner 2020; Weik von Mossner 2021a, 2021b). Indeed, even recent scholarly work that specifically analyses *Seaspiracy* also overlooks the conspiracy theme, describing the documentary merely as 'dramatic' and 'controversial' (Novitasari and Rohmah 2023) or by concentrating exclusively on its anti-poaching message (Rooney 2022). In the following, we therefore wish to advance this body of work by offering an in-depth examination of the growing use of conspiracist tropes which remain understudied in contemporary ecocritical scholarship.

At this juncture, we also wish to call attention to the fact that the turn to conspiracist storytelling has been particularly salient in films with a vegan agenda, such as *Cowspiracy* (2014), *What the Health* (2017), *Seaspiracy* (2021), *Milked* (2021), and most recently, *Christspiracy* (2024). Exploring different types of animal agriculture, these films challenge the dominant ideology of carnism, which rests on the belief that meat consumption is 'a given, the "natural" thing to do, the way things have always been and the way things will always be' (Joy 2010, 29). Writing specifically about the genre of vegan advocacy films, Weik von Mossner argues that this subgenre tends to follow a fairly predictable set of content characteristics. These include: (1) A focus on animal rights issues, (2) an emphasis on the health benefits of switching to a plant-based diet, (3) portrayals of people's individual transformations from omnivore to vegetarian/vegan, (4) a shift away from the conventional association of veganism with whiteness and femininity, (5) a focus on the connections between veganism and various environmental issues such as climate change, and finally (6) a tendency to show visions of the future in which the ideology of carnism is no longer hegemonic (Weik von Mossner 2021b). Though Weik von Mossner does

not discuss *Seaspiracy*, it is striking how methodically the film appears to follows this template: It ties overfishing to issues of global climate change and animal rights, it portrays a male filmmaker's journey of discovery, emphasising, along the way, the varied health benefits of cutting out fish from one's diet, only to finally culminate in a series of hopeful stories about plant-based alternatives. Entirely missing from this account, however, is the use of the conspiracy narrative, which, on the one hand, appears so conspicuously present in the style, jargon, and especially the titles of these films, while, on the other, appears to have received less attention from environmental critics working on the topic.

By contrast, in the field of conspiracy theory scholarship, the narrative conventions of conspiracies have been explored in depth (Butter 2020; Fenster 2008; Knight 2000). In this field, the classic conspiracy narrative typically has three main parts: (1) a fast-paced story, (2) a lone detective character, and (3) an absence of resolution. These elements are, in varying degrees, also present in *Seaspiracy*, and they influence the film's rhetorical appeal in profound ways. In what follows, we employ an econarratological perspective (James and Morel 2020) to explore what happens when this formulaic narrative template gets transformed by the conventions of the environmental documentary genre and, in particular, the expository and participatory modes (Nichols 2010) that vegan advocacy films like *Seaspiracy* tend to follow. Our emphasis here is on the potential experiences that this form of storytelling invites viewers to undergo and the changes the film seeks to inspire by doing so. While more empirical reception studies are necessary to unfold actual viewer experiences, our aim is to deepen our understanding this emerging eco-genre through an in-depth analysis of its unique aesthetic strategies.

Hierarchies of scale: velocity and coherence

It is commonly known that stories about conspiracies can be confusing, overwhelming, and bewildering. Their narrative trajectories tend to move at 'a disconcerting, often incoherent pace, disrupting conventional notions of both time and space through their rapid movement' (Fenster 2008, 132). Doing so, conspiracy narratives present a 'spiralling and dazzling flow of information about a global array of people, institutions, and events' (121). At first glance, *Seaspiracy* appears to be no exception to this. Its frequent shifts between locations, interviews segments, and topics of consideration have been described by reviewers as muddled and confounding (Silberg 2021) and its fast-paced narrative has been critiqued for unloading 'information at a pace too fast to fully grasp, let alone critically evaluate' (Allen 2021). Commenting on the film's high velocity, one reviewer even concluded that '[the film] covers a lots [sic] of issues that really warrant a 90-minute film each but are instead blurred together at 100 miles an hour in an incoherent way' (Williams 2021). By contrast, we suggest that the film's high-velocity narrative is in fact anything but incohesive. Because when examining the film's narrative organisation, one finds a relatively predictable structure that orders the film's segments in terms of the relative importance of the issues they cover. By beginning with issues that are presented as minor only to then move on to more significant

concerns, the film's narrative can be seen to rely on a *hierarchy of scale* that Tabrizi, as the film's protagonist, gradually ascends on his path to exposing the conspiracy's truth.

Starting out with the issue of land-sourced plastic pollution, the first six minutes of the film shows Tabrizi in the guise of an everyday environmentalist, driven by a passion to save the ocean.[1] Here, a series of handheld camera shots filmed by Tabrizi shows him attending beach clean-ups and signing petitions to ban single use plastics. This initial segment, however, is soon replaced by another segment on whaling, which is introduced in the wake of Tabrizi's realisation that 'no matter what beach I went to or how much I collected, there was always more plastic and more animals washing up' (Tabrizi 2021, 00:06:07-00:06:14). The film thus motivates its transition from segment to segment by establishing a sense that there is something more to be discovered, something worse out there that needs to be addressed: 'I knew that dolphins and whales were dying accidentally from plastic', Tabrizi explains in voice-over while images of dead sea animals are shown on the screen, 'but I never dreamed that they'd be targeted on purpose by an industry that I thought only existed in the history books' (Tabrizi 2021, 00:06:44-00:06:53). Changing location to Japan, Tabrizi then sets out to document the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, which is presented as far more deadly to marine life than land-sourced plastic pollution. Yet this segment, too, is soon replaced by another story about how it is in fact the Japanese tuna fishing industry that is responsible for the dolphin slaughter, as overfishing has resulted in the decline of local fish stocks, which, in turn, has led local fishermen to form the erroneous belief that they are being outcompeted by the dolphin population. Thus, another shift in topic, location, and *scale* takes place, as Tabrizi follows the trail of the tuna fishing industry from the small cove in Taiji to the vast fishing ports of Japan, where he learns that overfishing is responsible for driving species such as the bluefin tuna into extinction.

Through these motivated transitions, we see how the notion of scale operates as the organising principle of the film's narrative, with land-sourced plastic pollution made to seem trivial in comparison with the practice of dolphin slaughter, which again is shown to be nothing but a local symptom of overfishing. Thus, the film's rapid movements across geophysical space can be seen to 'make possible the integration of the multiplicity of events in the story into a single scheme as well as the totalisation of that scheme, i.e. its use as a global coordinate system' (Hristov 2021, 6–7). In other words, the hierarchy of scale that the film constructs through its organised segments here functions as the film's primary way of establishing narrative cohesion, enabling the mapping of otherwise bewildering and overwhelming issues into a consistent system. Doing so, viewers are encouraged to align themselves with Tabrizi, as he consistently attempts to 'zoom out', inviting the audience to take notice of the bigger picture – a totalising system or Mortonian hyperobject – through which one might explain the crisis. In this way, we here note one of the first ways in which the film's organisation makes use of the conspiracy story to make the otherwise incomprehensible crisis relatable, as viewers follow Tabrizi's movements across the world (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Ali chasing the conspiracy across the globe, incl. Hong Kong (top-left), Scotland (top-right), Brussels (bottom-left), in transit connecting the dots (bottom-right), *Seaspiracy* (2021). Reproduced with permission of the filmmakers.

Eventually, the film transitions into its segment on the impact of commercial fishing globally. This segment is introduced as the logical culmination of the film's emphasis on scale, as Tabrizi soon discovers that the environmental impact of the individual industries of whaling, tuna fishing, and shark finning pale in comparison with that of fisheries on a global scale. Tabrizi then learns about the devastating effects of trawling techniques, discarded fishing nets, and the devastating amount of by-catch produced annually by fisheries, including those labelled 'sustainable'. Shocked by this discovery, he directs his attention to the organisations working with sustainability certification such as the Marine Stewardship Council in search for answers as to how this destructive industry is allowed to exist. However, when the organisation rejects his offer for an interview, it appears highly suspicious, suggesting, again, a deeper conspiracy at play.

Faced with this rejection, Tabrizi then seeks out the Plastic Pollution Coalition, which is an NGO that combats plastic pollution. This leads to a series of scenes reminiscent of those in *Cowspiracy* where Kip Andersen similarly confronts environmental groups about their reluctance to address meat consumption. Filmed in medium close-up, this sequence shows Dianna Cohen, director of the *Plastic Pollution Coalition*, in a room filled with plastic artwork. As she nervously listens to Tabrizi's questions about the prospect of reducing or eliminating fish consumption, she eventually asks him to turn off the camera, at which point the screen goes dark and we hear Cohen tell Tabrizi to steer off that topic. At this point, it seems likely that some viewers might start questioning Tabrizi's methods, as he records Cohen's voice without her knowing consent. The effect, however, is also that viewers are invited to listen in on what appears to a confidential conversation, thereby making them feel that they partake in uncovering the conspiracy, which is further enabled by the shaky handheld camera and the hidden microphone. Doing so, the scene exemplifies the film's strategic use of cinematography and sound as a way to frame mainstream

environmentalist organisations and their fear of contact with questions of meat consumption and production.

From the perspective of critical animal studies, what this scene demonstrates is how deeply 'meat culture' (Potts 2016) influences even those who see themselves as environmentalists. In *Seaspiracy*, however, this cultural critique takes on the form of a vegan conspiracism that is suspicious of anyone who does not share its vegan tenets, meaning that organisations such as the *Plastic Pollution Coalition*, when situated within this narrative frame, come across not merely as irrational, misguided, or naïve, but as symptoms of the conspiracy itself. Consequently, the conspiracy is made to seem like it is truly everywhere, influencing even those who were thought to be allies in the fight against evil. While such conjectures might be met with scepticism among the parts of the audience opposing this narrative frame, it is worth noting how this epistemological uncertainty also works as a way to build suspense, as it keeps viewers guessing who is to be held accountable: Is it the environmental NGOs and their focus on plastic pollution that constitutes a secret plot to distract well-intending citizens from the environmental impact of fishing? Is it the organisations responsible for certifying sustainable fisheries who are engaged in malevolent profit making schemes to deceive consumers? Or is it the commercial fisheries whose romanticised self-representation of modern fishing practices constitutes a marketing trick to conceal the detrimental effects of technologies such as trawling? As we demonstrate below, these questions prepare the viewer for the moment of illumination that occurs when Tabrizi confronts the *Earth Island Institute*, which the film places at the centre of a profit-motivated greenwashing conspiracy.

Exposing the ziggurat of power: narrative pivots and agency

The second feature of *Seaspiracy* that we wish to examine is the use of so-called 'narrative pivots' (Fenster 2008, 124), which refer to the crucial moments in conspiracy narratives where the story changes because the protagonist discovers a critical piece of evidence. Doing so, 'the conspiracy narrative foregrounds the cognitive act of interpretation as performed by both protagonist and audience and suggests that the protagonist is able to reestablish his agency – which, like that of everyone else, has been lost to the conspiracy – through cognition' (126). This transition, we claim, constitutes a key element of the appeal that conspiracy narratives offer to the genre of environmental documentary, as it provides the ideal backdrop for the call to action typical of such films.

In *Seaspiracy*, this narrative pivot occurs about one-third of the way into the film, when Tabrizi interviews Mark J. Palmer, Associate Director of *Earth Island Institute*, about their 'Dolphin Safe Tuna' label. Here, Tabrizi learns that Palmer's organisation cannot guarantee that bycatch does not occur at the fisheries they certify as dolphin-free. As Palmer explains: 'Once you're out there in the ocean, how do you know what they're doing?' (Tabrizi 2021, 00:25:53-00:25:58). In this context, we can observe how the notion of terrestrial bias also influences the concrete work of organisations that regulate companies operating in this inaccessible environment. However, in the film, this challenge is not interpreted in such terms. Instead, the terrestrial bias simply adds fuel to the conspiracist narrative by making the ocean seem like a place of hidden schemes, thereby interpreting Palmer's predicament as evidence of his corruption. This interpretation is further

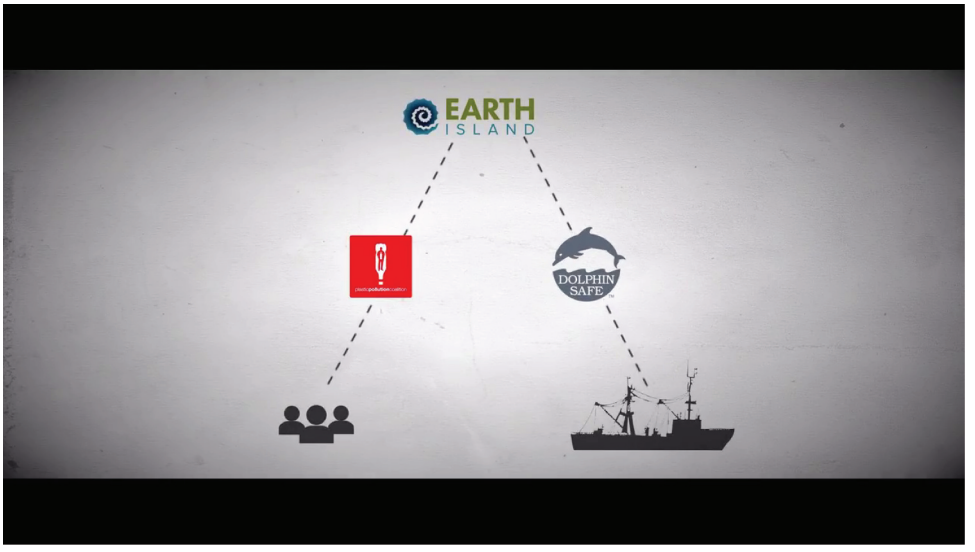

Figure 2. The ziggurat visual in *Seaspiracy* (2021). Reproduced with permission of the filmmakers.

accomplished through the effective use of editing, as the film cuts to another interview with marine conservationist, Ric O'Barry, whose testimony aids the film's conspiracist frame. 'There is nobody out there witnessing whether they kill dolphins or not', O'Barry explains, 'So how do you know it's dolphin safe? Especially when they are paying you to licence your dolphin safe (Tabrizi 2021, 00:26:09-00:26:19). 'I think it is a conflict of interest', he continues, 'I also think it is fraud' (Tabrizi 2021, 00:27:16-00:27:20). Through such juxtapositions, Palmer's transparency is turned into wilful ignorance, inviting the audience to question his motives.

At this point, Tabrizi decides that his only option is 'to follow the money'. This effort is presented through a series of medium close-ups showing Tabrizi browsing through the websites of the organisations he has interviewed. He then discovers that the *Plastic Pollution Coalition* is a project of the *Earth Island Institute*, which provides the final piece of the puzzle placing the actors into the same organisation – a conjecture that the film portrays using a ziggurat-shaped diagram (cf. Figure 2).

The ziggurat figure, according to Stephen Joyce, is

> A useful if imprecise visual metaphor for how conspiracy theories categorise the forces of good and evil. It is imprecise because the exact ordering of the lower tiers can never be determined, but it does focus attention on identifying those at the apex of their respective ziggurats who have full knowledge of the conspiracy. (Joyce 2021, 133)

This hierarchy, Joyce observes, puts an end to the 'postmodern nightmare' of the conspiracy theory, where the signs only lead 'to more signs and never to the final referent' (133). Thus, the display of this diagram marks the narrative pivot and reveals the film's newfound truth: The environmental groups that were supposed to protect the marine environment have sold out to the commercial interest of the fishing industry and thereby failed to live up to the responsibility entrusted in them. Consequently, because sustainable seafood brands can longer be trusted, the film suggests, the only recourse for

consumers seeking to minimise their impact on the ocean is to refrain from eating fish altogether.

Ultimately, this realisation shifts the emotional dynamics of the narrative, which, in turn, becomes the film's primary method of inspiring viewers to change. Tabrizi, now able to see through the false promises of the environmental NGOs, no longer feels confused and helpless. Instead, he is empowered and enthusiastic about putting his new knowledge into practice, at which point the film concludes with a call for viewers to join Tabrizi's boycott of seafood products and to make the switch to a plant-based diet. In this regard, the film utilises the trope identified by Weik von Mossner, common in vegan advocacy films, where depictions of personal transformations aim to evoke powerful emotions and motivate the audience to take similar actions (Weik von Mossner 2021b, 312–313). Interestingly, this call to action also represents one of the crucial ways in which *Seaspiracy* deviates from Fenster's account of conspiracy theory. Describing the political potential of conspiracy theories, Fenster argues:

> Conspiracy theory ultimately fails as a universal theory of power and comprehensive approach to historical and political research, however, because it not only fails to inform us how to move from the end of the uncovered plot to the beginning of a political movement, it is also unable to locate a position at which we can begin to organize and respect people in the complex, diverse world that it simplifies. (289)

By contrast, *Seaspiracy* offers a compelling model for translating awareness into tangible action, as it urges the audience to participate by joining the movement. This involvement is further facilitated through the film's website, which functions as a paratextual support for the film's activist message. Here, visitors can sign up for a newsletter, access resources like vegan meal planners, and participate in signing petitions for no-catch marine reserves. Taken together, the film and the website thus provide a very concrete path from revelation to activism. Ultimately, this departure from Fenster's notion of a 'lack of closure' (2008, 121) underscores the fact that even though *Seaspiracy* never fully exposes the conspiracy in its entirety (as even the above-mentioned ziggurat visual has its limitations), the film nevertheless succeeds in conveying a clear and actionable agenda that viewers can follow.

The conspiratorial environmental documentary

We started this article by asking why environmental documentarians have begun to draw upon the narrative conventions of conspiracy theory. As we have demonstrated, the affordance of this genre lies, at least in part, in its capacity to represent otherwise complex environmental problems in a register that is easily understandable, highly compelling and, potentially, empowering. In *Seaspiracy*, this potential is clearly expressed in the film's persuasive message about the destruction of oceans and the seemingly corrupt organisations who appear to be wilfully turning their blind eyes to this destruction. We have also called attention to the significant position that this type of film has come to occupy within the broader infrastructure of contemporary environmental media, and especially in the context of vegan advocacy. Indeed, as Potts asserts in her reflections on this rapidly moving field: 'Raised awareness of, curiosity about, and commitment to vegetarianism or

veganism is no doubt facilitated by the increasing presence in popular culture of realistic and sympathetic veg*n characters in television shows and movies' (2016, 21). Films like *Seaspiracy* are examples of this, and their influence, we suggest, may even extend beyond the confines of the vegan movement, not least given their proven track record of attracting a mainstream audience.

However, like any other genre, the conspiratorial environmental documentary is not without its flaws. Accordingly, we wish to conclude this article by addressing some of the potential objections that our affirmative reading of *Seaspiracy* might raise. Above, we challenged the view that conspiracy theory is nothing but a flawed explanation for the negative effects of capitalism. However, the capitalist system, undoubtedly, does play a crucial role in the devastation of ocean ecologies. Consequently, it seems entirely fair to critique *Seaspiracy* on the basis that it distracts from the concrete problems brought about by the global capitalist system and its negative socio–ecological effects. As a documentary that purports to explain why the devastation of the ocean environment is happening – not to mention its brief segment on the exploitation of fishermen working in the industry – it is, in a sense, somewhat perplexing that the concept of capitalism is not mentioned even once throughout the film.

That being said, it seems reasonable to presume that the reason capitalism cannot be named as the real problem is that doing so might undermine the film's mainstream appeal. Indeed, this explanation is supported by the fact that most of the films that fall within the genre of environmental documentary tend to treat the concept of capitalism as a kind of 'hot potato' – an implied theme that is always there, but never addressed head on. In turn, whenever environmental documentaries do attempt to explain the ecological crisis in general terms, they instead rely on what Jason Moore has coined 'Anthropocene discourse' which is characterised by 'very broad black-box descriptive categories' such as 'industrialization, urbanization, population and so forth' (Moore 2017, 603). However, the

Figure 3. Capitalism or conspiracy? *Seaspiracy* (2021). Reproduced with permission of the filmmakers.

problem with these categories, Moore contends, is that they obscure the concrete capitalist infrastructures and systems of extraction that enable the destruction of the natural environment in the first place. As tools for cultural diagnosis, concepts like 'industrialisation' and 'population' are simply too monolithic.

In *Seaspiracy*, these abstract ideas work in concert with the film's conspiratorial narrative and visual style. Throughout the film, there are several extreme long shots featuring of trawlers and fishing vessels (Figure 3), yet in most cases, the audience is left to its own devices to decode, as they all appear to refer to some broader, undefined, and elusive whole. This is compounded by the often-ambiguous explanations from various speakers, as seen in one segment where marine conservationist, Cyrill Cutsch, explains: 'We are at war with the oceans. And if we win this war, we are going to lose it all, because mankind is not able to live on this planet with a dead sea' (Tabrizi 2021, 00:37:52-00:38:01). In Moore's account, it is precisely this use of an undefined 'we' that prevents us from seeing how different populations, systems, and organisations contribute differently to the ongoing crisis. Interestingly, this tendency to collectivise the film's antagonistic forces with such categories can also been seen to reflect a historical shift within conspiracy culture generally, which Knight argues has 'mutated from an obsession with a fixed enemy to a generalised suspicion about conspiring forces' (2000, 4). What *Seaspiracy* demonstrates, however, is how this generalised suspicion can also result in attacks on specific actors, while simultaneously giving the impression that these actors can never truly be pinned down as the true culprits. Thus, the most accurate description of *Seaspiracy*'s conspiracist narrative would be to state that it oscillates between two different forms of critique, both of which appear inherently limited: In one moment, the film directs its attention towards very broad anthropogenic factors, which are so unfocused, so unhistoricised and so globalised that they cannot give the critique (or activism) any purchase, only to then later relapse into a conspiratorial thinking that identifies overly specific forms of agency – the latter providing a kind of solution to the slipperiness of the former, and the former reinforcing that conspiratorial answer because otherwise everything seems impossible to pin down.

Another issue is the film's tendency to simplify complex situations into simplistic notions of good versus evil. This Manichean dualism is especially salient in film's damning portrayal of the environmental organisations, who are framed as villainous and corrupt. And yet, one might ask, are they really? On the one hand, it seems appropriate to portray the reluctance of mainstream environmentalist organisations to address questions related to the consumption and production of animal products as both hypocritical and deeply problematic. On the other hand, these antagonistic confrontations can also be seen to promote an all-or-nothing approach that, perhaps unnecessarily, delegitimises any organisation, discourse, or cause that is different to the film's own. Or, at the very least, it begs the question of whether concentrating all our efforts in one area is the most conducive way to create of a more sustainable and just future.

Finally, the style of *Seaspiracy* raises the question of how different viewers might respond to its conspiratorial language and its didactic conclusion. Above, we claimed that the film's use of a conspiracy framework allows the film to attract

a broad audience – and perhaps even viewers who would not typically elect to watch a documentary about the oceanic crisis. However, the film could also be too radical for some, making them dismiss it. As a recent empirical reception study has found, texts that challenge dominant ideologies might be able to engage a wide range of recipients and transport them into their story-worlds [. . .] [however] the ecological messages encoded in them might fail to have an effect on readers who are skeptical about certain textual claims (Malecki et al. 2023, 199). The same, we suspect, might well apply to the genre of conspiratorial environmental documentaries, as they challenge the dominant (meat) cultural paradigms, and in doing so, they advocate for a position that many might perceive as deviant. Such questions highlight the necessity for more empirical work that might investigate further how different audiences respond to this unique genre, which, in all respects, looks like it is here to stay.

Note

1. 'Guise' is here used to indicate that Tabrizi performs the role of a character in the film, who is made to seem unaware of the global fishing industry's effects, even though this is not the case. This strategy has been described by the film's producer as a deliberate choice (Hill 2024). However, as Weik von Mossner (2021a, 264) observes, it is also a risky strategy because it might lead some viewers to see Tabrizi's transformation as disingenuous.

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