Stories of Futures, Stories of Selves

Apocalyptic Expectations and Narrative Agency

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Introduction

> How could we recount what we heard to people who were already scared by the catastrophe, and mobilise them on a large scale? (*Demain* 2015, 00:06:12)

The 2015 French documentary film *Demain* (»tomorrow«), directed and narrated by actress Mélanie Laurent as well as poet and climate activist Cyril Dion, opens with an unsettling, emotionally charged sequence on the apocalyptic climate future of our planet, and the consequences for future generations. A blacked-out image accompanied by low buzzing sounds creates a gloomy atmosphere. In voice-over, viewers are told about a scientific study that discusses the possibility of human extinction in the light of climate change. Laurent responds with her personal perspective, saying she was pregnant when she heard that news. Her child, whose birth and future are symbolised by images of the rising sun, »would grow up in a world in which water, food and oil would dramatically diminish. Where entire cities would be swallowed up by oceans. And part of humanity could die out by the end of the century« (00:00:56).

Realising that neither activist protests nor political action would in any way suffice to effectuate a course change, the *Demain* filmmakers decide to take action themselves. They ask the question that is at the heart of this collective volume: What can we do in the face of the imminent apocalypse – and how can we »mobilise« large numbers of people who are »already scared« into apathy (00:06:12)? In this contribution, I explore the concept of narrative agency as a human strategy for responding to this challenge in the genre of eco-political documentaries.

Eco-political documentary films have become prominent voices in popular discourses on climate (in)action,[1] not least since the success of *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) at the 2006 Academy Awards, a film which portrays Al Gore's political and educational engagement for climate causes. Appealing to audiences in cinemas, at film festivals, and increasingly via streaming services, the genre has been proliferating over the last decade, as has academic scholarship that aims to assess the genre's role as an educator of climate futures, inspirer of environmental action, and promoter of sustainable lifestyles (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010a, 45; Murray and Heumann 2014, xiii; Macdonald 2013, 20; Ingram 2013, 43). In addition to *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Demain*, the films that informthis chapter include *The 11th Hour* (2007), *No Impact Man* (2009), *The Age of Stupid* (2009), *This Changes Everything* (2015), and *2040* (2019). What they have in common is that by merging scientific fact, aesthetic representation, affective storytelling, and creative speculation, they explicitly aim to call people into action: In the face of an anticipated climate catastrophe, they explore practical ways of engaging with the future, offer blueprints for action, and thereby actively engage in the narrative construction of agency.

With ›narrative agency‹, I describe the process of constructing and asserting a sense of agency through storytelling. Eco-political documentaries, I argue, portray and perform such processes as a form of opposition to humankind's seemingly unstoppable rush into the apocalypse. As a genre that is often concerned with exploring alternatives to the social and environmental status quo, eco-political documentaries navigate the orders of knowledge that inform ideas about the future by self-reflexively engaging in (narrative) practices of making futures. Yet, as my analysis suggests, the agency related to making futures is inextricably linked to narrating the (human) subject, its self-understanding and self-positioning in relation to those futures: If an alternative future appears possible by means of changing the dominant stories, these are stories about the future as much as they are about us. Agency to avert the apocalypse and to build a different future, eco-political documentaries imply, requires agency over our own subjectivity and thus becomes a two-way exchange between the making of futures and the making of selves. Considering the levels of knowledge production, practices, and subjects as components of futures-in-the-making, in this chapter I zoom in onnarrative practices as forms of future-oriented subjectivation that represent a way of asserting individual and collective agency in the face of the feared apocalypse.

The argument that narrative practices constitute futures-in-the-making and are framed as forms of future agency in eco-political documentary discourses was born from research I conducted on the relationship between future knowledge, practices, and subjectivities in eco-political documentary films.[2] Intrigued by the narrative pos-

1 On the role of scientists and content creators as voices in the climate change discourse see also Felix Böhm's »Fact is that we know and do nothing. Gattungstransformatorische Perspektiven auf die Ver- und Entwissenschaftlichung von Wissenschaftskommunikation angesichts der Klimakatastrophe« as well as Sarah Engelhard's and Hanna Poloschek's »Da geht es um alles oder nichts« – Inszenierung von ›Wissenschaft‹ als Autorität in der Klimawandeldebatte auf YouTube« in this volume.

2 This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, UK, and Pembroke College, Cambridge.

sibilities and political agenda of documentaries to engage with the future, I explored the broader genre of feature-length documentary film with an iterative approach that guided me to the underlying cultural logics behind the narratives. With a data set of eleven feature-length documentaries produced in Anglo-American and European contexts and released between 2006 and 2019, the aim was to reconstruct the constitution of subjects in relation to the future. In the interpretive tradition of qualitative research, my perspective was informed by a sociology of knowledge approach to discourse which follows the principles that meaning is to be reconstructed from subjectively experienced realities, that any observer necessarily participates in the observed situation, and that all interpretation is »situated«, that is, »emerging from some specific place, time and social space« (Keller and Clarke 2018, 57).[3]

As the arguments in this chapter are grounded in a reconstructive framework[4] that focuses on the film data, the aim is neither to assess whether or to which degree the protagonists in the films have agency,[5] nor to speculate about the practical effects of the films in terms of reception. I rather ask how narrative agency is subjectively understood, discursively produced, and intertwined with other logics such as the constitution of both futures and subjects in the films. Instead of offering a narrow definition, this chapter assembles both theoretical and analytical fragments that together form the outlines of a concept of narrative agency and its role in eco-political documentaries. In the following, I briefly place my argument within the research context of an intensifying discourse on catastrophism and introduce the genre of eco-political documentaries. I then reconstruct the different facets of agency construction comprised by the idea of a narrative agency in eco-political documentary films, and expand on the relationship between narratives, futures, and selves.

3 Against this backdrop, both my research perspective and the cultural logics of the films which I reconstructed mainly represent views situated in Global North discourses, which is reflected in particular (privileged) notions of agency and apocalypse, as I address later in the analysis.

4 For my reconstructive analysis of the films, I drew on film analysis, aesthetics, practice theories, and subjectivation research. Narrative approaches to discourse analysis and (biographical) interview analysis were particularly helpful, as the narratives of the films combined with interviews with experts, practitioners, and other protagonists revealed how practices of storytelling are framed as self-reflexive acts of affirming agency.

5 In the sociological context, perspectives on agency tend to gravitate either towards a theoretical argument that aims to understand and place agency between the forces of autonomy and determination, between individual, collective, and structure, or towards an empirical investigation of how subjects experience, enact, make sense of, and construct agency in cultural practices and discourses (Helfferich 2012, 10; Lucius-Hoene 2012, 240). Both of these perspectives resonate with the results of my analysis, as agency appears as a relational concept, evoked and reflected on in social situations and discursively located between the poles of individual capability and structural heteronomy. With their future orientation, eco-political documentaries add a temporal dimension to the question of (narrative) agency, as past, present, and future provide different contexts for the subjective experience of agency.

Discursive Context: Apocalypse and ›New Catastrophism‹

To understand how eco-political documentaries evoke narrative agency as a meaningful concept to meet the challenges of the future, it is helpful to glance at the discursive context. For the production of narrative agency in eco-political documentary films, I argue, can be seen as a response to »a ›new catastrophism‹ in social thinking« (Urry 2016, 34) that is echoed in the films' accounts of apocalyptic futures and that has been gaining momentum since the new millennium. How people understand and position themselves towards the future, how they imagine it, handle it, attempt to manage or design it, has preoccupied humanity in various forms of cultural practice through the ages. As culturally contingent and contextually specific concepts, stories of the future have been evolving throughout history and are studied by scholars with varying interests in economic, demographic, technological, or social futures (e.g., Koselleck 1979; Hölscher 1999; Graf and Herzog 2016; Radkau 2017). When looking at the evolution of the discursive context on future agency in recent decades, a broad development can be traced where the destabilisation of an idea of continual progress (Schultz 2015, 326) as well as multiple global crises across various sectors pose questions about the ability of humans to handle complexity (Miller 2015). Planning and prevention, the two dominating paradigms of future agency in the 20th century that reflect a notion of the future as something to be controlled, managed, or predicted, do not seem fit to encounter such overly complex futures. New answers to the question what (human) agency can look like in the face of an increasingly unpredictable future are consequently being explored in speculative fiction, advice media, and scholarly research that focuses on the socio-cultural processes of (pro)actively engaging with the future.

Against this backdrop, narratives of the future that gravitate towards apocalypse and catastrophe have become one of the guiding logics in future discourses. This ›new catastrophism‹ since the late 20th century (Urry 2016, 34) is a cultural logic that informs not only practices of prevention and preemption, but in the field of cultural production dominates both fictional narratives of the future (Horn 2014) and non-fictional accounts (Urry 2016, 36). It builds on the discursive construction of risk, i.e., »manufacturing particular uncertainties that may have harmful consequences to ›life‹ [. . .]. The essence of risk is not that it is happening, but that it might be happening. Risks are manufactured [. . .] in the *making of sense* and by the technological sensibility of a *potential* harm, danger or threat« (Adam and van Loon 2000, 11, my emphasis). As Ben Anderson argues, catastrophic and apocalyptic narratives are a social response to concepts of the future as indeterminate and unpredictable (2010, 779). In turn, an attitude of cautious anticipation (re-)produces a sentiment of the future as representing imminent danger. As a dominant mode of engaging with the future, risk and catastrophism thinking fosters affects of fear and threat: »There is always the nagging potential of the next after being even worse« (Massumi 2010, 53) when »the nonexistence of what has not happened [is experienced as] more real than what is now observably over and done with« (52). The eco-political documentaries in my sample for the most part reproduce this idea of imminent catastrophe. The perspective that the (climate) apocalypse is on the horizon becomes the starting point for almost every film in my sample, and to varying degrees across the wider genre of eco-political documentaries. The threat of the apocalypse in the form of social and environmental collapse

becomes the springboard into a narrative that tries to call its audiences to action, traces present pathways into the future, and/or explores what a different future could or should look like. In the following, I address the particularities of eco-political documentary film, their involvement in apocalyptic discourses, and their genre-specific relationship with narrative agency and the future in more detail.

Eco-Political Documentaries: Genre Expectations and Narrative Strategies

Eco-political documentaries build on the affective threat of a looming apocalypse, which they usually establish in their opening sequences in a twofold way: on the one hand, by creating a sense of urgency that relates to their political agenda, and, on the other hand, by using this threat to position themselves as advice media. Their activist agenda (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010b, xi) manifests in a practice of informing their audiences about environmental, political, and societal problems, of showing possible consequences or solutions, and thereby trying to move their viewers into action. This general political »intentionality [i]s a fundamental for [the] environmental documentary« (Hughes 2014, 5), although it is not to be mistaken for the filmmakers' particular vision or the key to understanding specific scenes, which – like all narratives – retain an interpretive ambiguity that eludes any definite idea of authorial intention. Rather, political intentionality needs to be taken into account for trying to understand the discursive practices and conventions of eco-political documentaries as »a communicative response in dialogue with the many debates taking place in the fields of environmental communication, environmental education and environmental psychology« (5).

The narrative of an imminent apocalypse[6] can be seen as such a communicative response to the contemporary culture of catastrophism. At the same time, the narrative of a looming systems collapse legitimises the eco-political documentary as an important actor within the discourse and stabilises its self-positioning as an advice genre, a how-to guide to the future, and an inspiration for their viewers. For, as research on advice media has reconstructed (Scholz and Lenz 2013), an increasing experience of helplessness, particularly in the face of social crises or vast complexity, produces a rising demand in advice literature. Promising help and offering guidance, how-to guides are pivotally concerned with questions of agency, as they build on a concept of the subject that emphasises a substantive degree of self-reflexivity and the capacity as well as agency to modify one's own behaviour. As eco-political documentaries show alternative ways of acting, portray the journeys of other individuals as blueprints for their audiences, and appeal to their viewers to take certain measures of change, they narratively create the need for change as much as the solutions, acting simultaneously as indicators, constructors, and solvers of problems.

6 Using the word ›narrative‹ to describe the representation of a threatening future is not meant to imply any doubts about the scientific facts on which the climate predictions in the films are based. It refers to the mode of representing apocalyptic scenarios by means of weaving them into a larger story, and points to the narrative function these scenarios have in the films.

In claiming the status of an advice genre that promises to make suggestions for personal agency in the light of an overly complex future and the potential collapse of the Earth's systems, eco-political documentaries benefit from their capacity to navigate both fictional and factual narration, balancing enactment and reality, and providing both entertainment and social criticism. They usually feature one or more protagonists, follow a storyline, build an arc of suspense, and gravitate towards an (ideally) powerful message or conclusion. There is a spectrum of fictionality that ranges from very reduced editing of documentary footage via structured interviews and re-enacted scenes to explicitly fictional elements as in *The Age of Stupid*, with its fictional frame narrative of the post-apocalyptic future world, or *2040*, with its fictional imaginations of a brighter future. Creating an impression of authenticity crucially depends on the communicative construction of coherence (Huck 2012, 244) through the interplay of spoken commentary, representation of practices and subjects, and the aesthetic, audio-visual level. The representation of urban gardening in, e. g., *Demain* or *No Impact Man*, includes portraits of gardening individuals who explicitly comment on their practices, while aesthetic images of abounding produce and community create positive affects on the visual level. The credibility and authority of eco-political documentaries depend on their »privileged status as a mediated representation of reality compared to fiction films« (Duvall 2017, 8). While they enjoy the artistic freedom of selecting, editing, and consciously representing contents the natural and social world created, they are *expected* to »paint a more credible picture of reality than other mass media« (Huck 2012, 242, my translation), as documentaries are »a mode of gaining access to the actual world« (Weik von Mossner 2013, 109).

Stories of Futures and Selves: Agency in the Light of the Apocalypse

Taking the imminent apocalypse – or some other version of a deeply problematic future – as their argumentative starting point, most eco-political documentaries are concerned with creating agency in the face of uncertain or even apocalyptic futures. In its scientific undeniability, its affective force, and its global reach, the narrative of the apocalypse represents a »locked-in future« (Tutton 2017, 483), an inevitable scenario born from »[a] series of path dependent mutually adapting systems [that] were set in motion« in the 20th century (Urry 2008, 275)[7] and that make any thought of agency appear futile. Yet, as eco-political documentaries operate not with the geophysical reality of a systems collapse, but with a narrative of the apocalypse, it is a narrative impasse they construct, which can be countered by a narrative counter draft. Storytelling becomes their arena of constructing a different future, and by doing so, constructing a sense of agency.

In the following sections, I draw on seven documentaries to reconstruct how the constitution of narrative agency in eco-political documentaries follows three steps. First, how the anticipated reality of an apocalyptic scenario that is experienced as paralysing is

7 While Urry focuses on developments of increasing systemic complexity since the 20th century and mainly in Global North societies, the starting points for the current climate crisis and the wider question of how to define the Anthropocene are widely debated (see, e.g., Butler 2021; Zalasiewicz et al. 2017; Braje and Lauer 2020; Braje and Erlandson 2013).

reframed in terms of cultural narrative and displaced onto the field of storytelling, second, how this level of narrative becomes a space of agency, and finally, how this concept of agency connects the making of futures with the making of selves.

New Stories against the Apocalypse

The 11th Hour, *2040*, *This Changes Everything* or *Demain* open with a reflection on ›the story‹ they have identified as dominating the current future debate and that involves knowledge about unstoppable climate change, ever-accelerating capitalism without alternatives, and greedy human nature. *The 11th Hour* identifies the lack of coherent, alternative narratives to this mainstream account as the main problem that leads to the destruction of the natural environment and, in consequence, the basis of all future human existence. When the media report natural disasters as »isolated incidents«, narrator Leonardo DiCaprio explains, it is the task of eco-political documentaries to connect the dots and »find a larger story that needs to be told« (*The 11th Hour* 2007, 00:03:58). Similarly, protagonist Damon Gameau asserts in *2040* that

> when it comes to predictions of the future they're almost entirely negative at the moment any time you open a news feed or social media there's some kind of doom and gloom story about the future a- of our environment and as a father I I think there's room for a different story a story that focuses on the solutions to some of these problems. (2019, 00:06:33)

The systemic problem of a planetary, multi-systems crisis is addressed not in its institutional manifestation or in its materiality, but in the form of the narratives that transport knowledge about the crisis. The films here echo the assertion of narrative-focused futures research that »our present incapacity to be sufficiently imaginative, to think the unexpected« (Bode and Dietrich 2013, 100) represents the main obstacle to the construction of truly alternative futures in their tangible, material form: »Through a failure of imagination, [...] we risk populating the future with our present priorities and with our present concerns which have been, in turn, shaped by our past experiences« (Liveley, Slocombe and Spiers 2021, 2). In sociology, narrations, especially biographical ones, are usually considered qualitative data that construct someone's *past* (Lucius-Hoene 2000; Thorne 2000; Rosenthal 2018). In contrast, eco-political documentaries narrate to construct the *future*. These narrations are, of course, always informed by multiple temporalities as the films start constructing future stories based on past experience and present-day (futures) thinking, such as present-day catastrophic expectations. Nevertheless, the orientation of these narrations is usually not one of *reconstructing* a story about the past, but of *constructing* one for the future. This includes reconstructing a certain past to make sense of the present and legitimise projections into the future, but also represents ways of narrating that follow a different, future-oriented logic and structure (Bode and Dietrich 2013, 2). Refusing to accept that what they perceive as the dominant story, i.e., an apocalyptic scenario, should turn into the future, the filmmakers want to tell a *different story*, to make *a different future* thinkable and possible. An experience of helplessness in the face of the apocalypse is turned into an experience of empowerment when the scenario of

an apocalyptic future is displaced from its predicted physical reality to its manifestation in narrative form.

Narrating a future that is offered as an alternative to what is perceived as the dominant narrative about the future (in the present) intends to construct the agency to *change the discourse*, and thereby to *change the future*. Filmmakers and protagonists of eco-political documentaries explicitly follow a strategy of changing the course of the future through storytelling as a practice that constitutes and affirms human agency – an agency that not only unfolds in present situations, but that is understood as reaching into the future.

Naomi Klein, the narrator of *This Changes Everything*, early in the film puts the focus on storytelling by explaining why she never liked films about climate catastrophes:

> [W]e're told that the cause isn't out there, it's in us, it's human nature, we're innately greedy and short-sighted, and if that's true, there is no hope, but when I finally stopped looking away, travelled into the heart of the crisis, met people on the frontlines, I discovered so much of what I thought I knew was wrong and I began to wonder; what if human nature isn't the problem, what if even greenhouse gases aren't the problem, what if the real problem is a story, one we've been telling ourselves for four hundred years. (2015, 00:01:24)

Klein ties this insight to a meeting where the UK Royal Society discusses scientific solutions to the climate crisis, and where she identifies the problematic story as the 17th century understanding of Earth as a machine to be mastered and exploited. In contrast to the loud, chattering, male scientists in suits at the Royal Society, Klein is shown sitting pensively on a lawn, standing in front of a lake, observing, and taking hand-written notes – embodying the critical, reflexive subject. She concludes that »unlike human nature, stories are something we can change« (00:04:56). The title *This Changes Everything* is shown immediately after, setting the horizon for changing the story: This film is not about finding solutions to specific problems; rather, it is about changing »everything« by changing the underlying narrative and therefore the logic people follow to legitimise their actions. Human agency, according to the film, lies in the capacity to actively engage in discourses: It is not the concept of »human nature« and the materiality of »greenhouse gases« that matter, but their narrative force. We cannot change ›the future‹, but we can change the stories that make the future.

As we have seen in the beginning of this chapter, *Demain* opens with a story of imminent apocalypse, a scientific study that announces the possible end of humankind, followed by an emotional sequence that is an audio-visual meditation on the beauty of the world and its grievingly anticipated loss. When searching for an alternative scenario, they turn to Rob Hopkins, founder of the transition town movement in the UK »to help us analyse the problem and find a way to act« (2019, 00:06:12). Hopkins' answer is that

> it's fascinating how as a species and as a culture we are brilliant at imagining our own extinction and our own demise […] those stories are so important because when the climate scientists say […] you need to start cutting emissions now by eight nine ten percent every year […] we don't have the stories that go with that that that are we see that as a story of less and of moving away from something and if you say to people what would it look like in twenty years time if we'd

> started cutting our emissions by that much every year what would it be like [-] for many people it's sitting in a cold cave eating rotten potatoes huh […] it's the end of the world. But actually [*enthusiastically*] it could be fantastic. (00:06:32)

Images of the filmmakers at the airport and the metro, travelling the world, crossing streets *Abbey Road* style and traversing natural landscapes illustrate what the next chapter in their narrative is about: »[S]o we crossed the globe, in search of men and women with solutions to these problems; we hoped to line them up, like puzzle pieces, and try to tell a new story which would make us want to build a different world« (00:07:47). By means of auditive and visual references to the canon of popular culture that besides the Beatles includes *The Lord of the Rings* and *What a Wonderful World* (in Joey Ramone's rock version), the film inscribes itself in a tradition of storytelling. Countering the apocalyptic predictions from the beginning with references to cultural artefacts, the focus on scientific facts that represent the physical inevitability of Earth systems collapse is shifted towards the narrative realm of popular culture. The »new story« becomes the antidote to the paralysing expectation of an imminent apocalypse, and, at the same time, the playing field on which the filmmakers locate their own agency.

Storytelling as Agency

By translating the anticipated *factuality* of climate change into a *narrative* about an apocalyptic future, the films create a discursive space within which they construct and enact their personal agency. Following a logic that considers narratives as creating social realities, storytelling becomes the practice that allows both the filmmakers (who narrate the film) and the protagonists in the films (who narrate their own stories) to become active designers of alternative futures. At the same time, the telling of an alternative story also has the effect of creating a personal sense of agency for the storytelling subject. In the following, I take a closer look at the first of these two logics of narrative agency, i.e., the idea that storytelling creates social realities, before turning to the second logic, i.e., the subjective experience of narrative agency, in the subsequent section on narratives of futures and selves.

So, in what sense can storytelling be understood as agency – and what logics of the future, of storytelling, and of agency are implied? Going back to the opening sequence of *Demain*, the starting point is an experience of helplessness, of a perceived incapacity to act in the face of a complex and threatening climate future. The filmmakers »wanted to do something« (00:04:02) to avoid the dire scenario of the scientific study, but what that »something« consists of is not immediately apparent until they come together in a field where they feel they have agency: They assemble a group of friends with experience in the film industry, who share the skills of professional storytelling. Positioning themselves opposite other subject figures such as the »activist« (00:01:33), the »scientist« (00:00:18), or the »politician« (00:01:21), the agency to change the future by means of protest, research, or policy, seems to be out of reach. What they know how to do, however, is to tell stories with an affective impact on people that »would make us want to build a different world« (00:07:47). Their experience of helplessness is turned into one of agency as storytelling becomes a way of affirming themselves of their power to affectively impact

their viewers and thereby »to do something« (00:04:02). *Demain* here echoes Liveley, Slocombe and Spiers' observation that »collaborative, character-led storytelling can activate an agentic relationship with an uncertain and complex future on the part of those participating in performative anticipatory practice« (2021, 7).

In the discourses of eco-political documentary films, telling stories about the future is not presented as just an imaginative prerequisite for constructing futures; it is implied to comprise already a practice of creating futures: Storytelling is framed as a practice that constitutes social reality. This implies a direct relationship between imagination, knowledge, and practice: By employing knowledge about the future and imagining a specific scenario, the films postulate, we already engage in a practice of creating this future in its nascent stages. According to *The 11th Hour*, this practice and the agency that is assumed with it is ambivalent: In an interview, environmentalist and economist Paul Hawken appreciates that

> the great thing about the dilemma we're in is that we get to reimagine every single thing we do […] there's two ways of looking at that, one is like ›oh my gosh, you know what a big burden‹, the other way to look at it, which is the way I prefer, is what a great time to be born, what a great time to be alive, because this generation gets to essentially completely change this world. (2007, 00:58:11)

The capacity and opportunity to *imagine* here becomes the central field of agency to impact the future: »reimagine« is equated with »chang[ing] this world« – the act of imagination is seen to already represent the practice. Narrating itself is framed as a form of agency, based on the belief that stories create social realities (Bode and Dietrich 2013, 99; Spiers 2021, 42).

Implied in this quote is the conviction that social actors have a choice of how to position certain facts within a discourse, and how to position oneself toward those discourses: The skill of storytelling gives filmmakers and protagonists the agency to actively steer future discourses. About a third of the way into the film *No Impact Man*, a sequence shows how the *No Impact* experiment is harshly critiqued in a *New York Times* article titled »The Year Without Toilet Paper«. Colin Beavan, also known as No Impact Man, comments: »[W]hat if we called it the year I lost 20 pounds without going to the gym once or the year we didn't watch TV and we became much better parents as a result or if we called it the year we ate locally and seasonally and it ended up reversing my wife's pre-diabetic condition; there are actual benefits to living environmentally« (2009, 00:30:03). While the article characterises Beavan's project as a curious, but essentially insignificant exercise in self-restraint, he himself offers a different interpretation: Instead of restrictions, he describes higher fitness levels, intensified family relationships, and health improvements. This reframing reflects an understanding of discourse as something that can be countered, challenged, and modified – a field of agency for social actors.

While the example from *No Impact Man* represents a proactive approach to past and present discourses, eco-political documentaries as a genre are equipped with a repertoire of representational modes to engage with futures. Their partly fictional, partly factual genre conventions allow them to create social realities that not only depict the present but reach into the future. Films such as *No Impact Man* or *Demain* portray self-

reflexive experiments, social labs in which alternative futures are drawn into the present to be tried, tested, and advertised. *An Inconvenient Truth* counts on the power of scientific graphs to visualise climate futures. And *The Age of Stupid* and 2040 include overtly fictional, animated elements in their narratives to make dystopian or ideal futures experienceable. Commenting on *The Age of Stupid*, Stef Craps notes that the narrative twist of having a narrator in the future tell us about the present as the past[8] »offers a way of overcoming the imaginative difficulties created by the vast dimensions and enormous complexity of climate change, making this elusive phenomenon visible, tangible, legible, and morally salient« (2017, 484). The materiality of a film, as well as the material realities portrayed *in* the films, are central to their mode of engaging with the future – for in any imagination of futures, it is difficult »to grasp the reality of futurity with reference to invisible and latent processes which may not materialise as symptoms for a very long time« (Adam and Groves 2007, 174).

The concept of agency that informs this practice of making futures through stories has a temporal aspect which Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische call »projectivity« (1998, 971). Projectivity »encompasses the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors' hopes, fears, and desires for the future« (1998, 971). Emphasising the creative process, this understanding of future-oriented agency also resonates with Liveley, Slocombe and Spiers' point that storytelling is vital for the construction of futures as it moves us beyond the horizons limiting the present (2021, 2). As the concept of the future that is implied in eco-politcal documentaries is that of a discontinuity with the present, a »solution« to present »problems« (*Demain* 2019, 00:07:47), the imaginary capacity to think outside the box instead of reproducing present-day perspectives and knowledge (Liveley, Slocombe and Spiers 2021, 7) becomes particularly relevant. These »problems«, according to the films, are not merely technical or structural: »[T]he problem is the way that we are thinking; the problem is fundamentally a cultural problem,« says author Thom Hartmann in *The 11th Hour* (2007, 00:45:11). The solutions therefore must encompass a cultural change, a mindset change. This diagnosis of the future represents an underlying reasoning for the films' emphasis on narrative agency as the (discursive) path to changing the future. Their stories are an effort to encourage audiences to participate in the imaginative and narrative practice of creating alternative futures in the present.

With an agenda of facilitating such a mindset change, and storytelling as the practical means to do so, the films raise questions about the intentionality of agency. The implications of this are exemplified by, e.g., *An Inconvenient Truth*, where Al Gore declares with an almost missionary tone that it is his agenda to tell a story to effectuate change on a massive scale and, in consequence, make a different future possible (2006, 01:15:22). As he lists all the countries where he has given his slide show worldwide, he says: »I guess the thing I've spent more time on than anything else in this slideshow is trying to identify all those things in people's minds that serve as obstacles to them understanding this,

8 On the idea of narrative future-archaeologies see also Eva-Maria Aigner's essay »Das Überleben, das immer auf das Ende wartet. Mit Derrida und Blanchot die Apokalypse überleben« in this volume.

and whenever I feel like I've identified an obstacle I try to take it apart, roll it away, move it, demolish it, blow it up,« Gore's account reflects a concept of communication, of storytelling, as the tool or weapon that can fix human non-understanding.[9] The »obstacle« metaphor conjures an idea of the human mind as a road or a landscape where understanding will flow freely as soon as the obstacles are removed. It also adds a globalist perspective, as it does not seem to make a difference to him who his audiences are, as he implies that minds are human and can be changed in the U.S. just as in China.

Besides the intentional aspect of agency, Gore's approach to storytelling points to another characteristic of narrative agency: its performative and relational nature. According to Pamela Steen (2012, 241), agency is always constructed and performed in interactive situations and therefore dependent on the legitimisation, modification, or rejection by other communicative actors. In *An Inconvenient Truth*, these are represented in the film by the audience of Gore's slide show. With regards to the wider genre eco-political documentaries, I argue that these can be imagined, too, in the form of an anticipated audience. Gore declares it to be his goal to »communicate this real clearly the only way I know to do it is city by city, person by person, family by family« (2006, 01:15:22), which is illustrated by images of him in conversation with people as well as on stage with a big audience, »and I have faith that pretty soon enough minds are changed that we cross a threshold.« This quantitative approach to changing minds engenders a transition from individual change to collective change: If enough individuals undergo a personal change, a new, collective identity can emerge through a shared story. Eco-political documentaries often feature narrations of collective identities of different groups that are referred to as a usually undefined ›we‹. Depending on the context, this ›we‹ often denotes ›humanity‹, e.g., in the sense of a community of fate (when we are told in *The 11th Hour* that »we need to be smarter« (2007, 01:14:46) or as an imagined community of exceptional genius when Gore boasts in *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) that »we landed on the moon, the very example of what's possible when we are at our best« (01:21:40). The discursive creation of a collective »we« produces the interpellative effect of ascribing the audience a certain identity, as it includes them in a pre-defined group of subjects, as humans, as like-minded environmentalists, as local community members, as a generation, or as members of a geopolitical region. *The Age of Stupid* exemplifies this perspective as the fictional narrator, an ›archivist‹ of what is left of the world's knowledge in an apocalyptic near future, takes an active role in curating the contents of the documentary: We see him scroll through stored files and retrieve the video material (documentary footage as well as educational animations) that composes the documentary. The archivist is the – albeit fictional – instance that claims agency over the story, that decides what is to be preserved and shown to the assumed future audience and what is not. At the same time, *The Age of Stupid* aims to transfer this agency onto the audience. In the credits, next to Pete Postlethwaite (starring as the archivist) and other protagonists, the caption ». . . and you« appears, making it clear that this is a story in which the audience has an active part. The explicit construc-

9 The use of militaristic rhetoric used by Al Gore and other protagonists such as Naomi Klein (who mentions climate »frontlines«, see above) reflects a normative, combative view on the future as something to be subjugated.

tion of narrative agency, which the films emphasise, serves to confirm and consolidate the agency of their own narration.

The question about this ›we‹ and ›you‹, and who is addressed with the appeal to narrate a different future, remains largely unanswered across these films that all share a production context and target audience located in the Global North. In *The Age of Stupid*, aspiring medical student Layefa Malemi describes a stereotypically American way of life as her life's dream. The presumably wealthier target audience of the film would find it difficult to morally judge her goals after seeing the everyday realities of the village she lives in, the dire hygiene and work conditions, even though *The Age of Stupid* identifies that Global North lifestyle as the main contributor to the current crisis. In contrast, *No Impact Man* Colin Beavan's ambitions to consume and waste less can only emerge from a privileged situation of having too much in the first place, and the (global) structural privileges this is grounded on – an aspect which is not eclipsed, but nevertheless rather neglected in the open discussions of the *No Impact* project in the film. A further analysis to assess how factors such as primary socialisation, economic privilege, structural inequalities, or family background play into the concept of narrative agency would add a layer of reflexivity currently lacking in the films in my sample.

Narrating Futures, Narrating Selves

As I have argued, a first central understanding of narrative agency in eco-political documentary films relates to the idea that stories create social realities, with implications for the projectivity, intentionality, and relationality of agency. The second aspect that is covered by the concept of narrative agency as I understand it describes the process of creating a personal sense of agency through the practice of telling a story. Agency here is not the theoretical assumption of social world-making, nor the measurable impact of someone's scope of action, but the »subjective conviction of one's own power or capacity to act« (Helfferich 2012, 27, my translation). *No Impact Man* illustrates this as Beavan explains his motivation for the project, stating that»one of the things that I as a writer wanted [...] was to become more of an activist writer; in sort of a humble way I wanna *have some sense* that my writing is helping the world« (2009, 00:02:35, my emphasis). The explicit goal is to create the subjective *feeling* of having an impact. If eco-political documentaries understand their agency in terms of a narrative capacity to act on the future, futures and selves co-emerge in this process of storytelling: Proactively engaging with the future through practices of storytelling not only modifies the (possibilities of) the future but serves to reassure the narrating subject of its own agency.

The practice of narrating the future is never only focused on the future as an abstract concept, or as an object to observe from a distance – narrating the future cannot be separated from a practice of narrating the self. Narrative practices and subjects cannot be thought separately, as »the social existence and intelligibility of an agent as an identifiable subject unfolds performatively through the accomplishment of practices« (Alkemeyer, Buschmann and Michaeler 2017, 67). Each (discursive) practice that describes, positions, and creates knowledge about things, ideas, or concepts simultaneously constitutes the speaking subject as it involves the speaker's self-understanding and self-positioning in and toward certain contexts. Narrating the future thus not only claims agency

over the future, but also co-creates subjects in relation to that future, echoing the belief that »this is the only way to exist meaningfully – as creators of the stories we have woven ourselves, of the stories that bring meaning into this world« (Bode and Dietrich 2013, 100).

Storytelling is a process of creating subjectivity, of negotiating and positioning the self toward discursive formations or established subject figures, such as the politician, the activist, the citizen, or the expert. Gabriele Lucius-Hoene and Arnulf Deppermann, building on George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, understand subjective identity as an interaction between social expectations or experiences and the individual's response to them (2004, 49). The narrative constitution of the future and the subject is informed by cultural knowledge that includes an understanding of the social world combined with the individual, incorporated know-how of navigating this social world (physically, discursively). When Gameau says in the above quote from *2040* that »as a father« (2019, 00:06:33) he believes there is a need for a different story (and, in consequence, a different future), a cultural understanding of parental subjectivity is without further explanation associated with the expectation of a challenging future and a feeling of personal responsibility for change. The subject is neither a mere respondent to social expectations, nor the sum total of personal experiences, nor an autonomous agent developing independently: Narrating identity – and thereby constructing the self as a subject – is always situated and a dual process of performing and constituting identity.[10]

Daniel Welch, Margit Keller and Giuliana Mandich identify a tendency in practice theories »to eschew a focus on the individual« out of an aversion to ontological individualism, and to highlight »the habituality of practice« over its (self-)reflexive and critical components (2020, 440). However, both of these seemingly binary poles are encompassed in the capacity to reflect on the logics that inform one's practices and their potential outcomes that we see in the films, as a tar sand worker's reflection on the effects of his industry on the local community exemplifies: »[P]ut two and two together and you feel physically directly responsible for affecting somebody else's health downstream« (*This Changes Everything* 2015, 01:19:26). The quote evokes environmental and industry factors as much as personal experience and the anticipated future effects of present action, alluding to structural questions of medical justice and personal affectedness. It illustrates how »subjects arise through the incorporation of bodies in social practices« (Alkemeyer, Buschmann and Michaeler 2017, 67) and echoes how Emirbayer and Mische »reconceptualize human agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented towards the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)« (1998, 963). Eschewing the question whether agency is an individual characteristic or capability, or structurally determined, this focus on the temporality of agency implies a concept of the subject that is capable of self-reflexively creating possible futures, assessing their own

10 Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann (2004, 56) here use the German parallelism between darstellen (enacting, performing) and herstellen (producing, creating).

situatedness in the process, and reassembling past experiences and future expectations into meaningful action in the present.

An impression that connects all the films mentioned here is that, while portraying alternative futures on the structural, mostly political and economic, level, the close connection between futures and selves that emerges in the process of narrative agency tends to locate responsibility on the individual as opposed to the structural side. As Eberhard Raithelhuber (2012, 125) argues, every engagement with the concept of agency sooner or later needs to ask not only who claims agency and who is assigned it, but also who, in consequence, is responsible for using that agency (or not, I might add). If the narratives of eco-political documentaries imply a (neo-)liberal appeal to »individual action«, as exemplified in *No Impact Man*: »[L]ike why do I have to wait for Congress to do something, why do I have to wait for big business to do something, why don't I do something« (2009, 00:27:32), this reproduces currently dominating orders of power and knowledge rather than telling a truly »different story« (2040 2019, 00:06:33).

The narrative process of making futures and making selves occurs on two levels of eco-political documentary narratives. First, the film itself is a narration of different competing futures. Second, there are the stories of the narrators *in* the films, who point out that they tell stories with a certain degree of expertise and authority (as filmmakers, activists, etc.). *Demain*, for example, portrays the urban gardening initiative *Incredible Edible*, whose two founders, who are local citizens, reflect on their beginnings: »we didn't start with ›shall we save the planet‹ cause that was too grand, we just started with where we are« (00:15:34). They called an open meeting, »in this building, we said ›do you want to have a great future for your kids? Do you want to think about food?‹« and were astonished by the huge interest from people in their community: »[W]e didn't know what to do, did we?«, they say, »cause we weren't ready, we thought if five come it's a success«. This narrative practice of evaluating the scope of their agency exemplifies how actors self-reflexively evaluate the situation against the backdrop of their personal experience, including the expectations that are explicitly or implicitly formulated toward them, in a »performative structure of reflexive making of the selves in practices« (Alkemeyer, Buschmann and Michaeler 2017, 75). The founders of *Incredible Edible* position themselves and their project as ordinary, down-to-Earth, with modest expectations, but at the same time immensely successful. This practice of self-narration does not imply an autonomous, wilful subject that rationally evaluates these components and acts accordingly, but a *reflexive* subject that emerges through the accomplishment of practices within this nexus of contingent situation, (normative) interpellation, and personal experience.

As mentioned above, narrating concepts of the self is usually – including in Lucius-Hoene's and Deppermann's approach – a practice of constructing one's past. As Kay Young and Jeffrey L. Saver note with regards to fiction, »the bringing of narrative to experience enables a sense of self founded on a series of recollections – to be without one's stories is to be without knowledge of one's life« (2010, 187). Narrating identity through stories of the future thus requires considering a dimension of futurity, or a »logic of projectivity«, as Welch, Keller and Mandich propose. This implies a concept of the subject that neither denies nor essentialises agency. The future dimension here forms part of the subjective and objective realities that confront us. Narrating identity becomes a specific practice of integrating experiences with those – internal and external

– realities to create a designated self-understanding as the basis for future agency. In that sense, making futures (through storytelling) is a practice that processually and continually contributes to making the self, to the constitution of a future-oriented subject. As concepts of the future change, so does one's sense of self, and vice-versa. In turn, that future is made through the process of constituting the self in thought, feeling, and practice. Naomi Klein illustrates this by distinguishing between »the us we've been told we are, selfish, greedy, short-sighted, and the us we could be, able to take care of the earth and take care of each other long into the future« (*This Changes Everything* 2015, 01:24:08). The future becomes the reason and the horizon for a process of changing the self. As William James conceptualised it in his 1902 work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1982, 138), a sense of futurity (or lack thereof) is the prerequisite for the potentiality of the self, not just its factuality. Our self *in posse* represents the ideal dimension of the self we are to become through a dynamic of change. According to James, the factuality of our self – our self *in actu* – is a less prominent factor in our self-perception than its future-oriented potentiality.

In addition to the aspect of futurity in practices of narrating identity, the setting of the narration in eco-political documentaries also demands consideration. The concept of storytelling usually informs narrative interview research, where it is understood as a process of arriving at a self-understanding and of discursively defining one's subjectivity in the concrete, present setting of an interviewee interacting with an interviewer: »Questions about subjective experience and coping efforts [. . .] converge [. . .] in doing ›identity work‹ during the process of narrating, in its foundation and justification in biographical experience and its manifestation in the linguistic expressions of the interview partners« (Lucius-Hoene 2000, 4). In most interview situations shown in eco-political documentaries, however, the interviewees are not interviewed about themselves, but about a certain topic of expertise. In addition, the films' interview segments are de-contextualised, edited, placed within a narrative, and in most cases ignore the role of the interviewer. The construction of the protagonists' narrative identity thus usually happens on a more implicit level. It is a positioning toward a certain discourse, e.g., toward the »lies« of the food industry, as farmer Nick complains in *Demain*, or toward established subject figures, like *Demain*'s filmmakers saying »we weren't activists«. On an implicit level, dress codes and settings are also filmic means to portray such positionings – consider, e.g., in *Demain* an economy expert, wearing a formal suit and interviewed in a setting full of antique office furniture and books to underline his professionality, high institutional standing and expertise. In contrast, the two founders of the urban gardening community *IncredibleEdible* are casually dressed and interviewed around a dining table, underscoring that they are ordinary people ›like you and me‹.

The scope of agency for narrative identity construction depends on factors such as the linguistic, cognitive, or material resources an individual can draw on not only to narrate their identity, but also to (internally) reaffirm it and represent it to the outside world (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2004, 50). In the opening scene of *Demain*, for example, we are told that the filmmakers are professional storytellers, a »crew of friends working in the cinema«. Al Gore, while not a professional filmmaker, assures us that »I've probably given this slide show over a thousand times; I would say at least a thousand times« (*An Inconvenient Truth* 2006, 01:15:22). He is also an experienced politician with substan-

tive media training who knows how to narratively create a coherent image of himself. Here again, the self-constituting function of storytelling is made transparent on a meta-level: Not only do the films tell a story to their audience, but within the films, professional storytellers explain to us that we are being told a story. The audience is called on as reflexive subjects who are asked to trust the expertise of the filmmakers and protagonists and who are also trusted to recognise in the distinction between the filmic level and the meta-level the role of storytelling in the constitution of (future) self and agency.

These invitations to identify with certain groups are not to be misunderstood as the identity templates audiences actually identify with. The images and blueprints for identities that are accepted and promoted in our society, especially through various forms of media, are diverse and differ in how much scope they leave for socially accepted action (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2004, 49). *No Impact Man* illustrates these boundaries: When their projectis presented in the above-mentioned *New York Times* article as a rigorous environmentalist experiment, Beavan is met with public opposition. Their family's self-representation as people who try to live environmentally friendly lives is rejected by most of the responses to the article, which leads him to speculate about the reasons for this irritation. The film here suggests that people (in general, and Americans in particular) do not like to be restricted in their actions or consumption habits, as it contradicts their views of what it means to be »a good American« (No Impact Man 2009, 00:34:30). Again, the viewers of *No Impact Man* are understood to be reflexive subjects who are confronted with the question of how they themselves react (intuitively, emotionally) to the No Impact project and who are presented with an example how they *could* react, as well as counterarguments that could inspire a different response.[11]

Conclusion

Taking a cultural-sociological perspective, this chapter addressed the construction of narrative agency in contemporary eco-political documentary films from the Anglo-American, Australian, and European context, showing how the theme of a ›new story‹ serves to construct a space of narrative agency against the – literal – dead end of a planetary systems collapse. It outlined how storytelling is framed as a form of agency, and what concepts of both stories and agency are implied in the narratives of eco-political documentaries. Finally, it argued that changing the prospect of the future in the narratives of eco-political documentaries cannot be separated from the idea of changing the self.

Considering the films' declared aim of having a positive impact on the future, the idea suggests itself whether the scope of the narrative agency as it is constructed in the films can actually offer opposition to a perceived crisis of agency in the face of the apocalypse, or whether it remains limited to alleviating the painful recognition of personal

11 *An Inconvenient Truth* and *An Inconvenient Sequel* equally show critical to defamatory responses to Al Gore's environmental action, although the reception side of the films in the form of responses like these are usually not part of eco-political documentary narratives.

helplessness. As argued above, Colin Beavan's driver for agency in *No Impact Man* appears to be a desire to increase a *feeling* of agency and of having a positive impact. The argument here is not to diminish the environmental efforts of the protagonists, nor to morally question how sincerely they are concerned about the future. It rather raises the question whether the narratively stylised production of agency in eco-political documentaries has a broader scope than the projective dimension of an imagined, yet not materially realised future (in Emirbayer and Mische's sense) and the private realm of a subjective feeling of agency (echoing Helfferich's definition). As the numerous accounts of collective action and community power in *This Changes Everything* suggest, a subjective experience of agency might be a prerequisite for political action beyond the genre of documentary film. And yet, considering the above-mentioned limited perspective of the films in my sample that almost exclusively represents a Global North lens on everyday realities, the question who is assigned both agency and responsibility remains unspecified.

Yet another, possibly more productive way of looking at these films instead of merely pointing out their vagueness or inconsistencies is to consider what both their innovative facets and their reproductions of currently dominating orders of knowledge tell us about the broader discourse on alternative futures. Regarded from a Foucauldian view, eco-political documentaries as specific forms of discourse are not to be understood as »groups of signs« that *depict* social reality, but cultural practices that »systematically *form* the objects of which they speak« (Foucault 1972, 49, my emphasis). I therefore suggest viewing eco-political documentaries as a cultural practice of ›rehearsing‹ future agency, and to consider both the moments where the films manage to surprise their audiences with new stories and those where they uncritically reproduce current hierarchies, injustices, and inequalities as practical explorations of alternative possibilities of understanding and positioning the self – and of the limitations they encounter in the process. Rehearsing here describes a state of not being there yet, not only temporally with regards to the future, but also ethically. It means critically engaging with a broad range of possible stories about the future, which is key »if we are to avoid re-presenting the priorities and concerns of the present« (Liveley, Slocombe and Spiers 2021, 7). Such a practice of ›rehearsing‹ future possibilities is not equally accessible to all and also neglects the reality of all those who already live with the climate realities that for many people in the Global North are still part of an imagined future. However, a perspective on eco-political documentaries as rehearsal spaces for alternative futures can point to the unequal distribution of future agency among humans while acknowledging their narrative effort to counter apocalyptic expectations, to appeal to the self-reflexivity of subjects, and to call people to actively build a different future.

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