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‘Affective’ witnessing and testimony in contemporary environmental cinema

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This article advances that through incorporating registers of affect, environmental cinema might better approximate its socially and ecologically transformative goals. A film in which this has been attempted is Fisher Stevens’s *Before the Flood* (2016), and it is contended here that for this reason the film holds promise despite the weakness of some of its proposed solutions to climate deterioration. An analysis of the film is offered, during which certain of Julie Doyle’s, Nathan Farrell’s and Michael Goodman’s reservations about *Before the Flood* are countered, drawing particularly on Anton Van der Hoven and Jill Arnott’s arguments in favour of affective cinema. Indeed, a pro-affective film-making approach finds theoretical support in the perspectives of materialist ecological feminists and African philosophers on the role of affect and emotion in being fully human. The article concludes that affect should be recuperated and strategically included within cultural products and interactions, particularly if these aim to engender significant socio-cultural change.

Keywords: affect; emotion; environmental cinema; ecological crisis; climate change; witnessing; testimony

1. Introduction

The negative impacts of humankind's economic and related political and socio-cultural activities on the Earth are becoming difficult to deny. A myriad of data discloses the precipitous rate at which resource extraction, consumption, and pollution has increased over the last 200 years (Steffen et al. 2011: 848), undermining the future prospects of all living things on Earth. The centrality of anthropogenic activities in the current destabilisation of the planetary ecology is receiving increasing emphasis in the media and academic scholarship, especially ever since biologist Eugene Stoermer and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen labelled the current epoch the "anthropocene" (2000: 17) – a term speaking to the fact that "[hu]mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come" (2000: 18). While discussing the impacts of humankind's exploitation of the Earth falls beyond the scope of this article, to begin with some ethical reflections on our perpetration of climate destruction might help to disclose both the sheer depth of the crisis, and the extent to which proposals for 'technological fixes' to it miss the mark.

Eco-anarchist Murray Bookchin describes humankind's activities as those of "undoing the work of organic evolution...disassembling the biotic pyramid... [and] steadily restoring the biosphere to a stage which will be able to support only simpler forms of life [in a]...great reversal of the evolutionary process" (1986: 89–90). Bookchin thus frames our rapacious (ab)use of the ecosystem as an evolutionary sin of sorts; a grave perpetration of wrongs against other living things, which also constitutes our own undoing as a species. The depth of the wrongs committed is emphasised by animal rights advocate Richard Ryder when he argues against "the moral gulf we impose between ourselves and our evolutionary relations," on the grounds that "[a]bundant scientific evidence, based on neurological, behavioral, biological, and biochemical data, supports the view that many nonhumans can suffer pain and distress in the same sort of way that humans do" (2006: 89). This is an echo of Australian philosopher Peter Singer's argument for the "fundamental...similar[ity of]...the nervous systems of all vertebrates, and especially of birds and mammals...[which] makes it likely that the capacity of animals to feel is similar to our own" (1993: 70). Indeed, Singer adopts the radical position of "conscious disavowal of any assumption that all members of our own species have, merely because they are members of our species, any distinctive worth or inherent value that puts them above members of other species" (1993: ix). The environmental philosopher Hugh McDonald too ties human and nonhuman fates together, criticising in particular the strong anthropocentric tendency in philosophical ethics. Accordingly, he argues that "the environment is not a luxury whose value is debatable, but a requirement for all life, and particularly of human life, and thereby of all human values" (2014:

2). In view of this, McDonald proposes that to develop ethics for a sustainable and just society, "the distinction of human and environmental ethics ought to be superceded" (2014: 2). The ecosocialist Joel Kovel, in his turn, links environmental justice issues more directly to social ones, suggesting that the ecological crisis is experienced more severely by poor peoples, often indigenes, and indeed that this crisis consists of both an imbalance between 'man' and 'nature' and an imbalance between (mainly white) powerful people and (mainly black) marginalised peoples. In Kovel's view, "we cannot heal nature without radical social change, for a movement that limits itself to cleaning the environment while neglecting the splitting that disintegrates human as well as natural ecosystems serves the needs neither of nature nor of humanity" (2003: 99, 105-6).

Whether one approaches the ecological crisis from a perspective of environmental concern, of social justice, or a combination of these, 'civilisation' and us as the human beings which comprise it, evidently need to change. But for this, people need to be sensitised ethically; conscientised about how their activities impact negatively on the ecosystem and human and nonhuman Others. Additionally, they might be shown alternative, regenerative lifeways that would allow them to "tread softly" on the Earth (Princen 2010: 37) for the sake of justice and indeed survival itself.

Key to such a kind of transformation is becoming sensitive to the error of logocentrism and dualistic thinking, which prevail in contemporary societal interaction and organisation. In fact, materialist ecological feminists attribute environmental and social catastrophes to dualistic behaviours, which are rooted in false conceptual splits between reason and emotion, mind and body, man and nature, etcetera. They make the argument that such dualistic constructs render people, particularly those complicit with the prevailing socio-economic system, oblivious to their dependence on the physical world and on the care of others for their own survival (Mellor 2009: 254). 'Economic man' is also taught to shun emotions and feelings, and indeed has historically been posited as superior to his feminine counterpart on account of supposedly being rational while women are ostensibly too emotional to even constitute "a properly human presence" (Salleh 1999: 208). For ecofeminists, denial of the affective-emotional constitution of the (full) human being which is engaged in a metabolic dialectic with wider nature, engenders ecological breakdown and violence against sustaining Others. African philosophers likewise point out how emotion was denigrated in rationalism, ultimately aiding colonisation efforts. Black people were deemed inferior to white men due to their emotional bearing, which from a colonial perspective was suggestive of irrationality (Ramose 2002: 1). And as Senegalese cultural theorist Léopold Senghor indicates, even within the West a "distrust [of] the imagination and particularly the emotions" was incited on the grounds that they supposedly

“distract...or beguile...rational thought” (1986: 78). Senghor, though, promotes “emotion as ‘a manner of thinking’ or ‘way of knowing’” (Masolo 2010: 95) that is not inferior to reason and that is integral to being fully human. South African *ubuntu* scholar Mogobe Ramose likewise advances “the indivisibility [and]... mutual dependence of the ‘rational’ and the ‘emotional’” (2002: 94).

To return to this article’s object of study then: in light of the above ecofeminist and philosophical reflections, it is possible to argue that the recent turn to affect in environmental cinema – although severely criticised by some – constitutes a promising intervention for social change precisely because, from a holistic perspective, it is quite necessary to move away from a strict focus on and valorisation of rationalism and logocentrism. The global reach and popularity of cinema within a primarily media-orientated society, are also what makes film an important and potentially very impactful medium through which (informational, and increasingly more importantly, affective), knowledges of the ecological crisis in all of its facets can be conveyed. That this potential of the cinematic medium has already been recognised, is evidenced firstly, by the fact that films reflecting on the environment and its precarious condition abound. Aside from run-of-the-mill nature/wildlife documentary fare, on the rise are celebrity-fronted environmental documentaries such as Guggenheim’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) narrated by Al Gore, and the Conners sisters’ *The 11th Hour* (2007), as well as Stevens’s *Before the Flood* (2016), with both of the latter narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio. These and other ‘edgy’ environmental films have, furthermore, received attention in environmental scholarship. There, focus has fallen on the composition and potentially positive social and environmental impacts of the films in question (see for example, Bahk 2010; Hughes 2011; Weik von Mossner 2012; and Shanthini 2016). What also deserves further and certainly more serious consideration, is the recent change in tack within environmental cinema involving a move away from Attenborough-style scientific narrations towards what climate communication specialist Julie Doyle, media scholar Nathan Farrell, and social geographer Michael Goodman, term “After Data climate change celebrity intervention[s]” (2017: 15). In such interventions emotion and affect are becoming heavily emphasised, potentially with the aim of more effectively connecting with viewers and so moving them to action.

In what follows, reflections will be offered concerning this above-described ‘turn to affect’ in environmental cinema, particularly on the grounds that it constitutes an important development in the conceptualisation and crafting of film for pro-environmental social change. In this regard, Stevens’s *Before the Flood* will be offered as a pioneering example of affect-orientated environmental film despite the criticism it has received from Doyle, Farrell and Goodman. Briefly, these latter authors’ assessment of *Before the Flood* as an “After Data...celebrity

intervention" (2017: 16) will be considered, with emphasis falling on reasons for their scepticism about the value of including affective registers in such media products. After this, focus will move on to South African media and cultural theorists Anton Van der Hoven and Jill Arnott's study of affect and melodrama in post-apartheid-themed South African cinema. In their article, Van der Hoven and Arnott emphasise the worth, and indeed the indispensability, of affect particularly within films that deal with grave injustices and the perpetration of wrongs. In their view, such themes require recourse to means of communication beyond the discursive – means which affective registers offer. Some might object that there is a disjuncture between this article's object of analysis, namely the environmental film *Before the Flood*, and Van der Hoven and Arnott's objects of analysis, namely the reconciliation-orientated, post-apartheid-themed South African films Boorman's *In My Country* (2004) and Gabriel's *Forgiveness* (2004). However, it is maintained here that the *animus* of these latter films and that of *Before the Flood* are similar in their ontological depth, and they accordingly share certain characteristics – most notably the motifs of witnessing and testimony. So, having laid out Van der Hoven and Arnott's multilayered defence of the use of affective registers in the post-apartheid-themed films, attention will shift on to a re-evaluation of emotion and affect in *Before the Flood*. The findings of this analysis will serve to problematise Doyle and her colleagues' scepticism about including affect in environmental cinema. Then, to conclude, *Before the Flood* will be posited as a film that overcomes, in particular, the reason/emotion dualism criticised by Van der Hoven and Arnott, affect theorists, ecological feminists and African philosophers alike, in that this film takes seriously the importance and power of affect in communication that aspires to effect socio-cultural change.

2. Doyle, Farrell and Goodman's critique of *Before the Flood*

In their "Celebrities and climate change," quite recently published online as part of the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science*, Doyle, Farrell and Goodman detail the emergence of a more affect-orientated climate communication approach – one which they label "After Data" (2017: 16). They hold that this new approach to intervention for societal transformation, in which "emotional climate celebrities" (2017: 17) take centre stage, can be seen as a response to the apparent ineffectiveness of data- or informationally-orientated attempts to instigate meaningful pro-environmental change at policy level, and paradigmatic and behavioural changes among individuals (2017: 6, 17).

For one, in their analysis, they question the motivations behind celebrity presence in After Data climate interventions in the first place, drawing in this respect on, among other texts, a related study co-authored by Goodman himself.

There Goodman and his co-author, environmental studies scholar Maxwell Boykoff, argue that celebrities might well front “causes [simply] in order to ‘flesh out’ their brands and/or less cynically, give their personal politics a public space of exposure” (2009: 397). Yet, even if celebrity involvement is motivated by genuine concern, contend Goodman and Boykoff, one still should wonder whether celebrities’ advocacy can actually influence their fans’ or admirers’ behaviours in any meaningful “long-term” way (2009: 403). Neither Goodman and Boykoff in their 2009 article, nor Doyle, Farrell and Goodman in their 2017 piece, dismiss the possibility that celebrity activism could have an impact on audiences and positively influence the popular cultural landscape. However, they maintain their ambivalence by, for example, referring to “climate change celebrities” simultaneously as “commodities in human form that generate cultural and economic capital,” and as “caring commodities that embody, perform, and work to elicit the concerns, emotions, and behaviors of care...in audiences” (Doyle et al. 2017: 17).

The authors also discuss the “‘intimate’” status enjoyed by celebrities in most people’s homes, and celebrities’ correlative ability to reach “particularly...younger audiences” (Doyle et al. 2017: 11). Against this backdrop, they then consider the possibility that Stevens’s *Before the Flood*, fronted by Leonardo DiCaprio, might prove more impactful than *The 11th Hour* which this celebrity also narrated, precisely on account of *Before the Flood* forgoing “‘talking head’ appearances of... environmental movement figures” in favour of following a Hollywood celebrity’s emotional “‘witnessing’ journey as the UN Ambassador of Peace to see the first-hand impacts of climate change” (2017: 15). As Doyle, Farrell and Goodman note, *Before the Flood* deviates markedly from *The 11th Hour* since it traces “a significant personal journey for DiCaprio shot through with stories of his early childhood,” and places “DiCaprio front and center as our serious, earnest and caring, emotive and affective guide and male ‘lead’” (2017: 15). That this approach has been successful is suggested by the popularity of this film, “one of the most watched documentaries of all time” (2017: 16). Certainly, argue Doyle, Farrell and Goodman, *Before the Flood* is innovative for powerfully “articulating and fully accentuating emotion and affect through narrative arcs and encounters of the impacts of climate change” (2017: 18) on people and wider nature. This helps to strengthen viewers’ connection to the issues (and people) featured, with DiCaprio – an “affective pedagogue” as it were – suggesting through the film “how and in what ways we should feel about climate change impacts” (2017: 18). Still, the authors raise concerns about the genuineness of the performance: after all, the film’s director quite openly commented that DiCaprio was *framed* as an ordinary person. The implication being that DiCaprio’s was still a performance, even though it may have been the “performance of a non-performance” (2017: 18). Doyle and

her colleagues also advance that the film might lack grass-roots substance. That is to say, they wonder whether ordinary audiences or rather political and economic elites are actually the targets of this communication intervention. And related to this, even if the former are the ones being addressed, they ask what will happen “if emotion and affect...[as a] core entryway to raising awareness and spurring public action, don't gain the traction” (2017: 19) desired. This speaks to the issue of ‘affect fatigue’ discussed by, among others, ethics theorist Mary Phillips (2016: 57). Aside from this, Doyle and her colleagues are concerned that this film might be feeding viewers “solutions” consisting of “the typical ‘weak brew’ of more and better conscious capitalism,” etcetera (2017: 20).

Certainly, Doyle, Farrell and Goodman’s criticisms of many of the solutions proposed in this film are warranted, as are their observations concerning the ambivalent status of DiCaprio as a celebrity, commodity and elite on the one hand, and (at least apparently) as an everyman, an autonomous agent, and an activist on the ground, on the other hand. However, while they remain undecided about whether the inclusion of affect (and emotional celebrities) in environmental communication interventions such as *Before the Flood* could yield any real results (2017: 20), their study does not present this affective turn in a strongly favourable light. Their scepticism in this respect seems to echo critical realist disdain for affect and melodrama in cinema generally. But as will be shown in what follows, by drawing on Van der Hoven and Arnott’s defence of cinematic melodrama, such a stance comes at the expense of eclipsing the non-discursive potentialities of the medium of film itself.

3. Van Der Hoven and Arnott’s defence of melodrama in film

In their 2009 paper “The anxiety of affect: melodrama and South African film studies,” Van der Hoven and Arnott provide important insights into the affective capacities of the medium of film. In the process, they cast doubt on the legitimacy of rejecting emotionally-charged cinema out of hand. Van der Hoven and Arnott situate their argument in opposition to what they describe as a tendency in South African film criticism – one “strongly allied” to “a particular, modernist, tradition of critical realism” (2009: 162) – to “treat...[a film] as an essentially transcribable message-bearing narrative that can be assessed using criteria of representational verisimilitude” (2009: 163). In the critical realist vein of film analysis, focus mainly falls on “[n]arrative and dialogue,” thus preventing meaningful appraisal of other important elements of the film that stand “in excess of...narrative meaning” (2009: 163). Such elements are consequently overlooked, disparaged, or bracketed out as “aesthetic” (2009: 163). Van der Hoven and Arnott hold, though, that such privileging of

right representation...precludes serious engagement with the cinematic object itself, assuming that the most significant ways in which cinema engages its audiences are patently self-evident...[M]elodrama, as cinematic genre and cultural mode, explicitly draws our attention away from film as right representation to the communicative possibilities inherent in other dimensions of the cinematic experience. (2009: 163)

In their paper, they counter the bias against melodrama within film criticism, emphasising that the emotions and affects comprising melodrama are essential forms of non-discursive communication, not obscurers of meaning. Drawing on Christine Gledhill's (2002) account of the emergence of melodrama, Van der Hoven and Arnott delineate melodrama's purpose and its related democratising characteristics. They explain that melodrama came about due to three events: (1) the late-18th Century rise of the bourgeoisie and the resultant growing emphasis on the everyman; (2) the need for non-licensed theatres in England and France to come up with ways of communication "evad[ing] official restrictions" as only "Patent Theatres...were licensed to perform plays with spoken dialogue;" and (3) the 19th-Century "bourgeois refiguring of neo-classical tragedy" whereby "the sufferings and nobility of ordinary people" became central (2009: 164). Later, melodrama was transposed to the cinema among other media. And in its cinematic manifestation, advance Van der Hoven and Arnott, "[m]elodrama can be described as a mode of film-making which is primarily concerned with presenting powerful emotions and evoking affective responses in viewers" (2009: 163).

Given the above-described ways in which melodrama operates on its audiences, some might consider it manipulative, especially as melodramas often involve their creators "rais[ing] moral and social issues" (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009: 165). However, Van der Hoven and Arnott contest such criticism through evoking Peter Brooks's (1976) argument that "melodrama is an arsenal of expressive techniques aimed at communicating 'meanings which are ineffable, but nonetheless operative within the sphere of human ethical relationships'" (2009: 165). They add that "[i]n the process, melodrama makes apparent the catachrestic nature of language, the limited ability of the discursive to express deeply, personally felt moral truths" (2009: 165). In this regard, they advance that melodrama is articulated through other registers, and emotion and affect are forms of communication transcending the strictures of language. In particular, Van der Hoven and Arnott focus on why cinema is uniquely suited to affective communication. The resources, techniques, the very 'stuff' of film, like "camera-movement, colour and mise-en-scène," along with "film's capacity to render *visible* even the smallest detail" (2009: 165), are in their view what allow the

cinema a multifaceted communicative ability. So for them, film is much more than mere narrative and dialogue: it “can be seen to work in ways that th[e]... discourse [of realist criticism] is largely unable to account for” (2009: 171).

To support their theoretical defence of cinematic melodrama, Van der Hoven and Arnott revisit two South African post-apartheid-themed films which have in the past been criticised as deficient for their seemingly excessive utilisation of emotion and affect (at the expense of ‘right representation’) (2009: 166). John Boorman’s *In My Country* (2004) is a film portraying the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, mainly as seen through the eyes of a white Afrikaans poet and journalist, Anna Malan, who was covering the hearings for a South African broadcaster. The testimonies of the victims are represented through employing “a series of close-ups and medium close-ups to ensure the centrality of the[ir] *gestures*” (2009: 168). And while scenes in which these techniques are used might be described as ‘melodramatic’ in a pejorative sense, for Van der Hoven and Arnott such melodrama is a form of honesty rather than a failing. As they explain in relation to testimonies of such a nature: “the inarticulateness of the grief...requires an audiovisual medium for its presentation...[and t]he function of melodrama is to solicit just such a universalised, human response and to bypass the policing impulses of right representation” (2009: 169). Of the actual TRC hearings themselves, they likewise argue that “language frequently proved inadequate to the expression of inner states and so ‘other registers of the sign’ – gesture, posture, wordless cries – came into play” (2009: 167). Thus, argue Van der Hoven and Arnott, again drawing on Brooks (1976), melodramatic techniques and devices are what allow the film-maker to “‘exteriorize...conflict and psychic structure’” (2009: 171); in this case the inner turmoil or pain experienced by the witnesses portrayed in *In My Country*. The film’s denouement has also been criticised for pointing matter-of-factly at the repetition of violence in spite of the TRC processes, as Anna’s soundman, Dumi, is murdered. But for Van der Hoven and Arnott, this unsettling conclusion to the film remains true to the spirit of melodrama. This is because against “the progressivism of critical realism” which would see “evil...expos[ed]... so that it will never be repeated,...the melodrama of good and evil...recognises that repetition is probably a condition of human existence [and]...aims at... engagement with the ongoing possibility of evil and the continuing relevance of forgiveness” (2009: 170). In this respect, melodrama invites a ‘meta’ perspective on the unfolding of human life and actions in time, which remains fraught with tensions, contradictions, and repetitions. Such a broader perspective on (life) time, argue Van der Hoven and Arnott, is also communicated using landscape shots in the film. They hold that the latter operate both to give visual testimony to the notion of South Africa as “the ‘beautiful land’,” and to “extend...this film’s

perspective much further into 'history in the abstract'...to locate the diegesis in a larger history and, by doing so, to interpellate its viewers into a mode of *ethical* apprehension" mirroring the TRC processes "of healing, forgiveness and the deep desire for the return of a 'lost' humanity" (2009: 173). Viewers' experience of the film, the authors argue, is thus structured less by the narrative itself than by "a series of repetitions" typical of melodrama, entailing Anna's trips home, the scenes of testimony, and travel between various TRC hearing sites where occasion is offered for the inclusion of the landscape scenery discussed above (2009: 171-2). So, *In My Country* grants viewers an affective, rhythmic journey, an ethical trial and trail through horrors, losses, guilt, forgiveness and acceptance in relation to a terrible time in South Africa's history. Yet, this is done while insisting that violence is a recurrent phenomenon requiring constant engagement (2009: 170-1). In view of particularly its latter characteristic, the film transgresses against realism's demand for an intact, contained and "transcribable message-bearing narrative" which simply represents what is already known (2009: 163).

In turn, in Van der Hoven and Arnott's analysis of Ian Gabriel's *Forgiveness* (2004), which like *In My Country* has been found wanting from a critical realist perspective, the film's melodramatic features are carefully detailed and discussed. The authors make a convincing case that far from constituting excesses, the affects conjured and emotions inspired via various cinematic techniques in this film are crucial to the cinematic experience, and indeed bring to greater fruition the potentialities of the medium of film. *Forgiveness* follows the journey of Tertius Coetzee, a former apartheid-era policeman who murdered Daniel, the activist son of the Grootboom family who live in Paternoster, in the Western Cape of South Africa. In the film, Coetzee travels to Paternoster to seek the family's forgiveness, and during his repeated visits to the Grootbooms, he encounters much resistance, hate, outrage, and yet later compassion and a form of forgiveness – but not without battling his inner demons and his inability to forgive himself. Coetzee's recurring visits to the Grootbooms structure the viewer's experience at least as much as the narrative itself does, and each of his encounters with the aggrieved family members shows a development of their relations, for better or worse. Each visit entails certain actions such as greeting, being seated, exchanging questions and answers, and related to these and other forms of repetition, "a structure of gestures that function metaphorically to represent the occult social and personal processes of forgiveness" (2009: 169). While the Grootboom family's reactions to Coetzee, and Coetzee's own responses, might seem hyperbolic, this is strategic. True to melodrama, there is no "psychologising" in the film, and so instead *Forgiveness* involves what Brooks has described as the "'exterioriz[ing] of]...conflict and psychic structure'...in a way that is consciously intended to evoke a direct emotional response" from viewers (Van der Hoven and Arnott

2009: 171). Furthermore, like the denouement of *In My Country*, the ending of *Forgiveness* thematises the repetition of wrongs in the same breath as it signals the possibility of transforming hatred into compassion and care. One of Daniel's friends who travelled to Paternoster with the aim of killing Coetzee turns out to be the person who betrayed Daniel to the police in the first place. Still, he ends up murdering the former policeman against the wishes of Daniel's sister who had in effect forgiven Coetzee. Rather than being products of pessimism, such unsettling endings might be understood as pointing to the "never-completed task" (2009: 171) of achieving humanity and justice. They thematise the complexity of life itself, just as the melodramatic actions give expression to the complications, psychic and interpersonal, experienced by people. Like *In My Country*, *Forgiveness* offers to viewers a 'meta' perspective, extending well beyond the story of a man seeking forgiveness and a family struggling to forgive. As Van der Hoven and Arnott point out, in this film "the viewer's assent to the drama unfolding...is intended to happen in a different register" to realism: a register "which involves acknowledging the 'grandiose spiritual force' of forgiveness itself" (2009: 170). Although Van der Hoven and Arnott do not really comment on the landscape images included in *Forgiveness*, incorporation of shots of the Karoo, of the ocean with its lapping waves, and of the Grootbooms' coastal home subjected to the forces of nature, might be suggestive of the fact that human processes (such as loss and forgiveness) are all unfolding against the backdrop of the vast rhythms and courses of the nonhuman world in which people too are embedded.

Ultimately, Van der Hoven and Arnott make the case that affect matters *in* cinema, as it constitutes a means of communicating directly with viewers, of giving outward expression to internal struggles, and of making felt the universality and enduring nature of social and moral issues. Affect also matters *to* cinema, as it allows the medium of film to come into its own. That is, because film is far more than just text, it should involve more than mere transcription and/or re-presentation of what is already discursively known. In short, "the visual can be deployed in ways that bypass the constraints of the discursive" (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009: 175). What must also be borne in mind is that affective/melodramatic film might have "a more significant social impact on ordinary viewers than do the 'progressive', usually realist, discourses of the modernising middle class" (2009: 174). Certainly, Van der Hoven and Arnott are not alone in advancing such ideas, in this respect citing corroborative research on Bollywood and Nigerian film (2009: 174).

It is important to note that the employment of Van der Hoven and Arnott's study in this article by no means implies that no other research on the role of affect in cinema exists. Book-length studies have been dedicated to affective cinema, one of the most notable being Greg Singh's *Feeling Film: Affect and*

Authenticity in Popular Cinema (2014). There, Singh theorises a “relationship between viewer and viewed [which] is itself an active intermediary, working at various levels...to render the cinematic encounter and realise the perceptual field within which empathy and meaningful connections may occur in time” (2014: 4). Indeed, he advances “a co-creational indeterminate psychological relation between viewer and viewed...an ambiguous and dialectical tension of affect, emotion and expression between [them]” (2014: 4). In his turn, another leading film theorist, Steven Shaviro, emphasises that “[f]ilms and music videos, like other media works, are machines for generating affect, and...subjectivity,” and he pays particular attention to “the figure of the media star or celebrity...[whose] ambivalent performances are at once affectively charged and ironically distant” (Shaviro 2010: n.p.). However, the framework offered by Van der Hoven and Arnott is privileged here because of the resonances between Van der Hoven and Arnott’s objects of analysis and that of the present study, particularly in relation to themes of witnessing, testimony, and the perpetration of wrongs.

4. Reappraising the affective turn in Stevens’s *Before the Flood*

Despite the apparent leap involved in following up a discussion of Van der Hoven and Arnott’s defence of melodrama in relation to South African post-apartheid-themed films with an analysis of affect in an environmental documentary concerning the global ecological crisis, there are more thematic similarities between them than initially meet the eye. The three resonances most significant to the ensuing discussion are as follows: (1) The post-apartheid-themed South African films deal with the atrocities of (race-based) social engineering, and the environmental documentary thematises the atrocities committed by (mainly Western) affluent human beings led by processes of capitalist-consumerist cultural engineering. (2) The South African films analysed by Van der Hoven and Arnott portray major injustices against humanity such as racial bias, political tyranny and murder, and *Before the Flood* explores similarly profound injustices against ecology – the impact of which also extends beyond the nonhuman world to include loss of meaning for the affluent, and disenfranchisement and destitution for the poor (who often happen to be people of colour). (3) *In My Country* and *Forgiveness* explore feelings and emotions relating to loss, grief, blame, guilt, forgiveness and hope, and *Before the Flood* likewise allows the viewer to explore similar sets of feelings and emotions through encountering activists, politicians, scientists, and suffering peoples via the proxy of DiCaprio. In view of such resonances, and in light of Van der Hoven and Arnott’s praise of the melodramatic elements in the post-apartheid-themed films as suiting their

subject matter and ontological orientations, it stands to reason that the potential positives of affect in *Before the Flood* should too be explored in earnest.

In contrast to the 2007 production *The 11th Hour*, which was presented by DiCaprio but in which the latter withdrew after each of his bridging narrations to “let those with genuine, deep knowledge” (Fildes 2007: 46) take centre stage, in *Before the Flood* DiCaprio plays the leading role. He undertakes a witnessing journey together with viewers, to see what humankind has done to the planet, to other species, and to often less financially fortunate groups of people. Along the way, politicians and scientists battling to get governments and populations to take notice of the peril in which we all find ourselves, are also given time to vent their frustrations and express their anxieties. Furthermore, and of no small significance, in comparison to *The 11th Hour*, in *Before the Flood* DiCaprio adopts a very personal approach to viewers. For example, viewers follow him behind the scenes on a film set, and more importantly, DiCaprio unpacks for them key moments of his life story which led him to becoming a climate activist. He also appears to allow viewers access to intimate, private, aspects of his self-understanding through, for example, openly expressing feelings of guilt, self-doubt, hope, fear over potential hypocrisy, and a range of other emotions regarding his individual role in (and yet also against) anthropogenic climate change. Even the title of the documentary relates to DiCaprio’s infancy. It derives from Hieronymus Bosch’s triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), a copy of which, DiCaprio explains, was hung above his crib and made a lasting impression on him. In his interpretation, this artwork represents the path of humankind from innocence, to perpetration of wrongs, and finally to ultimate destruction – should people not change their ways. What is also important, from DiCaprio’s perspective, is that the outer part of this artwork features the crystal-encased Earth during Creation, before the emergence of humans and other animals, leading him to suggest that Bosch might have “wanted to show the fragility of our planet.” So, the film can be seen to constitute an intervention in response to Bosch’s warning: it aims, in whatever small way possible, to help prevent ‘the flood,’ or, human-driven omnicide. The quasi-theological, transcendent framing provided in this way is complemented by DiCaprio’s meeting with Pope Francis, to whom he gives a Bosch art book that includes the above triptych. These elements operate to position *Before the Flood* as a quasi-religious drama of sorts, similar to *In My Country*, *Forgiveness*, and other melodramas focused on the perpetration of wrongs, human suffering, and the pursuit of redemption.

Like *In My Country*, *Before the Flood* airs the testimonies of victims and their spokespeople, but in relation to climate destruction and the related loss of livelihoods and/or quality of life. To name but a few examples, featured in the documentary are an Inuit subsistence hunter and guide in the Canadian Arctic,

who talks of a marked decrease in the integrity of the ice and a correlative increase in the speed of ice melt; the Mayor of Miami Beach, Florida, who speaks of the danger in which the city and state are from rising sea levels; an environmentalist in Beijing, who elaborates on how his people are choking on their cities' polluted air even as they actively seek solutions; the previous President of Kiribati, who explains how his people are being turned into climate refugees through sea level rise; and an Indian environmental and political activist, Sunita Narain, who tells of how climate change is destroying the lives of rural people in the global South. Also, for instance, Narain takes DiCaprio to witness one such incident of devastation, where the onion crops of already-impoverished farmers have been destroyed by the territory receiving half a year's rainfall in the space of five hours. In these and other scenes of testimony on the part of the victims and/or their spokespeople, in the presence of DiCaprio as witness to their stories, the individuals concerned walk with him through the landscapes negatively impacted by climate change. As the camera follows and captures them, it often moves in a way that imparts to the viewer the sense of walking or standing alongside these people. This makes it all the easier for the viewer "to emotionally and viscerally connect with and through" (Doyle et al. 2017: 18) them, and to feel part of the discussion and the experience of witnessing. *Before the Flood* abounds with the gestures and expressions of these victims and spokespeople quite visibly going through a range of difficult emotions such as sadness, anger, despondency, and fragile hope. Close-ups of the faces of the aggrieved – even of those who remain silent – allow for the capturing of meaning and feelings. That is, the camera records every gesture, helping to convey what these individuals cannot put into words or what words cannot properly communicate: meanings that lie beyond discourse and so defy the faulty "logocentric assumption that language is a fully adequate means of expression" (Van der Hoven and Arnott 2009: 168). As film critic Béla Balász once argued, "[f]acial expression is the most subjective manifestation of man, more subjective even than speech, for vocabulary and grammar are subject to more or less universally valid rules and conventions" (1979: 289). Balász added that in the close-up of the face, "we see, not a figure of flesh and bone, but an expression...we see emotions, moods, intentions and thoughts" (1979: 290). The cinematographic choices made in this film, combined with background music (and at times the absence thereof), complement the dominant emotions tied to each scene of testimony and witnessing, thus facilitating the viewer's experience of the same or comparable feelings.

Such melodramatic techniques and devices, as well as the performances themselves, invite the viewer to identify with the persons and to feel with and for them. Similar approaches are adopted in scenes featuring scientists (such as Piers Sellers and Michael Mann) studying climate change, and eminent

politicians (such as John Kerry and Barack Obama) trying to put the brakes on the ecologically disastrous global trajectory. These individuals' expressions – and the sympathetic reactions of DiCaprio to them – are also captured through medium close-ups and close-ups. And in all such scenes, not only through words but also through tone of voice, and especially through facial reaction, DiCaprio displays deep respect and sympathy for these people, against the backdrop of imminent global climate catastrophe. There is, though, an interplay between this intimate frame of (emotional) human testimony and reaction, communicated via localised shots, and the film's 'meta'frame of planetary instability to which the viewer is alerted by means of certain narrative elements, and numerous shots of both irremediably devastated, and still-pristine, landscapes. This interplay gives viewers opportunities to grow increasingly aware of the global scale of the disaster facing all life on Earth, and yet also of the localised forms of suffering this entails, which is where the use of melodramatic techniques and devices is particularly important. Had *Before the Flood* failed to convey affects and induce emotions particularly in its featured scenes of testimony and witnessing, the issue of climate change might well have remained apersonal or impersonal, and viewers might well have stayed distanced voyeurs rather than becoming emotional participants.

Parallels also exist between *Before the Flood* and *Forgiveness*, the other South African melodrama analysed by Van der Hoven and Arnott, insofar as both films focus on the physical, and especially the emotional, journey of a central character bearing witness and at times testifying himself. Obviously, there is a vast difference in character and history between the actual Hollywood celebrity Leonardo DiCaprio, and the fictional apartheid-era murderer Tertius Coetzee. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify parallels between their respective witnessing journeys, and to contemplate how both face dilemmas which stand either to paralyse them or to assist them in transforming themselves (and potentially others) for the better. While Coetzee travels to Paternoster to seek forgiveness from the Grootboom family whose son he had murdered, making repeated visits to them and going to the cemetery where Daniel is buried, DiCaprio over a two-year period travels across the globe to witness the destruction caused by a system with which he is complicit. Admittedly, unlike Coetzee and other typical central characters in melodrama, DiCaprio does offer the viewer a background story of psychological motivation to his becoming a climate activist: one involving his encounter with Bosch's triptych during infancy; his visits to the Natural History Museum as a child to escape the concrete jungle of downtown Los Angeles (and his anger at learning about extinct species there); and his much later meeting with Al Gore who explained to him that the climate crisis is the priority of our time. Providing such historical/psychological reasons for a character's action sees *Before the*

Flood deviate somewhat from melodrama, but this deviation is tactical because it deepens connection between DiCaprio and viewers. In short, by furnishing viewers with intimate details of this Hollywood icon's earlier experiences, encounters, and personal challenges, they can more easily feel for him and identify with him, so permitting a more intimate witnessing journey alongside him, since he is thereby characterised as someone ordinary and trustworthy. To return to similarities between Coetzee's and DiCaprio's performances, though: Coetzee struggles to make peace with himself and to fathom how the Grootboom family could ever forgive him for his crime, and likewise DiCaprio discloses his struggle with his conflict-ridden position – as an advocate of change yet also a Hollywood celebrity who benefits royally from the (ecologically destructive) status quo of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, DiCaprio speaks of his struggle to try to reconcile these two aspects of his existence, which often pull him in opposite directions, and the difficulty of reconciling the two is what makes certain environmental activists and scholars sceptical of his efforts – as evidenced in the work of Doyle, Goodman and their other colleagues, discussed earlier. However, DiCaprio's self-reflexivity in *Before the Flood* on this issue can be said to undermine such scepticism to some extent at least. Furthermore, DiCaprio seems well aware of the stock criticism levelled at an actor trying to engage in movement politics. He points out that climate change denialists make the self-same criticism to try to delegitimise the issue of climate change: *they* claim that DiCaprio's – an actor's – involvement reveals the climate change issue to be a joke. Moreover, in an address at the United Nations, DiCaprio makes it clear that pretence – which he has made a very successful career out of – is not enough when it comes to tackling environmental problems. That is, he advances that unlike in the movies where “fictitious characters...solv[e] fictitious problems,” the world is facing a very real and complex crisis requiring actual solutions.

That said, Doyle and her colleagues are correct in pointing out that DiCaprio in *Before the Flood*, just like in *The 11th Hour*, does tend to advocate more ‘moderate’ solutions to the ecological crisis. These, for the most part, amount to what American political and environmental theorist Thomas Princen refers to as (inadequate) “technological fixes,” which “absolve us of responsibility for finding behavioral and structural fixes, the only changes that can endure” (2010: 4). How DiCaprio responds in the scene in which Narain challenges him over the average American citizen's levels of consumption relative to those of others (be they Europeans or Third World peoples), is quite telling in this regard. Rather than fully supporting Narain's argument that Americans must drastically curb their consumption and truly undergo a radical cultural shift, DiCaprio automatically declares that Americans are quite unlikely to change in such ways. He then simply, meekly expresses the hope that clean energy will become more affordable, such

that the lifestyles people are used to can be maintained in a 'greener' way. Aside from his words, close-ups revealing his physical (and especially facial) reaction to Narain's criticism, disclose his discomfort with and sensitivity over Narain's uncompromising demand for genuine change, involving meaningful sacrifice on the part of the wealthy. Also telling is DiCaprio's rather melodramatic reaction in another scene, where South African-born 'green entrepreneur' Elon Musk rather misleadingly tells him that the world would need only 100 gigafactories (producing electric cars and batteries), to move away from fossil fuels. A medium close-up of DiCaprio, who wore a serious expression before, discloses great change at this news: his facial expression relaxes and shows immense relief that the solution is that simple, and he offers words to match. The problem, though, is that it is not. Technological giants like Panasonic as well as other energy experts have explained that the technological capacity Musk envisions is yet to be developed, and the environmental impacts of the batteries themselves are grossly underestimated by him (see for example, Westervelt 2015; and Martin 2017). Similar reservations over green technological 'solutions' have been voiced in light of the grave environmental impacts of the materials needed for wind turbines and solar panels, the energy outputs of which are supposed to be stored in batteries such as those manufactured by Musk's company (Shanthini 2016: 6, 8). Musk's claims in the film do, however, suit the film's apparent agenda when it comes to identifying conveniently technophilic and culturally undemanding 'solutions'. Through careful selection of words, certain background scores, gestures, and expressions of emotion, the viewer can quite powerfully be led to believe and to feel that ready solutions to the climate crisis do exist. This, though, is where the affective nature of *Before the Flood* becomes a *pharmakon* – a cure and a poison at once. Earlier it was argued that the affective and emotional acts of testimony and witnessing showcased in the film facilitate viewers' intimate and deep connection – through DiCaprio – with those bearing the brunt of existing environmental problems. However, the flip side of this same development of deep connection with the "emotive and affective guide and male 'lead'" (Doyle et al. 2017: 15), is that viewers may all the easier be misled by DiCaprio and the technologically optimistic 'experts' whom he interviews and so fervently believes in.

5. The promise of affect for environmental cinema

The use of affective devices and emotional performance in *Before the Flood* – particularly in relation to and by DiCaprio – true to melodrama pulls viewers directly into the world opened up through this film, inviting them to experience nadirs of despair in certain instances, and (albeit at times misplaced) upliftment in others. Moments of (mis)use of the power of melodrama in this film do not, however,

provide sufficient reason for regarding the recent turn to affect in environmental cinema as a mistake to be undone. To clarify, although affect turns out to be a double-edged sword in *Before the Flood*, like with any new development it could be harnessed more strategically in subsequent environmental films. After all, as has been argued in the preceding pages, affective, emotion-inducing film techniques in *Before the Flood*, also allow viewers to draw close to those most gravely affected by climate change and environmental destruction, and so such techniques can constitute potentially significant tools for environmental and social conscientising, and hopefully meaningful cultural change.

Film-making that embraces registers of affect (which exist on the plane of the 'emotional') rather than remaining exclusively concerned with conveying data or information (which exist on the plane of the 'rational'), is after all progressively coming to terms with nothing less than the holistic character of being (human) – of embodying and being part of the larger, relational-ecological metabolism of the Earth. Such an approach to cultural creation resonates with those theoretical and philosophical perspectives, discussed earlier, that problematise the bias against affect and emotion – a bias that, along with other manifestations of dualistic thought, ruptures relations between people themselves and between people and wider nature. If it holds that dualistic conceptions, attitudes and actions are the causes of the ecological crisis – a crisis that entails grave human and environmental impacts – then a non-dualistic approach to film-making, involving concerted and increasing inclusion of registers of affect, remains indispensable if we seek to use film as a mode of intervention for meaningful social change.

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