

Pro-Environmentalism in *The End of Meat* (2017) and *Living the Change* (2018): A Thematic Analysis Through an Ecocriticism Lens

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Abstract

The rise in the making of environmental documentary films has called for a richer dimension of critical analysis of the relationship between humans and nature to understand the media's intended messages better. Ecocriticism comes into play in interpreting literary and visual texts with an engagement of ecological thinking. This article proposes a thematic approach using ecocriticism to analyze *The End of Meat* (2017) and *Living the Change* (2018). These two films were selected because they offer solutions in practice by groups of people in different corners of the world in response to the call for action to tackle the intensity of environmental issues. This analytical study used an ecocriticism lens to investigate pro-environmentalism's determinants by speculating words, phrases, sentences, emotional expressions, activities, ambiances, and locations. The analysis revealed three themes: morality for the environment, connectedness to nature, and environmental citizenship. The study extracted cognitive and affective perspectives and discussed coherent characteristics of pro-environmentalism. The study found that the intended messages encircled around improving the balance between humans and nature, fostering empathy for animals and lands, and promoting conscious consumption and production.

Keywords Ecocriticism; Environmental documentary films; Morality for the environment; Connectedness to nature; Environmental citizenship

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Introduction

The past two decades have seen a significant rise in the making of environmental documentary films portraying the causes of ecological destruction laced with scientific facts to send warning messages. The ecological disaster documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) has become a remarkable success in heating a debate on environmental issues that had been difficult to call for attention in the global political community (Bondebjerg, 2014). Filmmakers use documentary films as a medium to promote social change and are motivated to excel in honing their crafts for several reasons: documentary films influence ideas and actions, the severity of environmental issues calls for a more effective and meaningful ethical review, and pro-environmentalism movement has become global and diverse (Karlin & Johnson, 2011). Documentary films in Asian societies share similar reflections to those in Western societies regarding human destructive activities, ecological catastrophes, expressions of sympathy and empathy, and an urge for a more balanced world (Yee, 2024).

As environmental documentary films encompass textuality, visuality, reality, and skepticism revolving around the contexts of humans, nature, culture, and society, ecocriticism can help to explore the relationship between humans and nature. Ecocriticism studies how literary texts and other forms of cultural production disseminate values contributing to ecological thinking in the hope of finding solutions for all creatures to live in harmony (Buell et al., 2011; Ivakhiv, 2008; Oppermann, 1999). Considering that environmental documentary films serve societies as vessels to distribute environmental consciousness, ecocriticism is a tool to interpret and intensify media messages with its principles that accommodate the critical analysis of creative work to broaden the understanding of the position of humans in the ecosphere.

The study used a thematic analysis method to shed light on morality for the environment, connectedness to nature, and environmental citizenship. The study employed these three themes from major concepts in pro-environmentalism, and they are identifiable in two full-length environmental documentary films entitled *The End of Meat* (2017) and *Living the Change* (2018). The study selected the two films because they show practical solutions carried out by groups of people worldwide in response to the global call for action due to the intensity of environmental issues. *The End of Meat* tells about pathways to animal liberation and eating plant-based as a mainstream. *Living the Change* shows stories of people pioneering changes in a sustainable and regenerative way. This study aimed to contribute to the growing literature on film ecocriticism and the understanding of the determinants of pro-environmentalism. The outline of this article includes an overview of environmental documentary films and ecocriticism, followed by a thematic analysis of the selected films.

Environmental documentary films

Duvall (2016, pp. 8-15) explains that environmental documentary films usually consist of interviews with knowledge experts, footage, and narrations to present the intended topics. Duvall proposes that the components of making a documentary film include the following: (1) nature of the topics, (2) rhetorical and persuasive strategies, (3) balance between facts and emotions, (4) stylistic approaches, (5) aesthetic elements, and (6) anticipation of audience expectation. Nichols (2017, p. 22) identifies six modes of documentary representation as follows: (1) expository mode, which consists of interviews, footage, and narrations with argumentative logic; (2) performative mode, which features filmmaker's involvement as the focal point; (3) observational mode which engages an unobtrusive camera with minimal intervention and interpretation; (4) participatory mode which involves direct engagement or interaction between filmmakers and subjects; (5) reflexive mode which intends to call viewer's attention to the filmmaking process; and (6) poetic mode which offers composition of visual and rhythmic qualities with vocal commentary.

Willoquet-Maricondi (2010, pp. xi, 45, 46) explains that a group of scholars has decisively used the term ecocinema, coined by Scott MacDonald, to refer to an emerging genre of ecological documentary films in the early 2000. Willoquet-Maricondi specifies that ecocinema (1) is a tool for activism, (2) conveys environmental value and behavior, and (3) aims to raise consciousness to stimulate intentions and inspire changes that strive for humans to make choices with an awareness of the consequences on the local and global scale. Duvall (2016, p. 35-48) explains that the history of documentary films (1) started with short snippets of actual events in the pre-1900s, (2) moved to the theme of life in natural and cultural settings in the 1920s and 1930s with *Nanook of the North* (1922) considered the first feature-length documentary film, (3) became a prominent propaganda tool for war by governments of the United States and European countries in the 1930s and 1940s, (4) entered into Disney's interest in producing nature films in the 1940s and 1950s, (5) explored sea life in the 1950s through American made *The Sea around Us* (1953) and French made *The Silent World* (1956) in which they present ocean depth in colors, and (6) linked to television networks that offer documentary series in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom from the 1960s to the 1990s with variety focuses ranging from environmental threats and environmental health to environmental equity.

Karlin and Johnson (2011) gather the roles of documentary films as follows: (1) influencing ideas and actions, (2) disseminating knowledge, (3) creating enjoyment, (4) evoking emotion, (5) increasing awareness, (6) mobilizing action, (7) promoting social change, (8) stimulating policy deliberation, and (9) altering and setting new agenda. Karlin and Johnson explain that communication technology helps to connect filmmakers, activists, and viewers. At the same time, the advent of media convergence allows filmmakers to communicate to prolong their campaigns through websites, social network services, and other communication means, including information kits, seminars, and screening programs to call for collaboration, mobilize action, and drive social movement which can result in social change.

Regarding the effects of ecocinema on the audience, Willoquet-Maricondi (2010, pp. 45-46) explains that the films alone cannot provoke large-scale social changes; however, if used as a medium to foster discussions in the classroom and community, films are crucial in disseminating awareness and understanding which is the necessary step in the process of transforming perception and motivating social action. Freytag & Possler (2024) suggest that documentaries that offer mixed reflections of feelings and conservation thoughts evoke pro-environmental intentions better than those that solely depict pristine nature.

Ecocriticism

Glotfelty and Fromm (1996, p. Xviii) define ecocriticism "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." Oppermann (1999) explains that ecocriticism aims to undertake the tasks on: formulating a conceptual foundation for the study of interconnections between literature and the environment, finding a commonality of coexistence between humans and nonhumans, and stimulating attempts to address environmental issues. Buell et al. (2011) assert that the definition of ecocriticism has broadened its scope to cover the growing diverse interests and needs across disciplines so that ecocriticism performs "in a spirit of environmental concern not limited to any one method or commitment" and aims to "explore the environmental dimensions of literature and other creative media." One of the widest definitions offered by Garrard (2023, p.5) is "the study of the relationship of the human and the nonhuman throughout human cultural history."

Marland (2013) explains that ecocriticism began with the movement in environmental writing in the 1960s and what Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, markedly propelled it at a time when awareness of the environmental crisis was growing. Marland explains that ecocriticism reached one of its prominent stages when Cheryll Glotfelty's *The Ecocriticism Reader* was launched in 1996 to provide a comprehensive review of aspects and concerns on the growth of ecocriticism.

Buell et al. (2011) state that literary criticism seriously engaged environmental history and social sciences in the late twentieth century when ecocritics tried to understand the environmental transformations of urbanization and techno-modernity. Oppermann et al. (2014, pp. 1, 4) explain that ecocriticism has used multiple theoretical methods with international alliances contribute to a worldwide movement and has become the study of human experience with nature across cultures.

Buell et al. (2011) explain that the principles of ecocriticism have been constructed based on distinguished characteristics of the waves of theoretical development as follows: (1) the first wave of the development of ecocriticism began in the 1990s with highlights on (1.1) equitability between human and nature, (1.2) preservation of nature, (1.3) place attachment at a local scale, and (1.4) affirmation of ecocentrism; and (2) the second wave in the later decade arrived with considerations on (2.1) metropolitan landscape, (2.2) industrialization, (2.3) sociocentrism, (2.4) collective ethical stance, and (2.5) multiple forms of media. Buell et al. state that theoretical development of the second wave derived from the need to engulf a more comprehensive array of issues including (1) environmental justice, (2) ecofeminism, (3) trans-species relationship, (4) climate change, (5) biodiversity loss, (6) mythography, (7) postcolonialism (8) alliances between scientific and humanistic methods, and (9) modes of literary representation to achieve truthful reflections of the natural world.

Informed by the fundamental principles of the preceding waves, Marland (2013) explains that the third and fourth waves have coexisted since the early years of the 2010s and have detailed the following: (1) the rights of nature that founded the extension of environmental justice under the framework of biospheric egalitarianism as expressed by local community members speaking on behalf of a mountain for its rights to exist in a proper relationship with the surroundings, (2) the complexity of interconnection between human or animal bodies and the material world as toxins seeped into water resources and birds fed plastic waste to their babies, (3) the biological intervention as developed in transhumanism, and (4) the envision of local places around the globe into one whole earth. Weik von Mossner (2020) remarks that, in recent years, there has been an engagement of cognitive and affective facets in the development of ecocritical analysis.

Thematic analysis of *The End of Meat* (2017) and *Living the Change* (2018)

The End of Meat and *Living the Change* share aims to present environmental solutions in practice to communicate that there are alternative ways for a human to live a happy and healthy life with a minimum negative impact on nature. These two films have stories of changes that fall within the range of interests and considerations about ecocriticism. *The End of Meat*, initially in German, highlights communities of animal advocates, vegans, and non-meat food producers in European countries and the United States. *Living the Change* offers stories from agents of change with their insights into regenerative living in New Zealand.

The study chose a thematic analysis method to explore determinants of pro-environmentalism in the two films. Thematic analysis can help to organize, describe, and interpret research data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The study explored the determinants using an ecocriticism lens to speculate anecdotes and actions. The study also examined emotions, beliefs, values, and attitudes contributing to pro-environmentalism. The early steps of the study involved repetitive viewings of the two films to familiarize them with the film contents. To generate the themes, the study borrowed major concepts in pro-environmentalism to define and name the themes. Transcriptions, visual texts, and actions in scenes were the material to highlight elements relevant to the concepts. The highlighted elements included words, phrases, sentences, emotional expressions, activities, ambiances, and locations. The study extracted cognitive and affective perspectives according to the recent trend in the ecocritical analysis mentioned earlier. The interpretive process to extract and organize data required repetition. The final mapping revealed three themes: morality for the environment, connectedness to nature, and environmental citizenship. Each theme consisted of subjective and objective factors that share coherent

characteristics based on the theme's definition borrowed from concepts in pro-environmentalism. The study designed the narration of each theme to incorporate data extracts and draw upon relevant theories, gaining insights into determinants of pro-environmentalism that are reflected in the two films.

Morality for the environment

Morality is an individual's ethical framework, and moral foundations for the environment have psychologically drawn a link among values, considerations, and actions (Jia et al., 2017). Moral engagement with an environmental issue can usher a person to act regardless of scientific arguments or economic incentives (Adger et al., 2017). The norm activation model developed by Shalom H. Schwartz explains the causal chain of determinants that affect pro-environmental action. Schwartz (1977) explains that personal moral norms and human values can motivate altruistic action in the way that when a person realizes negative consequences to others (awareness of adverse consequences), that person restrains harmful actions (ascription of responsibility) through moral capacities. Paul C. Stern and colleagues employed the causal chain in developing the Value-Belief-Norm theory. Stern (2000) explains that the theory posits that personal moral norms are activated by beliefs that valued things are threatened, which can then drive actions to reduce the threat. The two films capture the causal chain. The awareness of threats to nature has triggered the altruistic motivation of agents of change to minimize impacts on natural resources.

Compassion for nonhuman species and concern for natural beings have been illustrated throughout *The End of Meat* and *Living the Change*. Animal lovers in *The End of Meat* highly respect the life of nonhuman beings and they condemn the operation of industrial animal farming to be the major cause of massive deforestation, animal cruelty, and human health hazards. To mitigate these threats, some animal lovers refrain from eating meat, some establish animal shelters, and others support research and development for cruelty-free protein. Agents of change in *Living the Change* highly regard all organisms and they denounce that modern industrialized living causes excessive use of energy, accumulation of unnecessary possessions, and wasteful consumption. To mitigate the exploitation of natural resources, some agents of change practice chemical-free agriculture, some move away from cities, others make best use of recycling opportunities. Individuals and groups in these two films have initiated environmental actions in the hope of restoring the earth's ecological balance for a great cause. Verbal data that mirrors emotions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that inclined toward morality includes "We'd fallen in love in a pretty crazy way and the thought of getting rid of her (Esther the Pig) was terrifying." and "No birds, no animals, no insects, no people should be harmed. Every living being has the right to live."

The two films briefly take viewers to an apprehension of the evolution of the human-nature relationship that has relentlessly developed to assert that humans must move toward ecocentric ways of thinking. *The End of Meat* features profound bonding between different species, showcasing the redemption of Hilda the Sheep from a garbage pile and the adoption of Esther the Pig into a human home. The perspective of cattle and swine as a source of labor and food has diversified when egalitarianism permeates aspects of animal use and welfare. The film conveys the plights and conditions of animals to provoke realization and reflection that should bring about empathy and responsibility. *Living the Change* reflects the notions of conformity with nature. Agents of change set forth to create an alternative food-consumption system that supports natural farming, establishing regenerative agriculture that reduces carbon emissions, and turning away from the possession of nonessentials. Anecdotes and narrations in the film point to a perspective that focuses on the conscious consideration of living in harmony with all natural things on earth. Economic activities and technologies aiming to serve the endless growth of human societies have become a pivotal argument in the film. The narrator argues, "Our entire economy is built on getting us to buy, consume, dispose,

and re-consume things". This realization and sense of responsibility for nature conservation reflect the idea that "We have not lived beautifully on earth and beautifully with each other".

Ecocentrism and anthropocentrism are two perspectives underlining the moral obligation to interact with the environment. Ecocentrism: believes that humans are not the center of the sphere (Cocks & Simpson, 2015); sees environmental systems as a sole source of nourishment for life (Gray et al., 2018); considers all beings possess intrinsic value regardless of human acknowledgment (Rolston III, 2003); and affirms the right to existence of all things in their natural state (Washington et al. 2017). Anthropocentrism: regards humans as the most significant species and superior to other forms of life (Cocks & Simpson, 2015); proclaims the right of humans to exploit other species upon motives and desires (Hovardas, 2012); and insists on oppressive desire on natural beings (Molina-Motos, 2019). As discussed earlier, the two films stand firm on their ecocentric way of thinking through agents of change's respect for the intrinsic value of fauna and flora.

Connectedness to nature

Connectedness to nature has become a research interest in reconnecting humans with nature because the growth of industrialized societies has popularized an anthropocentric viewpoint and has separated humanity from the natural environment (Lumber et al., 2017). Connectedness to nature is an association between the human self and the natural environment (Schultz et al., 2004). Richardson et al. (2020) explain that connecting to nature refers to a sense of affiliation with nature, which outdoor activities and nature-related tasks can enhance. They state that it benefits mental well-being and helps formulate pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors that contribute to a more sustainable relationship with the natural world.

The study traced pro-environmental emotions, beliefs, values, and attitudes within the thematic elements of animal shelters and regenerative farms. A cinematic portrayal of emotional experiences during close encounters between rescued animals and the agents of change under a warm outdoor ambiance in *The End of Meat* has been intended to point out the bright side of human traits. Visitors to animal shelters interact closely with animals by cuddling them, feeding them, or looking at them. Some visitors adopt plant-based eating after having experienced these interactions. Activists in the film suggest that visiting animal shelters can help to explore the human mind. Opportunities to associate with rescued animals could lead to an increase in the level of concern for nonhuman beings. Getting to know diverse characters of individual animals and watching them roaming around offer positive psychological effects. The film asserts that the companionship between humans and animals is not only limited to functional purposes but also engulfs emotional connection, leading to respect and responsibility. *Living the Change*, living off the grid, growing vegetation, and tending to regenerative livestock farming have allowed humans to immerse themselves fully in the natural environment. The film introduces the idea that the alternative choices of living arrangements away from cities without the use of advanced technology are convincing, and the results constitute peace of mind and happiness. Advocates and agents of change in the film point out that living near and in harmony with the natural environment can add to reducing negative impacts and increasing environmental ethics. An agent of change says, "It was the choice wanting to be more immersed in my environment and more directly connected with my needs where my food was coming from."

Nisbet et al. (2020) explain that connectedness to nature can benefit human health by increasing psychological well-being, reducing mental distress, spawning positive emotions, and generating vitality. Pritchard et al. (2020) conducted a meta-analysis study. They found that several studies found a linkage between connectedness to nature and human well-being. They also found that a higher level of connectedness to nature produces a greater eudaimonic happiness (meaningful fulfillment). Studies on human-nature relationships have employed the perspective of biophilia, an innate tendency to relate to nature and other forms of life (Lumber et al., 2017). Biophilia has been used to discuss

environmental ethics (e.g., Bump, 2014; Wilson, 1993) because affiliation with nature can increase concern for the natural environment. Bondings between human and natural beings in the two films mirror human desire to seek connection with nature which fosters an appreciation of all living things.

Environmental facts and figures are presented in the two films to attract the audience's attention. After advocates and agents of change discuss a certain topic, the narrator in *The End of Meat* brings up relevant facts and figures to emphasize the urge to protect nature and inform the next issue. There have been unimaginative amounts of greenhouse gas emissions by livestock production, fossil fuels used per day, farmed animals killed each day, and plots of forests taken up for cattle glazing. *Living the Change* chooses to blend numerical facts in anecdotes from advocates. The two films use rough figures to provide a big-picture view of the discussed issues. Using disastrous facts and figures, the films show that human reconnection to nature must become essential in redefining our place in the ecosphere to diminish negative influences on other beings. The mainstream economic and industrial models leading to the ecological crisis described as the age of Anthropocene have brought multiple challenges, including the destruction of earth systems and the degradation of the human psyche (Westoby et al., 2022). To reach a harmonious balance, there has been a persistent rise over time in attempts to recognize the natural world as an interconnected unity to rectify fragmented environmental practices caused by viewing the world as partial and fragmentary and seeing nature as an infinite resource (e.g., Juanda & Azis, 2023; Ma et al., 2021; Marshall, 2002, pp. 8-10).

Environmental citizenship

Environmental citizenship is recognized as a key factor for environmental protection and conservation (Dobson, 2007). Balunde et al. (2020) characterize environmental citizenship by efforts to use values and beliefs to educate environmental citizens. Takahashi et al. (2017) explain that environmental citizenship engages in political activities and can be distinguished by the measurement scale proposed by Stern et al. (1999) which includes questions related to membership in environmental organizations, signing petitions, donating to environmental groups, and voting for environmentally friendly candidates. Ecocritical literature in the form of digital short story texts can influence the involvement of students in environmental campaigns including donations of time and labor to nature conservation activities (Juanda et al., 2024). The European Network for Environmental Citizenship (ENEC) has described environmental citizenship.

“Environmental Citizenship” is defined as the responsible pro-environmental behaviour of citizens who act and participate in society as agents of change in the private and public sphere, on a local, national and global scale, through individual and collective actions, in the direction of solving contemporary environmental problems, preventing the creation of new environmental problems, achieving sustainability as well as developing a healthy relationship with nature. “Environmental Citizenship” includes the exercise of environmental rights and duties, as well as the identification of the underlying structural causes of environmental degradation and environmental problems, the development of the willingness and the competences for critical and active engagement and civic participation to address those structural causes, acting individually and collectively within democratic means, and taking into account inter- and intra-generational justice (ENEC, 2018).

The study considered ambiances, locations, and public participation activities in the two films as a thematic element because they incorporate a mixture of great determination, perseverance, and passion for pro-environmentalism. In *The End of Meat*, activists set barricades on a road to stop trucks so that they can give water to thirsty pigs on transportation to a slaughterhouse. Advocates have staged demonstrations against animal cruelty to exercise environmental citizenship to liberate farmed animals. Investing in biotechnology for non- meat protein sources is another concept within

environmental citizenship. The film states that biological intervention can lead to possible solutions to global warming, which has become a familiar premise in the business and civil sectors. Research and development teams contend that biotechnology in plant-based and cell-based protein production should become central to food innovation for the world population. Facts and figures about cattle farming, highlighting the eradication of native forests, greenhouse gas emissions, and biodiversity loss, have driven activists to advocate for the total elimination of industrial livestock production. Advocates have repeatedly echoed reflections of egalitarianism and nonhuman rights, proposing ideas to include animals as citizens of cities and to create blueprints that accommodate coexistence in the urban landscape. An advocate says, "But it is the idea of the shift and of the composition in the painting to try it (establishing an urban public space that is shared by humans and cattle animals) out and see what happens." The idea of the unity of nature has been reflected through establishing the state-endorsed animal cruelty-free zone in the world's first vegetarian city, Palitana, India, and through the conceptualization of *Zoopolis*, which aims to form an animal-inclusive society. In *Living the Change*, agents of change establish different missions to achieve putting new directions into practices as follows: collecting organic waste for compost as business venture to support local ecology, pioneering in alternative living arrangements, and organizing community events where local experts offer free services to repair appliances, clothes, and bikes. An environmental citizen fulfills his obligation to use and care for the earth by earnestly producing compost from human feces for his land. A group of concerned environmental citizens has established a local currency in the community market by utilizing a voucher system that promotes local businesses and resources while counteracting potential money value depreciation.

Larson et al. (2015) found that city residents had more recognized and practiced environmental citizenship actions than rural residents. They also found that donating money to pro-environmental activities had the lowest participation rate compared to voting to support environmental policies, writing letters about environmental issues, and signing petitions. They note that environmental citizenship actions were not actively performed compared to household conservation activities because environmental citizenship actions needed great determination and resources. However, their study found that environmental citizenship actions had been distinguished as one of the most possible means to improve environmental quality. Ribó (2024) pushes forward the idea that aligns with *Zoopolis*. He encourages the transformation of citizenship to denizenship through the concept of co-inhabitation.

Conclusion

The intended messages of *The End of Meat* and *Living the Change* revolve around improving the balance between humans and nature, fostering empathy for animals and lands, and promoting conscious consumption and production. The use of thematic analysis through an ecocriticism lens helped this study to identify three key components of pro-environmentalism that have been employed by agents of change in the two films to achieve their goals. The advocacy on restoring the earth rests upon morality for the environment, connectedness to nature, and environmental citizenship. This study contributes to the growth of film ecocriticism and the comprehension of pro-environmentalism's determinants. This study is limited by the fact that all interpretations have been made from a cultural perspective different from those of the filmmakers and agents of change in the films. Future studies should look into environmental documentary films of countries in the Global South to add to findings of determinants of pro-environmentalism in different cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds.

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