

# [Ecocritical and Metamodernist Perspectives in Postmillennial Vegan Documentaries]

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**[Abstract]** *This paper strives to examine the narratives of veganism in the documentaries Cowspiracy (2014) and Seaspiracy (2021) from ecocritical and metamodernist perspectives to uncover how the narrative of the importance of veganism is framed and to determine whether the metamodernist oscillation is present in these films, i.e., oscillation “between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5). In addition, the ecocritical perspective is examined in order “to give voice to ‘nature’ that has been silenced” (Rangarajan), with the goal of examining how these cultural texts offer an alternative to the binary of nature vs. culture.*

**[Keywords]** *Cowspiracy; Seaspiracy; vegan studies; ecocriticism; ecocinema; metamodernism*

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, veganism as a practice has become popularized across the Western world, particularly in Anglophone countries. Documentaries exploring health concerns connected with the consumption of animal products as well as the environmental impact of the meat and fishing industries, such as *Cowspiracy* (2014) and *Seaspiracy* (2021), have undoubtedly contributed to this popularization. Presented as a lifestyle and an identity rather than merely a diet, “veganism constitutes a subject position that allows for environmentally responsible consumer choices that are viewed, particularly in the West, as oppositional to and disruptive of a capitalist system that is largely dependent upon big agriculture” (Wright 727). And while some research has suggested in the past that using environmental arguments as a reason for reducing meat consumption in one’s diet has been proven less successful than using arguments based on the health or well-being of nonhuman animals (Cordts et al.), a preliminary study examining the effects of watching *Cowspiracy* (2014) on young adult audiences found both a significant change in awareness of the environmental impact of animal agriculture and a significant change in attitudes towards consuming less meat, as opposed to watching another similar documentary (Pabian et al.). These results point towards the importance of investigating the narratives presented in this documentary, as well as a similar documentary from the same producer, *Seaspiracy* (2021), to understand the structures these films use in order to be more persuasive than their predecessors.

This paper examines the narratives of veganism and animal product consumption presented in these documentaries from ecocritical and metamodernist perspectives, aiming to shed some light on the techniques these films use, both visually and narratively, to frame the importance of veganism. In addition, the paper also attempts to locate these documentaries in the cultural landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, utilizing the theory of metamodernism. In their essay *Notes on Metamodernism*, Vermeulen and van den Akker explain that while the modern outlook vis-a-vis idealism and ideals could be characterized as fanatic and/or naive, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or skeptic, the current generation’s attitude – for it is, and very much so, an attitude tied to a generation – can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism. (Vermeulen and van der Akker 5)

This paper attempts to analyze the selected documentaries through the lens of this informed naivety and pragmatic idealism and to uncover whether such attitudes and concepts can be found in contemporary vegan documentaries. Metamodernist perspectives are also examined because Vermeulen and van der Akker claim that climate change is one of the main threats that push sociocultural sensibilities away from postmodernism: “it infuses doubt, inspires reflection, and incites a move forward out of the postmodern and into the metamodern” (Vermeulen and van der Akker 5). Within the scope of this paper, it is predicted that these documentaries offer a route towards metamodernist oscillation “between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivete and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity” (Vermeulen and van der Akker 5). Furthermore, these authors discuss the rise in neo-Romantic sensibilities within meta-

modernism, with the explanation that this “Romanticism is about the attempt to turn the finite into the infinite, while recognizing that it can never be realized. As Schlegel put it, ‘that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected’” (Vermeulen and van der Akker 8). This paper will thus look closely at the possibilities of interpreting the chosen vegan documentaries from this neo-Romantic metamodernist perspective and at the instances where these films utilize the aforementioned concept of infinite becoming or turning “the finite into the infinite”.

Another perspective utilized in this paper is that of ecocriticism. The main concern of ecocriticism is “to give voice to ‘nature’ that has been silenced, as well as to other marginalised presences that are rendered voiceless due to the logic of the binaries which cast nature and culture as opposites” (Rangarajan). Within this concept, it is predicted that these documentaries, as cultural texts, offer an alternative to the binary of nature vs. culture. Concerning this binary, it is also relevant to examine the overall perspective regarding humans vs. nonhuman animals, as ecocritical writings and ecocinema examinations often do: i.e., to see whether the text in question adopts an anthropocentric perspective, which is “the belief that humans are the central elements in an ecosystem” (Baddour 152), a biocentric one, meaning that living beings are seen as the most important, or an ecocentric perspective, which recognizes “intrinsic value in all lifeforms and ecosystems themselves, including their abiotic components” (Washington et al. 35). This discussion on different perspectives is tied to the concept of speciesism, which denotes “not only an assumption of human supremacy but the belief that members of some nonhuman species are morally more important than others” (Roeder 292). It is presumed that the vegan documentaries examined here will likely present, and advocate for, either biocentric or ecocentric values.

In addition, the perspective one adopts about the world, be it anthropocentric, biocentric or ecocentric, may be directly influenced by the culture of consumerism, or commodity culture: “a culture organized around practices of production and consumption wherein nearly everything is reduced to its material cost” (Clark 180). This influence may be manifest on a political level, deciding whether change can be implemented through the legal system, or rather through “a major overhaul of the dominant paradigm of capitalism” (Clark 180); another level is positional, based on the presumed value and importance of humans within the world:

At one end of the scale, ecocentrism argues that the natural world has its own inherent value, apart from what use humans might put it to, and that human beings are just one more species in the animal kingdom, no more valuable than insects or fish. At the other [...] notions like conservationism and wise use value sustainable, environmentally friendly practices mainly for their anthropocentric value. (Clark 180)

It is thus necessary to examine whether these documentaries promote veganism from a biocentric or ecocentric perspective, placing value on living beings or on ecosystems as a whole, or whether they promote veganism as a sustainable option for its ‘anthropocentric value’, which would point to a speciesist narrative even within vegan discourses.

The two documentaries selected for this paper share a common denominator in the figure of the American filmmaker and activist Kip Andersen, who produced, directed, wrote, and starred as the main narrator of *Cowspiracy*, released in 2014. Andersen also produced *Seaspiracy*, released in 2021, although the role of the director and the main narrator was shifted to Ali Tabrizi, another filmmaker and activist. The documentaries were selected for their accessibility via the streaming platform Netflix as well as for their popularity. Analyzing the documentaries *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* from an ecocritical perspective involves examining how they address environmental issues and the human impact on ecosystems. Some of the key issues of ecocriticism were selected for analysis: the depiction of anthropocentric, biocentric or ecocentric worldviews, the discussion on animal agriculture through the lens of speciesism, and the contradictions of the narratives of sustainability as opposed to consumerism.

## [1] Anthropocentrism vs. Biocentrism vs. Ecocentrism

In order to discuss how these documentaries portray human-centered views (anthropocentrism) and whether they advocate for a shift towards more ecologically balanced perspectives (biocentrism or ecocentrism), it is necessary to examine the narrative structure employed in them.

Both films share a similar premise, captured through an almost identical narrative: a young man from a Western country (American in the case of Andersen, British in the case of Tabrizi), who has liked nature, nonhuman animals, and/or the ocean since childhood, tries to follow the standard ecological advice, such as changing the lightbulbs to a more environmentally friendly variety, using wooden cutlery instead of single-use plastic forks, collecting trash for recycling, etc. However, this young man soon realizes that such small changes are not impactful enough and the situation is getting worse, which makes him set out on a journey of discovery to find the root of the problem.

Throughout both documentaries, the narrative guides the audience through a shift from an anthropocentric worldview (the view of the filmmaker himself) to a more biocentric view. In addition, both documentaries appear to consider the planet Earth as a living organism in its entirety – at the beginning, both filmmakers use rhetoric that suggests a certain distance between humans as a species and the rest of life on Earth, whereas towards the end, a more interconnected view is adopted.

For instance, in *Cowspiracy*, Andersen claims that from a young age he wished to help people “live together in balance with the planet sustainably forever” (Andersen and Kuhn), speaking as if people and the planet were two separate entities. Later on, the view of a former Greenpeace board member echoes a similar sentiment when speaking about the actions taken by environmental organizations: “the environmental organizations are failing us, and they’re failing the ecosystems” (Andersen and Kuhn). Once again, the “us” in the statement, representing humans, is separated from the idea of any ecosystems in question.

Visually, biocentrism as “an extension of ethics, a broadening of humans’ conception of global community to include nonhuman life forms and the physical environment” (Branch xiii), i.e., a belief that humans are part of the planet’s ecosystems, is represented in *Cowspiracy* very clearly: the speakers who support Andersen’s journey, and are in favor of veganism and fighting animal cruelty, are often shot with a green background, in a garden or a park, and lit in a warm light, while the representatives of organizations that fail to address animal agriculture are usually recorded indoors, with only office walls behind them, and the colors of the scene are usually colder, bluish and darker. In addition, the camera angles create a specific balance of power between Andersen and the interviewees, based on whether they support or contradict Andersen’s own opinions: “the employees at the Dept. of Water Resources are visibly below the camera angle, depicting a feeling of vulnerability. It puts Andersen (speaking off-screen) in the more powerful position, leading the viewer to believe that Andersen is the more dominant force and thus correct” (Blundell). On the other hand, another speaker, doctor Oppenlander, who is fully in favor of Andersen’s opinions, “is even with the camera, removing this power dynamic. This angle conveys a sense of equality between Andersen and Oppenlander” (Blundell).

Andersen also visually represents his questioning of his own position – in the middle of the documentary, once he finds out that most environmental organizations refuse to speak to him about animal agriculture, and that some of the activists writing about the topic have been monitored by the FBI, Andersen appears in a nighttime shot of the cityscape, as merely a silhouette – and he turns his back on the city lights to denote his turn away from the capitalist civilization, only to be followed by a shot of him, still in the dark, but this time looking out at the sea, attempting to re-connect with nature in some way. It is at this point that the scene shifts to an image of a sunrise over a body of water and over mountains, without any humans in the frame, as well as to images of a sunlit forest: with these images, Andersen narrates the following conclusion, regarding the topic of animal agriculture and its impact on the planet’s ecosystems: “This was about all life on Earth, hanging in the balance of our actions” (Andersen and Kuhn). At this point, Andersen ascribes responsibility for the impact of animal agriculture to humans; however, the life on Earth that he speaks of is no longer divided into humans and nonhuman animals, or humans and the planet. The all-encompassing word “life” refers to a much more ecocentric worldview, representing a marked shift from the beginning of the documentary. When talking about his shift to veganism, Andersen claims: “I decided instead of eating others to eat *for* others” (Andersen and Kuhn). Humans and nonhuman animals are once again contained within one umbrella term, “others”, and again, the idea of the reunification of the two “others” (the human and the nonhuman animal) into one entity is represented visually as well, with the image of Andersen biting into an apple and then offering it to a cow, both connected over the metaphorical and literal fence by the food item from which both can benefit. In this ending, Andersen also displays quite a metamodern “narrative of longing structured by and conditioned on a belief (‘yes we can’, ‘change we can believe in’) that was

long repressed, for a possibility (a ‘better’ future) that was long forgotten” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5), believing in a change in people’s everyday diet that would create a possibility for a more sustainable, thriving world.

*Seaspiracy*, released seven years after *Cowspiracy* (although the origins of the making of this film date back to 2015), adopts a slightly more biocentric worldview earlier in the film. *Seaspiracy* begins with the same story of a young man wishing to protect the oceans and to clean up plastic waste on the beaches; however, Tabrizi allows for a deeper interconnection between the ocean and the dry land, or between the health of the ocean and the health of the entire planet, humans included, much earlier on in the film. Nonetheless, some progress is made towards a more biocentric worldview in terms of the narrative itself and in the words that are chosen to discuss the issues of overfishing and ocean pollution. For instance, Tabrizi uses the word “species” to refer both to fish and to humans: “Countless species journeyed across the Atlantic Ocean to find themselves in these waters. A refuge for mating and feeding. Living in as close to harmony and balance as I’d ever seen. But there was another species, journeying to these waters for a very different purpose” (Tabrizi). Tabrizi thus pointedly criticizes anthropocentric and speciesist practices of over-exploitation of natural resources as standing against “harmony and balance”, which is visually represented by the juxtaposition of marine life together with humans working towards environmental goals, set against the dehumanized machinery of industrial fishing embodied by the images of large fishing vessels. In addition, Tabrizi, much like Andersen, is often framed against the backdrop of natural imagery, such as the ocean, representing a very similar journey to Andersen: an oscillation between anthropocentric beliefs and a move towards biocentrism or even ecocentrism.

Perhaps the starkest moment pushing *Seaspiracy* even further towards the biocentric view is Tabrizi’s discussion with a whale hunter from the Faroe Islands towards the end of the film, in which the whaler expresses that to him, the life of a whale has the same value as the life of a chicken or a salmon, and thus by killing one whale instead of two thousand chickens, the whalers only take one life for the same amount of meat. While Tabrizi comments that he does not agree with everything the whaler had said, he also expresses surprise at never having thought of the lives of nonhuman animals “in their own right” (Tabrizi), only in terms of sustainability and ecological impact.

Both these documentaries thus embody a consistent shift from an anthropocentric view towards a more biocentric one, reflecting this journey both visually and narratively. Compared to other vegan documentaries, *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* deliberately follow a more environment-based, ecocritical argument rather than focusing on the rights and wellbeing of nonhuman animals or using the audience’s “more egoistical desire for their own and their loved ones’ health” (von Mossner 248). Even more interestingly, when viewed through the lens of metamodernism, these documentaries offer an alternative way of reading their message. If metamodernism “moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find” (Vermeulen and van den Akker 5), these two films may strive to convince the audience despite the impossibility of convincing everyone, pushing forward the biocentric



perspective despite the potential unfeasibility of completely abandoning all anthropocentric views. This attitude is thus consistent with the neo-Romantic turn in metamodernism, where the infinite becoming is valued despite the impossibility of reaching the goal fully.

## [2] Speciesism and Animal Agriculture

The consistent shift from an anthropocentric view towards a more biocentric or ecocentric one in these documentaries also highlights another issue that is commonly addressed in much ecocritical writing: speciesism. Introduced in the 1970s, the concept of speciesism refers to the “prejudice or attitude of bias in favour of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (Singer 6). In other words, speciesism is a practice of treating members of one species as morally superior to members of other species, including the justificatory practices for this belief. Speciesism is more commonly used in the context of nonhuman animal rights to suggest discrimination and prejudice against nonhuman animals and to promote respect and an extension of moral consideration to nonhuman animals (Rangarajan).

Both documentaries discuss how certain species are favored over others for human benefit and link this favoritism to environmental degradation. In *Cowspiracy*, Andersen visits a duck farm and witnesses the slaughter of two ducks, which is also shown very graphically on screen. The graphic images of the duck’s head being cut off are juxtaposed against the image of the farmer’s daughter in the background, watching the slaughter, and the farmer’s memories from his childhood, when he used to be unhappy about slaughtering rabbits but then, in his own words, he “got used to it” (Andersen and Kuhn) when he was about five years old. The documentary thus not only brings to the forefront the issue of speciesism and the killing of another living being; it also proposes that people are innately discontented with the killing, unless they are desensitized to it: in other words, that speciesism is a learned approach rather than an intrinsic one. Andersen also comments on the disconnection of meat-eating from the reality of killing: eating meat is, according to him, “a disconnected, abstract fact” for most people (Andersen and Kuhn).

In contrast to this anthropocentric, speciesist disconnect, Andersen himself appears in a close-up shot, acting visibly distressed, and claims that he could not do the killing, which also means, for him, that he would not want someone else doing it for him. The gory scene is followed by Andersen discussing how he was scheduled to attend another slaughter but could not stand it, and then a chicken is shown being saved by Andersen, who takes the chicken to a rescue farm. This narrative coincides with the critique of speciesism later used in *Seaspiracy* regarding the value of a life of any living creature.

*Seaspiracy* follows a similar structure, using words such as “species” or “Earthlings” to refer to the living creatures inhabiting the Earth, making less and less distinction between humans and other creatures as the film progresses. One of the more memorable quotes from the film, for instance, comes from a founder of an organization that actively fights against illegal fishing. The Captain, Paul Watson, equates Earth to a spaceship and

the oceans to a life support system, and the fish and the organisms of the sea are compared to a crew keeping that system running; overfishing means that “we’re killing off the crew” (Tabrizi). In this quote, fish are conceptualized through the use of the word “crew”, commonly associated with people; on the other hand, the word also hints at the common goal of the “spaceship” population, both fish and human: to preserve the earth as a functional, habitable environment for all. In addition, both documentaries address to some degree the processes of exploitation of humans and the impact of animal agriculture and fishing on workers’ lives: however, the way these concerns are addressed bears much similarity to how the respective directors talk about animal exploitation. Tabrizi’s voice-over in *Seaspiracy* adopts a similar tone when talking about dolphins being slaughtered off the shores of Japan as when discussing slavery aboard fishing boats in Thailand, shaping the narrative through the anti-speciesist lens of the importance of all lives, human or nonhuman.

In both documentaries, a sort of oscillation exists between the anthropocentric and biocentric views, between the modern enthusiasm for finding solutions that would be viable for the entire ecosystem (which in both films is represented by a plant-based diet and products) and postmodern irony, which is translated into a critique of sustainability, both as a term and a practice.

### [3] Sustainability vs. Consumerism

In *Cowspiracy*, Andersen discusses seemingly more sustainable practices such as grass-fed farming or organic milk production. However, eventually he comes to the conclusion, whether by himself or by interviewing producers of grass-fed beef or organic milk, that these practices are not sustainable for the entire population of the planet. In addition, a worker on an organic milk farm is shown expressing the idea that “the biggest part of sustainability, to [him], the number one thing on the list should be profitability” (Andersen and Kuhn); sustainability is thus linked to consumerism and capitalist practices of exploitation for profit.

*Seaspiracy*, made seven years later, takes this argument even further by casting doubt on the term “sustainability” itself. Tabrizi’s journey towards an understanding of sustainability takes him through the exploration of so-called sustainable fishing and the discussion of bycatch, the fish inadvertently caught in the fishing nets of commercial fishing boats despite not being the target species – including dolphins, sharks, seals, or whales (Tabrizi). The documentary presents the idea that sustainable fishing does not avoid this bycatch, but keeps the numbers low enough for it to be labeled sustainable. In addition, labels such as “dolphin-safe” can be bought by companies, and the documentary presents this option as a tool to get customers to buy the product without actually guaranteeing that the products have not harmed any dolphins (Tabrizi). While available scientific data disproves these claims (De Sousa), the narrative of popular media such as *Seaspiracy* may influence popular opinions on certain practices. After witnessing a whale hunting event on the Faroe Islands, the so-called Grind, described as sustainable by



various media, Tabrizi's voice-over follows gruesome images of sea water being colored completely red by the whales' blood: "In the chaos of everything that happened, I finally understood sustainability. It just meant that something could continue on and on forever regardless of how much suffering it caused. In reality, the Grind was about as sustainable as you could get. But I began to wonder whether sustainability was truly the right goal for how we took care of the ocean" (Tabrizi). Sustainability is thus labeled not only as a potentially exploitative practice, but also as a morally wrong goal.

In this discussion of sustainability, *Seaspiracy* swings the imaginary pendulum of metamodern oscillation between enthusiasm and hope on one side, and irony and melancholy on the other, further into the more pessimistic end of that spectrum. The potential reason for this can be linked to the disillusionment of environmentalists like Andersen or Tabrizi with governments' actions over the past decade, which is also seen in the narrative that both films construct around the laws, policies and regulations that are employed (or are not employed) to protect the environment. The fundamental premise of both films is that animal agriculture, in the case of *Cowspiracy*, and industrial fishing, in the case of *Seaspiracy*, are the main causes of pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and other environment degradation processes – and that the organizations that claim to protect the environment, from NGOs to government agencies, do not talk about the issue at all, or even attempt to conceal the truth due to the influence of meat and fishing industries. Both Andersen and Tabrizi go through the same narrative of looking at the websites of organizations such as Greenpeace, Oceana, Plastic Pollution Coalition and others, only to be either completely denied any interviews, or to be given interviews with representatives who seem to avoid the issue of animal agriculture, fishing, and/or animal product consumption, or even make light of it. This carefully assembled narrative of a hidden truth about the environment has been criticized by the aforementioned organizations themselves as misconstrued and misrepresented with the goal of eliciting an emotional response in audiences (De Sousa).

Thus, both documentaries make use of a globally observable phenomenon, a phenomenon foreshadowed by the very titles of these films. While some studies show that there has not been a significant increase in the numbers of people who believe conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al.), this conspiracy rhetoric has nonetheless entered not only popular media but also political discourse. By channeling the tools of this discourse and framing the issues of animal agriculture and industrial fishing, or the issues of environment degradation caused in large part by these industries, within the narrative of a conspiracy controlled by some dehumanized entity, Andersen and Tabrizi, as well as their creative teams, have managed to promote their films by exploiting significant controversy and a narrative style that is known to the public from several other recent discussions.

The approach to this conspiracy narrative structure is also markedly different in these two films. *Cowspiracy*, released in 2014, mostly attempts to reveal a "truth" which environmental organizations refuse to even talk about or mention on their websites, seemingly operating on the premise that if people know about the impact of animal agriculture, they can, and will, change their behavior. The marketing for the film itself prom-

ises that Andersen investigates “the most destructive industry facing the planet today [and] why the world’s leading environmental organizations are too afraid to talk about it” (cowspiracy.com). The supposed reason, as presented in the film, leads the audience to believe that environmental organizations will not, or cannot, address meat consumption for fear of losing profit or political support. Research has shown that this narrative might be true to a certain extent, due to the fact that environmental non-government organizations (NGOs) have historically been set up “to focus more broadly on energy, forests, oceans, pollution and waste, and do not make a habit of pushing the public to make major (unpopular) lifestyle changes. Instead, environmental NGOs focus more on persuading government and industry to make policy-based and supply-side changes” (Freeman 168).

The film ends with a scene in which Andersen feeds a cow an apple over the fence, a seeming reunification of the two species over a common denominator, plant-based food, and Andersen’s voice narrates his hopes of eating “for others” and relates the experience of switching to a vegan diet as spiritual: “It felt good. It was an alignment. And we see this movement, not just about providing cheaper, inexpensive food that everyone can have, but also a spiritual move” (Andersen and Kuhn). Sustainability is only mentioned briefly at the end of *Cowspiracy*: “All this talk about sustainability sounded like our planet was on some sort of life support. And I don’t want her to simply survive or to sustain, but to thrive. Life today is not about sustainability. It’s about thrive-ability” (Andersen and Kuhn). Through the lens of this final statement, thrive-ability is possible, and Andersen goes even further, calling for people to save the world, further implementing the narrative of truth-seeking, spiritual heroism through adopting a vegan diet. Again, metamodern neo-Romanticism is apparent in this suggested quest for truth and heroism, calling for a constant state of becoming more and more environmentally conscious.

*Seaspiracy*, however, doubts the very concept of sustainability, as Tabrizi’s journey takes him to visit organizations that are directly responsible for labeling fisheries or specific products as sustainable or “dolphin-safe”, even visiting the European Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries. All these agencies and organizations, in comparison to those in *Cowspiracy* who merely remain silent about the issue, are represented as actively working to conceal the impact of fisheries on the environment: for instance, by allowing producers to use the dolphin-safe or sustainable labels while (as it would seem in the film) knowing that these labels are meaningless and that they are unable to guarantee that the customer will get what they think they are paying for. While these claims have also been challenged by scientific research and by information about the process of attaining these labels provided from the organizations themselves (De Sousa; Booth and Arlidge), the narrative of *Seaspiracy* does not allow its audiences any doubt. Thus, it can be said that *Seaspiracy*, a 2021 film, embodies an even greater degree of mistrust towards the authorities, with the same solution – making personal choices with a political and environmental goal in mind. Both documentaries strategically aim to address “the debilitating sense of powerlessness reported by people all over the world who do care about climate change but feel that their individual actions do not matter on the larger scale of things” (von Mossner 253). The impact of such films cannot be easily dismissed: for

instance, in a classroom setting, almost all out of 20 students claimed that viewing *Cowspiracy* altered their views on animal agriculture: “they all said they would recommend the film to a friend and, remarkably, they all believed that *Cowspiracy* has the potential to change other people’s attitudes toward meat consumption” (von Mossner 258-259).

However, where *Cowspiracy* seems to be making an argument against people eating meat in general, the *Seaspiracy* documentary ends with a recommendation that people should avoid seafood and fish consumption until such a time when fishing activities are “properly regulated” (Tabrizi). And where Andersen calls for people to change and save the world through their food choices, Tabrizi, in the words of a marine biologist he interviews, presents a much more sedate plea to action: “no one can do everything, but everyone can do something” (Tabrizi). In this, Tabrizi’s narrative is less neo-Romantic and more skeptical of the process of becoming; the impossibility of reaching the goal is more starkly addressed in *Seaspiracy*.

Both documentaries also address consumerism as one of the reasons for environmental degradation. In *Cowspiracy*, Andersen includes an interview with Daniel Simon, a lawyer, an advocate for sustainable consumption and the author of *Meatonomics: How the Rigged Economics of Meat and Dairy Make You Consume Too Much – and How to Eat Better, Live Longer, and Spend Smarter* (2013). Simon argues that the additional costs of animal agriculture are paid by everyone, regardless of whether they eat meat or not:

I’ve added up the costs of animal food production that the producers don’t actually bear themselves. These are the hidden costs, or the externalized costs, that they impose on society. And those are in categories like health care, environmental damage, subsidies, damage to fisheries, and even cruelty. [...] Whether you eat meat or not, whether you’re an omnivore or an herbivore, you are paying part of the costs of somebody else’s consumption. So that when somebody goes into a McDonald’s and buys a Big Mac for \$4, there’s another \$7 of costs that’s imposed on society. I’m paying that. You’re paying that, whether you eat meat or not. (Andersen and Kuhn)

Andersen thus potentially seeks to persuade his audience not only that meat-eating is unsustainable and morally wrong, but that it also creates additional costs to society – costs which everyone is paying regardless of their own food choices; this supports the narrative of the interconnectedness of personal choices with not only the environment, but also the economy. The film potentially seeks to elicit an emotional response in audiences not only by portraying the suffering of nonhuman animals and environmental impacts, but also by discussing the financial impact on society and on consumers. The documentary, through its conspiracy narrative, also utilizes the images of unnamed large corporations who benefit most from these additional costs: “when you really look at who’s benefiting, and who lobbied for this system of agriculture, it’s the largest food producers in the country and the largest meat producers” (Andersen and Kuhn). Despite this anti-consumerist argument, *Cowspiracy* promotes selected vegan products, such as vegan meat and milk alternatives, and frames them in a narrative of morally superior, cruelty-free choices that also help the environment. The documentary thus oscillates

between two poles, which Andersen himself, before his visit to several vegan alternative producers, aptly describes as follows: “I wanted to help the planet be sustainable, but I needed to sustain myself” (Andersen and Kuhn). In the name of sustaining oneself, promotion of consumerism is utilized under the guise of sustainability, as long as the products themselves are plant-based, supporting the claim that “veganism is a deeply emotional affair and so are the cultural texts that advocate it” (von Mossner 246); this pushes the documentary one step back into the anthropocentric position. *Cowspiracy* makes use of this emotionally charged narrative to create the impression that there are morally inferior and superior choices regarding food:

If I could tell you that you could have the fiber-structure of meat, the satiating bite of meat, the protein, and all the nutritional benefits of meat, without actually having animal protein itself, and by doing that, you could address climate change, you could address the human health epidemics that we're seeing, you could address animal welfare, and you could address natural resource conservation, would you make the change? (Andersen and Kuhn)

The seemingly addressed problem of consumerism is relegated to the background when it comes to promoting plant-based alternatives, despite the fact that the films do not provide much evidence concerning these alternatives' effects on the environment.

*Seaspiracy* continues with the pre-established narrative of large companies who benefit from unsustainable practices, although the focus shifts from the economic impact on the consumer to a moral dimension: for instance, a representative of Oceana, one of the conservation organizations interviewed in the film, speaks about fishing in terms of investment, production lines and conveyor belts – a stark, emotionless contrast to the documentary's previous emotionally-charged discussion of oceans as parts of human lives. The sustainable labeling on canned fish is discussed similarly through the lens of large corporations profiting from the consumer's ignorance: “certified fisheries [...] produce astonishing levels of bycatch. And those are ignored because the level of kill is considered to be ‘sustainable’ in itself. But that's not what a consumer is looking for. They want to know that no marine mammals are being killed, no seabirds are being slaughtered, in order to put that fish on their plate” (Tabrizi). In this case, consumers are presented as naïve and unaware of the nonhuman animals that are being killed as bycatch. However, as previously mentioned, *Seaspiracy* does not stop at the idea of sustainable fisheries: it is not enough to eat fish from sustainable fisheries, given that the film claims no such thing exists. The difference between sustainably produced salmon and protected bluefin tuna is compared to shooting a polar bear versus shooting a panda: “neither one is sustainable, and neither one is right to do” (Tabrizi); this shifts the argument from a data-based discussion on the effects on the environment to a black-and-white argument of right vs. wrong. Such rhetoric may discourage some viewers from subscribing to the film's ideas: “to be implicated in acts of ‘bad’ eating risks marking the bad eater as a bad person. Not just energy transfers here, but also a morality – as the old aphorism goes, we are what we eat” (Hertweck 133). Nonetheless, this may very well be the reason why other members of

the audience consider and adopt the film's moral: in an attempt to view themselves, or be viewed by others, as good people, they may strive to make "better" food choices.

The two documentaries presented here, through oscillating between various points in vegan discourse, thus represent a somewhat metamodern take on the impact of veganism, moving from irony to enthusiasm and back again, from disillusionment to hope, and oscillating between unity and plurality in the sense of employing anthropocentric and biocentric views slightly differently, with a potential for further development. Regardless of the factual validity of the information presented in these documentaries, their impact in terms of narrative structure and visual symbolism should be studied further to uncover the possibilities for discussing climate change with contemporary audiences.

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