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Abstract

Brett Story's *The Hottest August* is unlike most climate change narratives that present scientific facts or depict dystopian scenarios but rather a portrayal of collective anxieties by exposing the contradictions of late capitalism and climate crisis. It engages with different modes of documentary filmmaking, using techniques such as a nomadic style of editing, juxtaposition of sounds, non-intrusive but intimate interview styles and distinct cinematography characterized by long stationary shots. A first-rate city symphony of New York City over one month during August 2017, it does not isolate climate change as the center of analysis but instead positions it in disguise, as the filmmaker raises questions about its entanglement with pressing social issues like racial capitalism, rising white nationalism and economic disparities. It is a contemplative treatment that places emphasis on the mundane to reveal the subjects' unrelenting faith in individualism and the massive destruction of the public sphere, which highlights the climate conundrum that stems from a lack of collective action. Moreover, the film conveys psychological insights into humans living in the Anthropocene, adding to the conversations of how climate anxiety and other chronic, long-term stressors, which have become a collective experience, increase the development of mental health problems. These clues from the meandering moments not only connect to how we are organized as a community but also point to the existence of eco-anxiety and ecological grief that people share, as well as other emotional states like *solastalgia* and trauma.

Keywords: Anthropocene, climate change, documentary studies, eco-anxiety, trauma

"Eli is at the kitchen table, trying all his markers one by one to see which still work. Ben brings him a bowl of water so he can dip them in to test. According to the current trajectory, New York City will begin to experience dramatic, lifealtering temperatures by 2047." (Offill, 2020)

Introduction

Brett Story's *The Hottest August* is unlike most climate change narratives that present scientific facts or depict dystopian scenarios but rather a portrayal of collective anxieties by exposing the contradictions of late capitalism and climate crisis. A first-rate city symphony of New York City over one month during August 2017, it does not isolate climate change as the center of analysis but rather positions it in disguise, as the filmmaker raises questions about its entanglement with pressing social issues like racial capitalism, rising white nationalism and economic disparities. It is a contemplative treatment that place emphasis on the mundane to reveal the subjects' unrelenting faith in individualism and the massive destruction of the public sphere, which highlights the climate conundrum that stems from a lack of collective action. This paper will explore the question: how does *The Hottest August* convey collective anxieties and the concept of ecological grief and climate trauma under the Anthropocene?

An Overview of Ecological Grief and Climate Trauma

Throughout history, climate change has long been recognized as a psychologically distant phenomenon confined within mainly scientific discourse and characterized as a non-emotional problem. However, this notion is changing due to the increased frequency of acute extreme weather events globally and other slower, chronic environmental changes like sea level rise, drought, and ecological degradation that are often less visible due to temporal dispersion and the lack of a particular identifier (Nixon, 2011) Concepts like eco-anxiety, ecological grief, and climate trauma have emerged in public discourse and research in recent years to describe an assortment of negative emotions associated with climate change and the Anthropocene and potential clinical conditions of mental wellbeing (Ojala et al., 2021). According to the *biophilia hypothesis*, humans have innate connections with the natural world and obtain psychological benefits from these associations (Wilson, 1984) Thus, climate change-related environmental degradation and an increasing global awareness of a climate crisis can induce negative emotional and mental states, which has been confirmed by empirical evidence showing the rise of acute and chronic mental health effects related to climate change in the past decade (Cunsolo, 2020). This section will break down four main concepts in the literature: eco-anxiety, ecological grief, solastalgia, and climate trauma, which all describe human experience in the Anthropocene, as we confront ecological decline and loss of environmental futures.

Eco-anxiety, a term coined by environmental philosopher Albrecht, is a chronic fear of environmental catastrophe related to a changing and uncertain environment, but it refers more generally to the mental distress and anxiety associated with worsening environmental conditions (Albrecht, 2019). It is an umbrella term that covers more specific conditions like *meteroanxiety* – induced by vicissitudes of the weather – or *global dread* – an existential condition induced by extreme anxiety about the future. While ecological worrying can be

constructive and adaptive, it can also manifest in maladaptive forms that result in pathological expressions of anxiety. One such possibility is *ecoparalysis*, a dilemma of seeing the enormous scale of the climate problem but being unable to do anything meaningful at a personal level to solve the problem that ultimately results in inaction. Another coping mechanism is resorting to crass consumption and pursuit of pleasure to counteract negative emotional pressures, which stems from the sublimation of climate guilt.

Zooming into the home environment, Albrecht coined the term *solastalgia* to describe a condition of homesickness when one is still located within one's home and territory (Albrecht, 2019). In other words, there is a gradual erosion of identity caused by feelings of belonging to a place and of distress and desolation about its negative or unwanted transformation.

A closely related concept is *ecological grief*, the internal physiological and emotional responses to climate-related losses. Cunsolo (2018) defines it as a form of "disenfranchised grief" that is not openly or publicly acknowledged and often left unconsidered in climate change narratives. Specifically, ecological grief can be broken into three types: 1) grief associated with physical ecological losses and species extinction, 2) grief in response to the erosion of environmental or place-based knowledge and identities, and 3) grief due to the anticipation of future losses of ecosystems and human-nature symbiosis. The third type distinguishes itself from the former two in terms of the temporal dimension, which is oriented towards the future. Nevertheless, in all three types, the process of grieving can illuminate our relational ties and dependency on complex ecological communities, which generates "we-creating capacities" that enable collective action.

Beyond anxiety and grief, there is also the phenomenon of trauma, which is usually defined in relation to the past, as in PTSD. However, Kaplan (2015) posed *pretraumatic stress syndrome* (PreTSS) as a trauma of the future, which arises from immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future that engenders unconscious suffering. Zimmerman (2020) elaborates on Kaplan's definition of PreTSS by conceptualizing trauma in relation to Nixon's notion of environmental "slow violence," which decouples itself from the sources by the workings of time. The pervasive, fatal repercussions induce trauma but are rendered elusive as they become dispersed across space and time, especially in the industrialized North (Nixon, 2011)

Pretrauma Cinema and Its Implications

In Kaplan's discussion of PreTSS, she focused on how the subgenre of "pretrauma cinema" and "pretraumatic disaster films" produce imaginaries of the future that shape constructions of the present and the past. This future orientation is explained by its connection to the Freudian notion of the "death drive" related to pretrauma phenomena, a looking toward a future death that is unconsciously desired. Therefore, the anxieties induced by fantasies or future projections can produce traumatic emotions and disabling uncertainty in real life. Morton (2013) argues that dystopian narratives are part of the problem because they inoculate us against the *hyperobject* that is already here: global warming, which surrounds us and affects our bodies and psyches. However, Kaplan disagrees by positing that pretrauma phenomena can offer "memory for the future," which has the productive power to alert us, force us to face the problem, and bring about needed change (Kaplan, 2015). However, Zimmerman (2020) challenges this idea by considering how prevailing discourses in pretrauma cinema leads to the

normalization of the crisis and obscures the urgency of its traumatic threats. Dystopian narratives gradually develop into well-defined expectations of the future, which contradict our inherent awareness of future uncertainties.

The Hottest August paints a portrait of the emotional life of climate change in an archival film format, illustrating the ways in which people narrate their anxieties. However, its poetic, contemplative, and reflexive force can also induce anxieties in viewers.

***Narratives in The Hottest August*: Reverberations of Anxiety, Grief, Trauma and Solastalgia**

In this section, I will draw from segments of the documentary and analyze the way in which the narratives illustrate the phenomena of these negative emotional states within different temporal dimensions. Although *the Hottest August* is centered around imaginaries of the future, there are also glimpses of the past and present manifested as *solastalgia* and grief.

The Past and the Present

The scene that portrayed Staten Island neighbourhoods in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy highlighted the emotional turmoil and *solastalgia* of the two women who still live in the neighborhood despite their loss. In the face of an acute extreme weather event, they survived and suffered from devastating floods, but their homes were since regarded as unsuitable for habitation. As one of them stated, "we lost everything… but we're still here, and I don't need the guff," which illustrates their emotional distress in response to chronic environmental distress. The person, however, then denied the existence of climate change and recognized it as a profit-making empire for Al-Gore, claiming "it's a hundred-year storm." While this illustrates her pessimism about political bureaucracy and capitalist institutions, it also contradicts the consensus that environmental stressors and negative emotions are the wellspring of adaptive human behaviors and increased engagement (Ojala, 2020).

The sequence shot in the gentrification flash point in Brooklyn further illustrates the concept of *solastalgia* in urban geography. The two women lamented the loss of community – "we used to be a neighborhood… now it's so separated… they just stay in the house… everybody knew everybody before; now it's more individualized" – and repeatedly said, "I don't like it." While gentrification and isolation are not a direct consequence of climate change, they are closely related to the process of industrialization and capitalist development that gave rise to the anthropogenic climate crisis. As opposed to acute weather events, this process is characteristic of "slow violence" and the more elusive development of modernization and climate change, which induces *solastalgia*, specifically the homesickness of community bonds in pre-gentrification times.

The Future

A common strand that ties together fragments of this film is individuals' future prospects, which are mostly cast in a pessimistic light. The dialogue with the Italian immigrant couple and with the younger generation portrayed their general anxieties and feelings of *ecoparalysis*. As the fitness studio lady confesses, "I try not to worry too much about the future… I don't worry about climate change or, anything like that… I don't have control over that… I just worry about me." This is echoed by the young man fishing: "I'll do everything I can

do to get by, but as an individual, I can't really do nothing but watch." Although they both recognized the potential climate catastrophe, directly or indirectly, they all pointed to the futility of individual actions and resorted to prioritizing personal futures over climatic engagement. An unrelenting faith in individualism courses through the psyches of the film's subject despite the divergence in their political opinions. At the beach, the college graduate with a degree in physical and environmental geography highlighted the difficulty of finding an environmental job due to political infeasibility – the downsizing of EPA – and the tough realities of being an adult. Projecting into the future, they expressed worries that their "kids might not live out their full lives" and uncertainties about "how much time [they] have." This further demonstrates their awareness of the gridlock between the ecologically necessary and the politically feasible, and the subsequent feelings of *ecoparalysis* and anxieties. Judging by their future worries, they are also likely to be unconsciously heading towards (or already experiencing) pretrauma induced by the dominant doom and gloom climate narratives. This is consistent with the findings that young people in countries globally report climate anxiety and other distressing emotions related to climate change that impact their everyday lives and that the distress is correlated with beliefs about inadequate government response and feelings of moral injury and injustice (Hickman et al., 2021).

However, the film also portrayed an alternative envisioning of the future by depicting the "Afronaut," who is a mix of an Afrofuturist and an alien astronaut. According to the "Afronaut," who walks around the neighborhood dressed in a suit that is "a combination of magic and technology," the public display of the suit is a way for people to jump to the future and envision future solutions to present challenges. Thus, this temporal shift is a more positive form of engagement with the climate crisis that encourages resolution, not despair, but it also reinforces the idea of techno-utopianism instead of drawing attention to pressing social issues of racial capitalism and economic disparities. Nevertheless, this contemplative treatment of the Afronaut moves away from the portrayal of collective anxieties to an extent and imagines an alternative future.

Documentary Modes in *The Hottest August*: Portrayal of Anxiety, Grief, Trauma, and Solastalgia

While *the Hottest August* is categorized as a documentary, it has engaged multiple modes and crossed boundaries of the real and the imagined. This section will analyze the modes employed by the filmmaker and how the combination of these modes portrayed the negative emotional states exhibited by the subjects.

First, this documentary utilizes the poetic mode, which stresses the "mood, tone and affect more than displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion." (Nichols) Specifically, it is poetic in that it juxtaposes scenes from different geographies within New York to represent reality in a series of fragmented and loose associations. It also does not follow a chronological order or a narrative arc but is creatively mixed. On this point, Story elaborated on her filming and editing process, she first collected a significant amount of footage and then spent most of the time in post-production, transforming the raw material in distinctive ways to produce a new perspective of an August in New York. She employed a nomadic style of editing and stressed ambiguity, illustrating her expressive desire to give new forms to the world

represented. Other than her unique style of editing, she also used a combination of ambient, natural sound and static noises that induced a mood of anxiety and uncanniness. In between different fragments, there are also interludes in which a robotic voiceover – by narrator Clare Coulter – adds a sprinkling of commentary from literary and political authors, from Annie Dillard, Zadie Smith to Karl Marx. For instance, the excerpt from Smith's Elegy for a Country's Seasons highlighted the theme of loss, nostalgia of the past and trauma associated with the "new normal": "People in mourning tend to use euphemism…The most melancholy of all the euphemisms: 'The new normal…' We can't even say the word 'abnormal' to each other out loud: it reminds us of what came before. Better to forget what once was normal, the way season followed season, with a temperate charm only the poets appreciated. What 'used to be' is painful to remember." These snippets helped organize the loose associations of the fragments and imparted additional meaning to the themes hidden in the narratives and scenes. Moreover, the narrator's voice appears out of place, as if she is visiting from another time and space, which adds to the unfamiliarity and uncanniness of the documentary. In terms of the visual aspect, the film also applied a filter that created a less saturated color tone, inducing a bleak atmosphere. Thus, the visual and the auditory work together to induce affective experiences of apprehension and uneasiness about the future.

Second, although the Hottest August is fragmented, it employs the observational mode within these fragments by allowing the camera to register the event without intervention, which enables the audience to watch, listen, observe, and make inferences. There is a wide repertoire of geographies juxtaposed to illustrate New York's urban geography: bars, beaches, the laundromat, home, basketball courts, and other public spaces. For instance, Figure 1 bellow illustrates an individual, all alone, staring out to the sea, thereby demonstrating a sense of powerlessness over nature but also highlighting the tendency to think of oneself as an individual instead of part of the collective and the subsequent massive destruction of the public sphere in late capitalism, which contribute to disillusionment, climate anxiety, and inaction.

Figure 1. A Beach Scene from "The Hottest August"

Third, *the Hottest August* also engages the reflexive mode, as it prods the viewer to a heightened form of consciousness about how one relates to what the documentary represents. It relates to Brecht's idea of alienation, a conscious mode of detachment, which separates us from our habitual assumptions and gives rise to self-reflection. Specifically, the stationary camera and long take style of cinematography induced the reflexive mode by enabling a

“politics of lingering” (“The Hottest August,” n.d.). As the camera lingers on the subject or place, viewers must exercise radical patience and cultivate modes of attention, first by getting oriented with the details of the scene, then go on to wander and discover new things by drawing personal associations. Therefore, the long take style enabled a contemplative treatment, allowing us to move between the concrete (what is presented) and abstract (higher level concepts) and draw connections between the two. While the documentary emphasizes the depiction of everyday life, the minutiae, it also simmers with political reverberations. For instance, in the figure below, the dialogue between the two women in the foreground in the laundromat is barely audible, but the TV in the background depicts sociopolitical issues like police brutality and marching white nationalists. But it also illustrates the bombardment of media in our everyday life. While climate anxieties loom in the background, citizens are constantly grappling with a host of other political issues that are somewhat entangled with the environmental crises.

Figure 2. A Laundromat Scene in "The Hottest August"

Finally, the documentary partakes in the participatory mode by illustrating the filmmaking process and directly portraying the director’s engagement with the subjects. The documentary largely consists of non-intrusive, intimate interviews with subjects from diverse backgrounds. Unlike traditional forms of interviews that focus on factual information or are pieced together to serve a narrative structure, Story’s interviews were driven by curiosity, empathy, and vulnerability. Specifically, Story depicts subjects in their natural state (without removing them from their daily context). What is especially distinctive is the inclusion of body language details – the camera often stayed with the subject long after the subject stopped talking – so that we are not only drawn to the content of the speech, but also their bodily posture, facial expression, and affective reactions to what has just been said, which tell another story. Beyond the interviews’ semantic importance, Story also highlights what is unspoken but was nevertheless present. As Schlosser (2021) argues, the cruelness of the optimism exhibited in the film is found in what respondents don’t say or do about climate change as they grapple with the temporalities of climate change, illustrating the cultural inertia that prevents the formation of collective alliance around climate change.

Conclusion

Overall, the film portrays collective anxiety via engagement with different modes of documentary filmmaking, using techniques such as nomadic style of editing, juxtaposition of sounds, non-intrusive but intimate interview styles, and a distinct cinematography characterized by stationary long shots. It deals with a host of socio-political and climate issues by engaging with the collective through a wide range of personal portraitures, illustrating how widely different perspectives often converge on and reflect the same systems – individualism – that operates in their shared communities. These clues from the meandering moments not only connect to how we are organized as a community but also point to the existence of eco-anxiety and ecological grief that people share, as well as other emotional states like *solastalgia* and trauma.

The Hottest August interrogates the broader socio-political landscape of climate change and underscores an urgent need for social discourse and collective alliance to prevent the massive destruction of the public sphere and the unfolding of the climate crisis. Moreover, the film conveys psychological insights into humans living in the Anthropocene, adding to the conversations of how climate anxiety and other chronic, long-term stressors, which have become a collective experience, increase the development of mental health problems. The question that remains to be explored is: how should we respond to the attendant grief, anxiety, trauma and *solastalgia* on a less stable planet? Climate-change-informed psychotherapy has risen in recent years, but does it risk individualizing the problem of climate anxiety? How could we advocate for more systemic changes that engage with broader socio-political issues?

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