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From *Cowspiracy* to *Seaspiracy*: Discursive Strategies in Contemporary Vegan Advocacy Documentaries

Abstract

Guided by the qualitative approach of film analysis, this article examines the discursive strategies used in the films *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* and *Seaspiracy*, while identifying contrasts with the rhetoric of other pro-vegan and environmentalist documentaries. The analysis of both films together serves to highlight: a) the prominence they give to environmentalist reasons for veganism; b) their different way of portraying violence against animals; c) their use of a detective plotline to articulate the narrative; d) their emotional use of first-person narration; and e) the emphasis they place on global responsibility for the environmental impact of animal-based food production and their proposal of specific, feasible solutions to reverse the situation. The study finds that *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* stand as evidence of the vegan advocacy documentary's contributions to the environmentalist non-fiction genre to which it belongs, while highlighting the strategies used in both films

(avoiding audience revulsion and promoting positive feelings; integrating fictional elements and fostering identification in order to seduce the audience; appealing to commitment and conveying proactive messages rather than a sense of helplessness) that enable the cognitive and affective dimensions to feed into each other for the purpose of persuading viewers and promoting individual and social change.

Keywords

***Cowspiracy*, *Seaspiracy*, documentary, veganism, environmentalism.**

1. Introduction

1.1. *Environmentalism, veganism, and their contemporary documentary practices*

The turn of the century was marked by a boom in the documentary genre that particularly affected the production of environmentalist documentaries (or eco-docs). The first decade of the 21st century witnessed the appearance of numerous non-fiction films (mainly but not exclusively produced in North America and Europe) that not only appealed to an audience already convinced of environmental issues but also managed to capture the attention of the general public (Hughes, 2014, p. 8). While the Oscar-winning *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim, 2006) is an obvious example of this trend, there were other titles that also received considerable recognition, such as *Darwin's Nightmare* (Sauper, 2005), *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009), and *Gasland* (Fox, 2010). A number of vegan advocacy documentaries have also formed part of this boom. The success of *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (Andersen

& Kuhn, 2014), following in the wake of the positive response to *Earthlings* (Monson, 2005) and *Forks over Knives* (Fulkerson, 2011), encouraged the production and distribution of other films that had a significant impact, such as *The End of Meat* (Pierschel, 2017), *Eating Animals* (Quinn, 2017), and *Seaspiracy* (Tabrizi, 2021).

The popularity of eco-docs is largely due to the increased ecological sensibility of the population and the dramatic growth of environmentalist movements in recent decades (Gold & Revill, 2004). Similarly, the proliferation of vegan advocacy documentaries can be understood as a consequence of the parallel rise of anti-speciesism and veg(etari)anism, whose advocates condemn the institutionalization of violence against animals (Curdworth, 2015) and describe our “meat culture” (Potts, 2010, 2016), also labeled “carnism” (Joy, 2020), as a dangerous ideology that normalizes, condones, legitimizes and encourages animal abuse based (allegedly and unfairly) on the nutritional needs of the human population (Adams, 2010; Loughnan *et al.*, 2014). In the face of the uncomfortable reality of animal oppression, we are urged to embrace a global commitment to an “ethics of avowal” that will help us to look at other animals (and at ourselves as animals) with greater respect (Kim, 2015, pp. 181–202). This perspective underscores the urgent need to rethink our relationship with non-human animals, as pointed out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2021). There are increasing calls for the elimination or reduction of animal product consumption and the number of people converting to a vegan or vegetarian diet is steadily growing, especially in developed countries (Hamilton, 2000; Fox & Ward, 2008; Greenebaum, 2012).

The simultaneous rise of the eco-doc and the vegan advocacy documentary –and the recent overlapping of veg(etari)anist and environmentalist stances– is no mere coincidence. As Fox and Ward predicted three decades ago: “As environmental concerns become more pervasive in society, vegetarianism may become increasingly embedded within such commitments, even if environmentalism does not itself become a prime motivation for a meat-free diet” (2008, p. 428). The evolution of the veg(etari)anist argument and the documentaries advocating such diets points precisely in this direction. Religious motivations aside, the reasons traditionally put forward for converting to veg(etari)anism have stressed the human health benefits and ethical concerns for animal welfare (Lea & Worsley, 2001, p. 127; Hoek *et al.*, 2004, p. 266; Fox & Ward, 2008). However, concern about the environmental degradation caused by meat and fish consumption has long been part of the veg(etari)anist ideology (Lindeman & Sirelius, 2001, p. 182; Gaard, 2002; Hoek *et al.*, 2004, p. 265) and is becoming increasingly prominent, even to the point of being considered the only significant factor that distinguishes veg(etari)an from non-veg(etari)an (Kalof *et al.*, 1999).

Based on studies by authors such as Steinfeld *et al.* (2006) and Tukker and Jansen (2006), which perhaps did not receive the attention they deserved at the time of the publication, vegan activists (and especially vegan advocacy documentaries) have been taking the lead in the necessary task of pointing out the environmental impact of animal-based food production in recent years. The vegan movement has thus progressed (at least if considered from the perspective of its impact on public opinion) on the back of more recent research that confirms the damage inflicted on the planet by this type of food production (Tilman & Clark, 2014; Godfray *et al.*, 2018; Gardner *et al.*, 2019; Scherer, Behrens & Tukker, 2019; IPCC, 2021). As will be shown below, the clear intersections between environmentalism and veg(etari)anism have also become evident in the film and television production associated with both movements.

1.2. *Emotion in documentaries as a force for change*

While environmentalist and vegan advocacy documentaries may be considered a consequence of the concerns of conscientious individuals and groups, it is important to recognize that these documentaries are at the same time the spark (or put more simply, the cause) that ignites further demands and mobilizations. Indeed, as various studies have highlighted, images (especially moving images) play a fundamental role in our perception of the environment

(Cox, 2013) and our understanding of its problems (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Moser & Dilling, 2012; Ahmad *et al.*, 2015; Shen, Sheer & Li, 2015; Brereton, 2015). This is because we connect to environmental issues in a markedly visual way (Leiserowitz, 2006; Höjjer, 2010; Doyle, 2011; Howell, 2013; Smith & Joffe, 2013) that has the power to elicit intense emotional engagement (Hill, 2004; Joffe, 2008; Olson *et al.*, 2008; DiFrancesco & Young, 2010; Graham & Abrahamse, 2017; Binti Mat, 2019; Finkle & León, 2019; Ahn, 2020; Weik von Mossner, 2022; León, Negredo & Erviti, 2022).

Eliciting an emotional response is key to inspiring conviction and motivating behavioral change (Hansen & Machin, 2013), although, of course, such a response does not guarantee the audience's conversion. In this sense, it is important to recognize, on the one hand, that in making certain decisions (such as those related to habit changes regarding the environment or changing diets) the rational and the affective cannot be dissociated (Hughes, 2014, p. 118), and, on the other hand, that the emotions aroused by environmental debates affect the different stances that people adopt. This means that emotions can lead to change, but they can also obstruct it. As Moser and Dilling (2012, p. 167) suggest, this is what happens when individuals see their most firmly held beliefs compromised and they feel threatened. "Moral shock tactics" (Greenebaum, 2012, p. 311) do not push people toward an environmentally responsible attitude (Leiserowitz, 2005, 2006) any more than they encourage the dietary transformation sought by veg(etari)anists (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992). In fact, inspiring feelings such as distress or fear in an audience may be counterproductive (O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009; Moser & Dilling, 2012).

Environmental communication must therefore strike a balance in the representation of threats and solutions, of what is being lost and what can be gained (Nisbet, 2009; Maibach *et al.*, 2010; Spence & Pidgeon, 2010; Feinberg & Willer, 2011). On the subject of vegan advocacy documentaries, Caldwell (2017) takes a similar view in arguing that the specific strategy of comparing "sad animals" with "happy animals" has proven to be quite effective in elicit the empathic projection necessary for viewers to embrace a plant-based diet. This balance between threat and solution can find an ally in the use of the "spillover effect," which Plantinga defines as "the relief from strong negative emotions, which are replaced by pleasurable emotions that depend for their strength on the arousal caused by physiological spillover remaining from the prior negative emotion" (2009, p. 184). The replacement of negative emotions with positive ones helps to convey an encouraging message vested with the kind of hope that is essential for viewers to believe in action and feel a desire to participate (Ojala, 2012, 2015). Ultimately, instead of eliciting the sense of guilt that leads to feelings of disgust and helplessness, the aim is to make viewers aware of their responsibility and to act accordingly by taking on the challenge to change proposed in the film.

Another of the recommendations for communication to promote the ecological transition made by studies such as these is the use of certain fictional elements as a means of enhancing the effectiveness of the message. The expressive use of the soundtrack, visual composition, or editing, as well as taking inspiration from the kind of character construction used in fiction or including narrative twists and epiphany moments can be of great help in the (rational and affective) task of audience persuasion (Nabi & Green, 2015). After all, the audience wants to be entertained rather than lectured, which is why many documentary filmmakers today are taking Michael Moore's (2014) well-known advice: "Don't make a documentary –make a MOVIE!" The current trend of fictionalizing documentaries has thus spread throughout the genre and is particularly evident in environmentalist documentaries, which are especially concerned about engaging their audiences (Hughes, 2014, p. 4).

Encouraging identification with the main character is one of the typical strategies of fiction that environmentalist and vegan advocacy documentaries use the most. Many of these documentaries portray the process that guides the protagonist to the adoption of a new point of view on the matter concerned (Mercier & Sperber, 2011, p. 59). This strategy of reproducing

a personal experience and the subjective response it elicits is key to arousing sympathy for protagonists and their point of view on the environmental issue in question (Ros *et al.*, 2018, p. 235). First-person narration and the performative mode of the documentary (Nichols, 2017, p. 22) have thus become common features of contemporary eco-docs and vegan advocacy documentaries.

2. *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* as the core of the analysis

Among the vegan advocacy documentaries of recent years, *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (Andersen & Kuhn, 2014) stands out as one of the first to make the environmental impact of meat production and consumption a central focus. It is also notable for its extraordinary success and the influence it exerted (and continues to exert). After its premiere in Los Angeles in June 2014, the film was screened in various countries and won several awards, including Best Foreign Film at the Portneuf Film Festival and the Audience Award at the South African Eco Film Festival in 2015. At the same time, initiatives and campaigns were launched via *Cowspiracy*'s website and social media accounts to create a sort of "extended event" (Hughes, 2014, p. 9) aimed at transcending the mere viewing of the film. These included the provision of screening licenses accompanied by support materials and online help, and the proposal of activities (such as "The 30-day Vegan Challenge"), together with resources such as videos, podcasts, or a meal planner. However, the film's leap to major success came in September 2015, when it reached a much larger audience thanks to its worldwide release on Netflix, a platform where it was soon among the most viewed documentaries and where it is still currently available.

The rest of this study focuses on both *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* (Ali Tabrizi, 2021), the documentary that serves as a complement to its predecessor by documenting the environmental damage done by commercial fishing. Tabrizi's film, released directly on Netflix in March 2021, did not reach the heights of success attained by *Cowspiracy*, despite entering the Top 10 most-watched productions on the platform a few days after its release and staying there for more than a week. It also sparked controversies that were immediately reflected in the reactions of reviewers in the generalist press, and as will be discussed below, of scholars as well. By focusing mainly on these two films (both relatively recent, with a notable impact and similar rhetoric), and turning occasionally to other pro-vegan and environmentalist documentaries for the purpose of comparison, this study offers a basic overview of the trend(s) in vegan advocacy documentaries and highlights their progressive overlapping with eco-docs.

Starting from the hypothesis that *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* illustrate (both thematically and formally) the consolidation of the convergence of pro-vegan and environmentalist documentaries, the main objective of this study is to analyze the discursive strategies the two films share and to contrast them with those of other contemporary pro-vegan and environmentalist documentaries, paying special attention to the strategies aimed at emotionally engaging the audience. As secondary objectives, the study also assesses the role that *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* have played in placing the problem of the environmental impact of animal food production on the public agenda and identifies the place that the vegan advocacy documentary deserves within the eco-doc subgenre.

The thematic and narrative parallels of *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* encourage a conception of the two films as forming a hermeneutic unity. The combined analysis of the two documentaries thus draws on the theoretical sources referred to in the previous section while also considering scholarly output on *Cowspiracy* (Lockwood, 2016; Weik von Mossner, 2021) and *Seaspiracy* (Lamb, 2021; Hearne, 2021; Pauly, 2021; Belhabib, 2021; Rooney, 2022; Harris, 2022; Yeo & Silberg, 2022). A qualitative approach is adopted to assess the films' discursive strategies, using the tools offered by film analysis. To this end, given that this study focuses mainly on the fictional elements of the two films, it is informed by the film analysis models proposed by Aumont and Marie (1990), Bordwell and Thompson (1995) and Marzal and Gómez

Tarín (2007). Thus, considering questions of both content and form, this analysis of the *Cowspiracy/Seaspiracy* binary explores the films' narrative strategies (focusing mainly on structures, plotlines, and the protagonists around which the narrative point of view is articulated) and expressive strategies (especially the arrangement of shots, editing, and the relationship between sound and image) mainly by examining key scenes that best serve these purposes.

This article is divided into five sections that describe the main features shared by *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*. The first section assesses the central focus given to the environmental impact of animal food consumption. The second considers the strategy of avoiding audience revulsion in reaction to images of violence against animals. The third analyzes the detective-style plot that articulates the investigations carried out in both documentaries. The fourth addresses the first-person narration that allows the audience to accompany the filmmaker in his journey of discovery and conversion and, finally, the last section highlights the emphasis given in both films to the global nature of the causes and consequences of anthropogenic environmental degradation while presenting the audience with specific, feasible solutions to reverse the situation.

3. Analysis

3.1. *The importance of the environmentalist argument*

An examination of the narrative structure of *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* reveals how both documentaries focus from the outset on exposing the environmental degradation caused by livestock farming and fishing, respectively. Thus, while the first film presents the problems associated with the production of meat, dairy products, and eggs (mainly greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, soil erosion, species extinction, pollution, and excessive water consumption), the second explores the destruction of marine life, the devastation of whale, dolphin, and shark populations, the dangers of bottom trawling and bycatch, and the appalling quantity of plastic dumped into the oceans as a result of fishing activity. In both documentaries, the data offered by the voice-over and the graphics along with the information provided by the images and interviews deal almost exclusively with these environmentalist concerns, with hardly a trace of the vegan advocacy that both films will later reveal.

In this sense, *Seaspiracy* is particularly striking: There are very few references to fish consumption throughout the film, except in the last few minutes, when it strongly advocates a plant-based diet. Moreover, the film never even makes use of the terms “vegan” or “vegetarian,” which are normally used repeatedly in documentaries of this kind. It can thus be asserted that both films are introduced and presented simply as environmentalist documentaries, until they conclude with the proposal of measures to curb anthropogenic damage to the environment, which include the elimination (or reduction) of animal product consumption.

With their primary focus on the environmentalist argument, both films omit the reasons for dietary change put forward by most of the veg(etari)anist documentaries that came before them. Traditionally, such documentaries attempt to persuade viewers to change their diets by highlighting the health benefits of veg(etari)anism –as do *Fat, Sick, and Nearly Dead* (Cross & Engfher, 2010) and *Forks over Knives*– or based on the ethical argument of animal welfare –as is the case of *Earthlings* and *Speciesism: The Movie* (Devries, 2013). *Cowspiracy* is certainly not the first documentary to deal with the environmental impact of meat consumption. Previous films have explored this issue, either by offering a critique of industrialized food production in general –*We Feed the World* (Wagenhofer, 2005), *Food Inc* (Kenner, 2008)– or by adopting an openly pro-vegan point of view –*Meat the Truth* (Zwanikken, 2007), *Vegucated* (Miller Wolfson, 2011), *Live and Let Live* (Pierschel, 2013). However, the success and impact that Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn's film has enjoyed is substantially greater than that of its precursors, thanks not only to its cinematographic quality but also to its inclusion in the catalogue of the Netflix platform.

The impact of *Cowspiracy*, serving as one of the many voices offering different perspectives on the environmental problems caused by meat consumption, has influenced the production of environmentalist documentaries in recent years. Although some films aimed at persuading people to adopt a vegan diet still base their argument on the benefits to human health or the prevention of animal suffering, there has been a proliferation of documentaries taking a more holistic approach and focusing especially on the environmental argument as a reason for dietary conversion. This is the case of documentaries such as *Food Choices* (Siewierski, 2016), *The End of Meat, H.O.P.E.: What You Eat Matters* (Messinger, 2018), *Endgame 2050* (Pineda, 2020), and *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (Otto & Ludo Brockway, 2021). To some extent, albeit somewhat more furtively, the environmental impact of meat consumption has also begun to find its way into the discourse of non-veganist environmentalist documentaries, such as in the well-known *Before the Flood* (Stevens, 2016) or the more recent *Meat Me Halfway* (Kateman & Wade-Hak, 2021).

3.2. Another way of showing violence against animals

The steady shift toward the environmentalist argument has been accompanied by certain expressive changes. One of these changes (perhaps the most emblematic) has to do with the depiction of violence against animals. On this point it cannot be claimed that both documentaries take exactly the same approach: While *Cowspiracy* keeps the presence of shocking images of this kind to a minimum, *Seaspiracy* does not shy away from graphic depictions of the cruelty inflicted on marine life. However, as Rooney (2022) argues, Ali Tabrizi's film chooses to place the portrayal of violence against animals at the service of an ethics of avowal that seeks to move rather than upset the audience with these scenes. This redirection of feelings is also detectable in the few cases where *Cowspiracy* makes use of images of this nature.

This idea can be illustrated with the analysis of a crucial scene toward the end of *Cowspiracy* that represents the turning point where the documentary presents the vegan lifestyle as a solution to environmental degradation. The scene begins with the filmmaker interviewing a farmer committed to sustainable production. The farmer selects two ducks and prepares to slaughter the first of them under the watchful eye of the girl he is talking to. A frontal shot that leaves the man's head out of the frame shows him handling the duck, laying it on the table, and stretching its neck in preparation for the slaughter. The unsteady camera and the constant reframing of the shot contribute to the tension of a scene drawn out over time that makes the suspense distressing. A close-up shot of the duck's head then shows the man holding his axe with one hand while holding the duck with the other. We witness the slaughter in all its rawness, with the only sound in those moments being the three dull thuds of the axe on the animal's neck.

As he bleeds the duck, the farmer explains that his father taught him how to kill and skin rabbits at the age of five. He adds: "But after doing it a couple of times, you kind of just learned it's just something that has to be done." The farmer's confession perfectly reflects the normalization of killing condemned in both *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*: the institutionalization of violence against animals that our culture legitimizes. The scene continues, as the farmer prepares to slaughter the second duck. He raises the axe, but when it starts its downward movement an abrupt cut to black saves us from having to witness another death. The shocking sound of the axe with the black screen invites us to try to digest what we have witnessed, and in the best of cases, to ponder the paradox of our horrified reaction to these images when actions like these (or worse) are necessary to fill our plates every day.

After the filmmaker reflects on this unpleasant episode, the scene ends and the next scene begins with Andersen's voice-over explaining that he had arranged another visit to a sustainable farm where they were going to slaughter a hen that has stopped laying eggs. He speaks while an extreme close-up shows him in profile, driving his vehicle with a serious look on his face. We cut to the next shot just as we hear him say: "I didn't know how I was gonna

possibly go through another slaughter. So I didn't." The cut at this moment is to a longer shot that shows the director smiling while we begin to hear a piece of upbeat guitar music. Immediately after this the camera follows Andersen's arm, which is reaching out to stroke the chicken riding in the passenger seat. We then understand, and effectively confirm to our relief seconds later, that Andersen has decided to save the chicken's life and take it to an animal sanctuary.

This revelation accosts us with optimistic sensations that give new meaning to the unsettling experience of the previous scene, which can now be read as a painful learning experience. At the same time, the positive emotions elicited by this last scene are made all the more intense precisely because it follows a scene of such brutality. In line with Weik von Mossner's (2021, p. 261) reference to the operation of the spillover effect¹, in these two consecutive scenes, the audience's constructive emotions of joy reinforce the bond that they have been establishing with the director and even enable them to connect with the hen on a certain level. The contrast between the sad fate of the ducks in the previous scene and the hopeful future of the hen enhances the possibility of the audience's affective response to the hen, and thus to the animal kingdom.

As this example shows, although (as noted above) depictions of violence against animals in *Cowspiracy* differ from those in *Seaspiracy* in quantitative terms, both films explore ways of cinematographically representing the harm we inflict on other species that are different from those used in other (mostly earlier) pro-vegan and environmentalist documentaries. Thus, while *Cowspiracy* eschews the crude, repetitive displays of animal suffering and death that characterize films dedicated specifically to denouncing animal cruelty, such as *Earthlings* or *Dominion* (Delforce, 2018), *Seaspiracy* does not revel in such violent images or reach the level of brutality of other documentaries with similar themes, such as the Oscar-winning *The Cove* or *Racing Extinction* (Psihoyos, 2015).

3.3. The use of fiction (I): The detective plot

Early on in *Seaspiracy*, director Ali Tabrizi and his companion Lucy head to Taiji, a Japanese village whose annual dolphin slaughter was brought to public attention by *The Cove* some years earlier. A brief montage sequence accompanied by frenetic music juxtaposes typical Japanese scenes with shots of the director's arrival in Taiji. A superimposed image shows the town's location on a map that disappears just as the music stops. The next scene begins with a shot of Ali driving taken from the back seat. A shot through the rear window then shows a car following them while a police siren begins to blare. The next shot, taken from the dashboard of Ali's car, captures the filmmaker showing his ID to a couple of policemen who ask him about the reason for his trip. In perfect continuity, the scene intercuts shots filmed from these two camera angles –from the back of the vehicle and the dashboard– while the exchange with the officers continues.

When the conversation ends, Ali speaks to us in a voice-over: "From that point on, we had an entourage of police, secret service, undercover cops, and the coast guard following us everywhere." Five short shots accompany this observation: the first is an indirect shot of a police car in Ali's rearview mirror; the second is another shot of a police vehicle through the car window; the third is an image of the dark road through the rear window; a fourth shot shows a man in uniform with a walkie-talkie seeing the camera and immediately hiding behind a wall; and the last is an image of a coast guard motorboat. A fade to black then transports us inside Ali and Lucy's hotel room. It is early morning and everything is dark. Ominous music plays. The young man looks out the window and sees a police car keeping

¹ Plantinga (2009, pp. 184–186) explains the spillover effect in relation to fiction films, analyzing how it functions in *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997). Apart from Weik von Mossner's work, no applications of the spillover effect to the study of non-fiction films have been identified. It is worth highlighting, in any case, the analysis of this effect offered by Bowens (2017) in his discussion of *Elephant* (van Sant, 2003), a fiction feature film notable for its documentary tone.

watch. Several underexposed shots taken with an exaggeratedly shaky camera show the couple sneaking out of the hotel.

This scene is an example of the many cases of cinematographic techniques with a markedly fictional character used in both *Seaspiracy* and *Cowspiracy*. The use of extra-diegetic music, the meticulously arranged series of match cuts from different camera positions, the audiovisual strategies used to reinforce the sensation of being pursued or threatened, and the expressive use of hand-held camera in the sequence are all elements typical of an action film or a thriller. Their use in these two documentaries makes sense, given that each one is articulated around a kind of detective plot that portrays the investigative process carried out by the filmmaker.

This detective plot –which Weik von Mossner (2021, pp. 249, 251) already identified in the case of *Cowspiracy*– appears associated with a division between “bad” characters and “good” characters that is equally typical of fiction productions. This binary logic –especially dangerous in the documentary field but nevertheless tremendously effective, as Plantinga (2018, p. 128)– is not resolved simplistically by placing vegans on one side and non-vegans on the other.

In both cases, however, the filmmakers adopt the role of hero and are clearly among the “good guys,” together all those characters who, in one way or another, support the basic lines of their discourse (mainly, certain scientists, environmentalists, and activists). In the category of the “bad guys” *Cowspiracy* includes not only the meat industry and the institutions that permit its activities, but also so-called “sustainable livestock farming” and even the various environmentalist associations and NGOs that remain silent about the environmental impact of animal food consumption. Meanwhile, *Seaspiracy* assigns the villain role to the fishing industry and its mafias, the political class and security forces of many countries that act as their accomplices, so-called “sustainable fishing,” and, once again, the NGOs that seek to camouflage rather than eradicate the problem.

As the recourse to this sort of detective story makes clear, *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* join the contemporary fictionalizing trend in the documentary genre that is especially characteristic of the eco-doc. Aware of the role that emotion plays in the task of actively engaging their audience, many environmentalist documentary filmmakers (whether vegan or not) have explored the permeable boundary that separates (and connects) non-fiction and fiction. Among the various examples of this is the aforementioned *The Cove*, whose detective story can be understood as an inspiration for the two films discussed here. Another example is *Vegucated*, which exhibits a style similar to the kind of reality television that effectively hooks and engages its audience (Christopher, Bratkowski & Haverda, 2018). Other documentaries veer unambiguously into the realm of fiction, although always partially and each in its own way. This is the case of *Endgame 2050*, which starts with a short fiction film set in the future (the near future, as the title of the film suggests, and clearly dystopian), which is subsequently alluded to at various points while different experts reflect on the measures we can take to avoid catastrophe². A similar example can be found in *The Age of Stupid* (Armstrong, 2009), a mockumentary that also places us in a dystopian future in which the “archive footage” is actually made up of images of our present that show how we are endangering human survival on the planet. The potential of the mockumentary is also tested in *Carnage: Swallowing the Past* (Amstell, 2017), a brilliant, humor-filled depiction of a vegan utopia with no shortage of real information about the present and recent past, serving as an example of the possibilities of raising awareness opened up by the imagination of counterfactual futures (Adams, 2022).

² Despite the use of fiction at the beginning of *Endgame 2050*, it should be noted that Sofia Pineda’s documentary gives greater importance to rational arguments than to emotions to convince her audience. The masterful explanations by Pineda, a researcher at University of Texas, echo the didactic tone of Al Gore’s slide presentations that later became *An Inconvenient Truth*. In a similar vein, it is worth mentioning that the detective story that *The Cove* does not constitute a drift toward the kind of entertainment flirted with in *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*.

3.4. *The use of fiction (II): First-person narration and identification*

Kip Andersen and Ali Tabrizi use first-person narration, turning themselves into the protagonists of their respective films. This leading role is reflected in their frequent appearances on screen, as well as in other moments when we hear them speaking off camera –mainly during interviews– and especially in the use of a voice-over that acts as a constant guide for the audience. In this way, the plot of each documentary is linked to the journey of discovery and life story of its presenter. Both films invite us to accompany the filmmakers on their discovery of hidden truths that will motivate them –and hopefully us as well– to adopt a different perspective on the issues being investigated. This intention is especially clear at the beginning of *Cowspiracy*, when Kip Andersen shares with the audience how his life was transformed by *An Inconvenient Truth* (a film which, incidentally, also recounts its protagonist's journey toward a new awareness). From this we can infer that Andersen hopes that *Cowspiracy* will bring about a behavioral change in us comparable to the effect that the viewing of Al Gore's film had on him.

From the outset, both *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* lay the foundations for the spectator's identification with the filmmaker. That identification will be reinforced throughout the journey of discovery, culminating in the last part of each film, when the filmmaker confirms his conversion. This moment takes place in *Cowspiracy* in a sequence already discussed above. After witnessing the slaughter of the duck, Andersen shares his reflections with us. His gestures and movements render visible the emotion that overwhelms him and fuses with the logical reasoning that leads him to the following conclusion concerning the slaughter of animals for human consumption: "I just can't do it. I don't think I could have someone else do it for me if I can't do it. If I can't do it, I don't want someone else doing it for me."

After a brief digression delivered to the camera about the unfeasibility of sustainable farms, the scene connects to the one that will end with the catharsis of saving the hen's life. Before this, Andersen's voice-over continues with his confession in an even more intimate tone: "I'd been so caught up in the destruction caused by animal agriculture, I realized I'd never truly dwelled on the obvious reality that every one of these animals was killed. It was always a disconnected, abstract fact of eating meat. But when it became personal, face-to-face, the story changed." This is the scene that depicts the protagonist's transformation, and from this moment on we are urged to follow his example; in other words, this is the aforementioned turning point where the documentary shifts openly toward vegan militancy. As we have seen, it is here that the animal welfare and environmentalist arguments are fused together for a cause that is no longer latent but explicit. And, as Lockwood (2016, p. 743) points out, it is here that the separation of individual and environment vanishes with the collapse of the boundary between reason and emotion.

Both films have been the subject of criticism for their subjective approach. In this sense, Tabrizi's film is the one that has generated the strongest backlash among those who argue that the hero's journey is a conveniently fictionalized reconstruction (Hearne, 2021) or that the film seems more concerned with a kind of verisimilitude ("truthiness") than with truth (Yeo & Silberg, 2021, p. 781) and abandons the scientific objectivity that one would expect from a documentary (Harris, 2022). Similarly, some have suggested that the film presents biased data in a sensationalist manner and does not consider other perspectives on the issue (Yeo & Silberg, 2021, p. 782; Pauly, 2021). What these criticisms –coming mainly from scientists– seem not to consider is that, as Bill Nichols argues, documentaries cannot provide objective and conclusive evidence but still have something valuable to offer: "Rhetoric [...] may sometimes be deceptive but it is also the only means we have as social actors, or citizens, for conveying our beliefs, perspectives, and convictions persuasively" (2008, p. 34).

In any case, many contemporary non-fiction productions opt for this approach, and there are many examples of environmentalist documentaries (not all of them pro-vegan) that

use first-person narration as a powerful weapon to persuade and convince the audience. These include titles such as *Food Choices* and *Empatía* (Antoja, 2017), in which the filmmakers act as protagonists who, like Andersen and Tabrizi, explain the reasons for their change of diet. In other cases, the process leading to dietary change is portrayed by following individuals with life paths that may be appealing to the audience and facilitate their identification, such as *Vegucated* or *Live and Let Live*. Other possible examples of first-person narration are those documentaries that are not narrated by the filmmaker but presented by a celebrity who can be portrayed as an authority figure and a convincing example to be followed. These include *An Inconvenient Truth* and *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (Cohen & Shenk, 2017), which follow Al Gore in his fight against global warming, and the films *The 11th Hour* (Leila & Nadia Connors, 2007) and *Before the Flood*, with Leonardo DiCaprio's presence on camera serving as an important lure for the audience. Other films in this category include *Earthlings*, *Dirt! The Movie* (Benenson, Rosow & Dailly, 2009) and *Eating Animals*, which make use of recognizable voice-overs by Joaquin Phoenix, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Natalie Portman, respectively.

3.5. Global responsibility, individual responsibility

Andersen's and Tabrizi's roles as protagonists in *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* are among the factors that have aroused criticism of the Western gaze that characterizes both films. Belhabib (2021), for example, notes that for many people around the world fish consumption is not a privilege but a necessity, and she thus accuses Tabrizi's film of "ecological colonialism." Although the directors and stars of both documentaries are white, middle-aged Western males, it is worth recognizing the effort both films make to present the environmental degradation caused by animal exploitation for food as a global problem.

This effort is especially clear in *Seaspiracy*. Although Tabrizi's investigation begins with a visit to Taiji, the film takes care to avoid limiting its exposé to a particular geographical area with the contribution by Lamya Essemlali, the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society activist who claims that bycatch in France kills ten times as many dolphins each year as are killed in the Japanese village. The film goes on to point out practices that seriously endanger life in the seas and oceans and directly involve countries on all continents, such as whaling in the Faroe Islands, the damage caused to turtles by fishing in the United States, salmon aquaculture in Scotland, illegal fish sales in Chinese fish markets, and the exploitation of workers in Liberian and Thai fisheries.

Similarly, the shocking images exposing the violence against marine life in *Seaspiracy* come from different parts of the world and bring the problem closer to the audience (geographically and emotionally). In other words, both these documentaries connect the environmental damage caused by the consumption of animal products to our daily reality, presenting it as a problem that affects us here (wherever you may be) and now, and for which we are responsible regardless of the part of the planet we live in, because, irrespective of where meat and fish industries may be operating, the consumption of their products is worldwide. As Tabrizi himself observes in the film: "The problem is that eating fish is just as bad, if not worse than the shark finning industry, because the shark finning industry is strictly held in Asia, whereas everyone around the world is eating fish."

As mentioned above, *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* dedicate their final sequences to the proposal of measures to reverse the situation and the ultimate solution involves a change of diet like the one made by the two filmmakers, which they share with the audience in their respective documentaries. While it is true that both films are committed mainly to advocating a vegan lifestyle, they also advocate responsible consumption, activism, and, to a certain extent, vegetarianism or the lesser evil of reducing the consumption of animal products. Both documentaries put into practice the idea of finding a balance between portraying threats and solutions, and in this sense they reflect the progressive tendency of environmentalist non-fiction to place the emphasis on the actions we can take to improve the situation. This change

of perspective –clearly evident when comparing, for example, the different messages conveyed in *An Inconvenient Truth* and *An Inconvenient Sequel*– follows in the wake of *The 11th Hour*, which at the time stood out for its emphasis on the proposal of solutions, just as films such as *Demain* (Dion & Laurent, 2015) and *Before the Flood* did later.

4. Conclusions

This article has offered an analysis of the discursive strategies implemented in *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*, contrasting them with those employed in other vegan advocacy documentaries, and in environmentalist documentaries in general. The first part of this analysis focused on the central role given by both films to the environmental argument in their call for a change of diet. In this sense, *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* demonstrate the position occupied by pro-vegan documentaries within environmentalist non-fiction, and both films have helped place the environmental impact of animal-based food production on the public agenda with a greater impact than has been achieved by other sources (academic, journalistic, institutional, activist, etc.) that have been pointing out this problem for some time. Beyond the impact that veg(etari)an advocacy initiatives can achieve based on their overlapping interests with environmentalism, it is worth highlighting the meritorious role being played by vegan advocacy documentaries and recognizing their contributions to the subgenre of environmentalist documentaries to which they belong. Although non-vegan eco-docs focus their efforts on combating global warming and climate change, it is the vegan documentary (with notable examples such as *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*) that is assuming most of the responsibility for pointing out one of the main causes of the environmental crisis: namely, the consumption of animal products.

This study then went on to examine the empathetic view of the animal kingdom adopted in *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*, which is particularly reflected in the way they deal with scenes depicting violence against animals. Also explored was the use of fiction film strategies in both documentaries, highlighting the detective plot around which they are articulated and the first-person narration they employ. This exploration has shown how the two documentaries appeal in different ways to the audience's emotions in order to engage them actively and encourage a change of behavior. In particular, it has highlighted how the sensation of revulsion that images of animal abuse or slaughter can elicit is redirected toward pleasurable emotions, how the intrigue of the detective story aims to hook in and persuade the audience, and how the performative nature of both documentaries presents us with a subjective discourse charged with emotion that predisposes us to sympathize with the filmmaker, and consequently to change our habits. In short, in *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy*, the cognitive and the affective reinforce each other in order to gain our favor and lead us toward collective action. However, as noted above in relation to the criticisms of *Seaspiracy*, this emotional approach has not always been well-received and has led some authors (Yeo & Silberg, 2021; Lamb, 2021) to question whether these documentaries should be sacrificing the complexity of the issues they deal with in order to be more persuasive. It could be argued that the answer to this question can be found in an observation about Tabrizi's film made by one of these same authors: "When viewed from the lens of investigative journalism, the film does come across as sensationalist. But when viewed through the lens of environmental activism –where getting eyeballs on an issue is key– the film is a compelling piece of environmental communication" (Lamb, 2021).

In the final analysis, especially given that they are activist films, stoking controversy and sparking debate should be viewed as indicators of the effectiveness and success of these documentaries. Sacrificing the complexity of some of the issues they address may not be such a high price to pay when the primary objective of these films is to stir the conscience. That is why it is argued here that in the current context, it is perfectly legitimate and even advisable that the proliferation of films like the two analyzed and the others alluded to in this article

should shift between exposition and proclamation, in some sense echoing the approach of the guerrilla documentary that flourished some decades ago. Just as the political-militant productions in this category of documentary defined by Barnouw (2012, pp. 231-256) sought to confront Cold War threats, savage capitalism, and imperialism, the current climate emergency calls for a similar belligerent attitude that audiovisual non-fiction can use to prick the conscience of viewers. After all, pretensions to scientific objectivity have always been relative for a documentary genre that began life as a propaganda tool and which, as John Grierson would suggest, proposes a creative treatment of reality that goes beyond mere recording.

This study has also examined how the environmental damage caused by the meat and fishing industries is presented as a contemporary problem that affects us globally, whose causes, responsibilities, and solutions involve every country and all the people who inhabit the planet as consumers. Both documentaries thus conclude by encouraging responsible consumption and activism, but above all, the reasonable individual challenge of changing our diet. By providing the audience with proactive messages and explicit steps toward achieving this, the two films combat the usual reaction of helplessness that overwhelms the audiences of other audiovisual pieces more inclined toward catastrophism. The empowering and hopeful message that *Cowspiracy* and *Seaspiracy* convey is expressed in easily achievable proposals that can allow us to contribute to the process of cultural transformation entailed in the ecological transition. Andersen's and Tabrizi's documentaries thus urge us to recognize the value of individual contribution and to abandon our sense of helplessness in order to avoid a future foreseen by Natalie Dorfeld (2019, p. 254) when giving up meat and fish will not be a matter of choice but an inevitable measure to ensure human survival.

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