Cinematic Ecosystems

Screen Encounters with More-than-Humans in the Era of Environmental Crisis

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Chapter 15

Breaking the Species Divide: Entangled Empathy and Environmental Hope in *The Olive Tree* and *My Octopus Teacher*[1,2]

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Abstract: Recently, it has become increasingly difficult to locate ecocritical films that project hope. While grim portrayals may stir an environmental conscience in some spectators, they can also be considered to be pernicious, as they may lead to hopelessness and inaction. Fortunately, one can still locate certain films that refuse to fit this pattern. *The Olive Tree* (Bollain, 2016) and *My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich & Reed, 2020) insist on the possibility of a hopeful future through their portrayal of human relations to other elements of the biotic community. This analysis will thus be undertaken mainly from a hope studies framework but will also follow other lines of research that highlight the importance of interspecies connectivity and non-exploitation of non-human animals and plants. As I will try to demonstrate, it is because of the empathetic entanglements that are developed in these post-anthropocentric narratives that hopeful alternatives for the future to come may be envisaged.

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Keywords: ecocritical films; environmental hope; interspecies entanglement; plant studies; animal studies

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Introduction

Elin Kelsey, a leading hope scholar, believes that "the environmental crisis is also a crisis of hope," and indeed, it is becoming increasingly challenging to locate ecocritical films that project hope.[3] Dramas such as *Deepwater Horizon* (Berg, 2016) or satires such as *Don't Look Up* (McKay, 2021) portray scenarios in which the overly optimistic neoliberal reliance on technological fixes and the permanent failure of political leaders to grab the bull by the horns foster rampant individualism and the dissemination of misinformation about the environmental crisis. While these grim portrayals may stir an environmental conscience in some spectators, they can also be pernicious, as they may lead to hopelessness and inaction. As Andrew Fiala says, "we are in the midst of a crisis of millennial proportions, and yet we waste time and pursue our own self-interests, fiddling while Rome burns."[4]

Fortunately, one may still locate certain films that stubbornly refuse to fit this pattern and allow us to envision a different possible future. Both the Spanish social-realist drama *The Olive Tree* (Bollain, 2016) and the South African documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (Ehrlich and Reed, 2020) insist on the possibility of a hopeful future in which humans intentionally break the species divide, thereby achieving self-improvement while procuring the overall betterment of the environments that they call home. Importantly, depression is a common thread that links the two films, even though the source for the main characters' poor mental health differs significantly. In the case of *The Olive Tree*, it is due to the suffering that natural despoliation inflicts on the protagonists. In the case of *My Octopus Teacher*, it is due to a nature deficit disorder of the human protagonist. In both cases, as shall be explained in more detail, psychological distress leads the main characters to take different forms

[3] Elin Kelsey, *Hope Matters: Why Changing the Way We Think Is Critical to Solving the Environmental Crisis* (Greystone Books, 2020), 4. Kelsey's objective is to break through the narrative of gloom and doom by showing how evidence-based hope can lead to change.

[4] Andrew Fiala, "Nero 's Fiddle. On Hope, Despair, and the Ecological Crisis," *Ethics and the Environment* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 51.

of direct action to address the problem and, by doing so, protect the natural environments in which they find solace.

According to Kelsey, green hope, defined as a willingness to act based on scientific knowledge and critical social analysis, is essential if we want to overcome the challenges that face us. This is not an easy task since, as she laments, "feeling empowered to act demands a sense of possibility which is constantly being eroded by the now-ubiquitous exposure to horrifying events happening around the world daily."[5] Fear can be a numbing and counterproductive emotion that does not motivate people to act. Alternative emotions like concern and hope should be cultivated instead, which is what the two films attempt to do. Their inspirational portrayals of interspecies relations appear to convey the same message: it is only by actively reconfiguring our relationships with other living things and redefining the roles that humans play in the ecosystems that we inhabit that the environmental crisis might be mitigated, even if not altogether averted. It is not too late. As Rebecca Solnit stresses: "Hope is an embrace of the unknown and the unknowable … It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it might impact, are not things we can know beforehand … Things don't always change for the better, but they change, and we can play a role in that change if we act. Which is where hope comes in."[6]

Hope for the environment, then, resides in our not avoiding the problem and acting, whether by simply engaging in protests and organizing or signing petitions or by working towards abandoning the anthropocentric bias that characterizes Western societies and fostering an ethics of care. Our actions, however small, can be empowering and have an enormous transformative impact when considered alongside the myriad small actions performed by others.

Apart from adopting the hope framework, this analysis also involves the critical dissection of human/more-than-human relations and the fostering of non-exploitative forms of interaction. To achieve this objective, the development of both personal and collective forms of environmental ethics is paramount. Individual actions, while essential, can only constitute the stepping stones to a radical change in our relationship to the natural world in the era of the so-called

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[5] Kelsey, *Hope Matters*, 4.
[6] Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities* (Haymarket Books, [2004] 2016), xiv; xix.

Anthropocene,[7] leading to a future full of possibilities in which not just everyone's but everything's rights (that is, the biotic and abiotic elements of natural ecosystems) are upheld.

Indeed, it is because of the human-more-than-human entanglements that are developed in these post-anthropocentric narratives that hopeful alternatives for the future may be envisioned. In short, I believe these narratives are worth considering for their dismantling of power and value hierarchies with regards to our relationship with nature and for their active fostering of "entangled empathy,"[8]—in other words, an ethics of care and respect for elements of the ecosystems in which we humans are inextricably embedded. Care ethics, in short, highlights the critical role that emotion, connection, and empathy have to play in the redefinition of human relations to the rest of the biotic community.[9] Such a redefinition inevitably entails a decentering of the human self, such that long-standing anthropocentric beliefs and thoughts may be questioned, and an empathetic stance may be adopted toward all elements of the ecosystem.

It is precisely because of their portrayals of novel scenarios of interspecies coexistence that these two films can be said to provide spectators with a measure of "radical hope." As Byron Williston explains, "radical hope is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is … Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand."[10] Put

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[7] The Anthropocene has recently been rejected by the International Commission on Stratigraphy as the geological epoch following the Holocene. Nevertheless, the term continues to be widely used outside (and inside) geology to refer to the immense and growing impact of human activity on the planet. Manuel Ansede, "The Anthropocene War: The Controversial Vote that Decided Not to Change the Planet's Geological Epoch," *El País* (English edition), March 8, 2024, https://english.elpais.com/science-tech/2024-03-08/the-anthropocene-war-the-controversial-vote-that-decided-not-to-change-the-planets-geological-epoch.html.

[8] Lori Gruen, "Navigating Difference (Again). Animal Ethics and Entangled Empathy," in *Animal Subjects 2.0*, ed. Carla Jodey Castricano et al. (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 203-27. Gruen defines this concept as "a type of posthumanism that helps us navigate difference and build meaningful, ethical interspecies relationships" (204) by breaking the "species border" (216).

[9] Ronald Sandler, *Environmental Ethics. Theory in Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 334.

[10] Byron Williston, "Climate Change and Radical Hope," *Ethics and the Environment* 17, no. 2 (2012): 178; 181; 183.

differently, these films provide us with a version of a good that is “not yet”[11] so that we may catch a glimpse of what the future of Western societies might look like if we work toward the establishment of an ecocentric ethics of care and respect. As Darren Ambrose argues, the cinema is a particularly adept medium through which these hopeful scenarios may be conveyed: “[Cinema] can offer us a way of resisting the homogenous reality of the present … At its finest and most ambitious, the cinema offers us renewed hope of perceiving and thinking reality as teeming with new and previously unforeseen possibilities.”[12] Cinema can play a key role, he continues, “in the vital re-enchantment of the world … by presenting not only alternative visions of possible realities but alternative and unorthodox ways of thinking.”[13] The films under analysis here foster such alternative ways of thinking. By doing so, they may hopefully, and radically, encourage the audience to take a step back and question their regular beliefs while “resisting the homogeneous reality of the present.”[14]

Finally, the ethics of kinship that these films distill are also paramount to achieve the aims that the World Health Organization’s (2024) “One Health” approach pursues.[15] This strategy, which in the post-COVID-19 pandemic scenario aims to achieve the best health outcomes for humans, nonhuman animals, plants, and ecosystems, is based on a holistic concept that has been known (but willfully ignored) in the Western world for far too long—that is, that human, animal, and plant health are interdependent and bound to the health of the ecosystems in which they exist. As we have painfully witnessed over the past few years, changes in the above relationships and the concomitant disruption of ecosystems can multiply the risk of new human and more-than-human animal diseases developing and spreading. The establishment of empathetic care ethics is an invaluable instrument for procuring the dismantlement of traditional Western ideas regarding the separateness and superiority of humans from nature, which may provide an opportunity for

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[11] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice (MIT Press, [1954] 1995). Bloch's philosophy of hope underlies the human capacity to be critical of present realities and to construct possible alternatives. These hopeful alternative configurations emerge from everyday experiences of dissatisfaction. For Bloch, social reality is constantly unfolding, i.e., unfinished, ‘not yet’ realized.

[12] Darren Ambrose, *Film, Nihilism and the Restoration of Belief* (Zero Books, 2013), 3; 4.

[13] Ambrose, *Film, Nihilism*, 5.

[14] Ibid., 3.

[15] “One Health,” World Health Organization, accessed January 29, 2024, https://www.who.int/health-topics/one-health#tab=tab_1

fundamentally reconfiguring human relations with the more-than-human world. While this will prove to be no easy task, we must persevere for, as Solnit concludes, "nothing less than systemic change will save us."[16]

The Olive Tree

Let me continue by taking a closer look at the Spanish film *The Olive Tree*, an unassuming but significant piece of filmmaking that covers uncommon ground, i.e., human-plant interactions. Plants continue to be in the background of ethical debates regarding our relations with the environment. This is because humans suffer (at least historically) from what Wandersee and Schussler call "plant blindness."[17] Plant blindness refers to the tendency for some human beings to not identify with plants as readily as they may do with animals, even though humans, like the rest of life on our planet, literally depend on the existence of plants for survival. The time has come for the development of an ethics of kinship with all more-than-human forms of life, including plants. *The Olive Tree* may encourage us to work towards these ethics.

Unusually, this film focuses on the strong bonds that humans can develop with both plants and their places of origin.[18] Yi-Fu Tuan famously referred to this affective bond as "topophilia," or the love of place. [19] Conceptually, 'place' and 'space' differ in meaning as the first term denotes a particular form of space that is *personally significant* and, generally speaking, comforting to people.[20] Feelings and emotions, therefore, play a key role in the definition of place. These meaningful places are innumerable and may include diverse physical locations, ranging from a bedroom to a beach to an entire bioregion. For this reason, place has been conceptualized as "a constellation of cultural as well as natural meanings that make it as essential and irreplaceable to humans as it is to wildlife. For place is what grounds us, holding us close to

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[16] Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 136.

[17] James H. Wandersee and Elizabeth E. Schlusser, "Preventing Plant Blindness," *The American Biology Teacher* 61, no. 2 (February 1999): 84-86.

[18] The more recent Spanish film *Alcarràs* (Carla Simòn, 2022) has also focused on this important trope, with a particular emphasis on Spain's current controversial craze for land clearing to make way for solar power farms.

[19] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes and Values* (Columbia University Press, [1974] 1990).

[20] Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Wiley Blackwell, [2004] 2015), 12 and 16.

the Earth."[21] Julian Hoffman has found that significant places carry more emotional resonance for people than valued, personally owned objects, which (in materialistic societies in particular) gives grounds for hope regarding the preservation of natural ecosystems.[22]

Conversely, *The Olive Tree* is a case study for what Glenn Albrecht has labeled "solastalgia,"[23] which, in affective ecological terms, refers to the feeling of despair that people experience when their home environment is degraded or destroyed while they are still living in it. This may be due to open-air mining, pollution of rivers, or deliberate destruction or removal of flora, on which this film specifically focuses. Albrecht's neologism derives from 'nostalgia,' which refers both to the feeling of sadness that people experience when they are away from home, particularly when this separation is forced, and the desire to return to a period in the past that is perceived as more comforting. Solastalgia derives from 'solace' and 'desolation,' for it was a perceived lack of comfort derived from interactions with the home environment that Albrecht repeatedly found in his research. As a result, he produced the following definition: "solastalgia is the pain or sickness caused by the … lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory ... It is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one … loves is under immediate assault."[24] Albrecht is careful to emphasize that this feeling of distress may make some people feel helpless and alienated, but it may also spur others into taking direct action, seeking "its alleviation in a future that has to be … created,"[25] or a future that is 'not yet.' Both situations find their reflection in the film's characterization.

The plot of the film revolves around the eponymous tree and three generations of a family of olive farmers. Alma (Anna Castillo) is a young, troubled woman who is deeply attached to her grandfather (Manuel Cucala),

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[21] Julian Hoffman, *Irreplaceable. The Fight to Save our Wild Places* (Penguin Books, [2019] 2020), 11.

[22] Ibid., 13. Hoffman's book incorporates successful stories of ordinary people from around the globe who, in the absence of political will, decided to act to preserve those places that they considered to be "irreplaceable." These important stories need to be told so that people can understand that it is possible to counteract political inaction and defeat corporate interests to stop indiscriminate ecosystem destruction.

[23] Glenn Albrecht, "'Solastalgia.' A New Concept in Health and Identity," *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 3 (2005), 44-59.

[24] Albrecht, "Solastalgia," 48.

[25] Ibid., 49.

who has been suffering from depression/solastalgia for quite some time and refuses to communicate with the other members of the family. Alma literally says that he is "in mourning." What triggered his mental illness, or mourning, was his children's decision to sell an olive tree, nicknamed "the Monster" due to the unusual look of its trunk, which resembles the huge mouth of a monstrous creature, to a garden center, which in turn sold it to a German utility company. The firm uses the olive tree as its company logo as part of its greenwashing strategy, for, as is revealed later, the company is under scrutiny due to its destructive extractive practices.

Both Alma and her grandfather were deeply attached to this ancient tree, which, despite its nickname, was far from eliciting fear from the main characters. Alma, who often self-harms and displays other forms of self-destructive behavior, likes to reminisce about the peaceful, comforting moments that she spent in the olive grove feeding the Monster, listening to the greenfinches, and playing with her grandfather. The inner peace that she lacks can somehow still be found in that place despite the absence of the tree. The film conveys this in visual and aural terms from the opening sequence, when we see Alma at work in an intensive chicken farm, collecting dead animals here and there. The loud, frantic shriek of the enclosed animals and the suffocating atmosphere inside the building are contrasted with the quiet chirping of the birds in the expansive olive grove, where the grandfather is mournfully laying another stone on the pile where the Monster used to stand. At the grove, there is silence; only the birds can be heard. At the farm, there is a mixture of music and chicken shrieks. Long overhead and aerial shots of the grandfather walking in the grove also convey the idea that trees and humans have been intimately linked in these traditional ecosystems; even the colors of his clothes resemble those of the trees and the soil. Meanwhile, intensive farming environments such as the chicken farm have become both death traps for animals and deeply alienating spaces for humans. In this latter context, the human-nature bond appears to be absent altogether.

On the other hand, the warm natural lighting that characterizes the various scenes at the grove contrasts with the hard equivalent employed during the scene at the garden center, where dozens of heavily pruned trees stand in plant pots ready for sale. The same can be said about the scenes at the headquarters of the German firm, an indoor space clearly lacking in natural light and ventilation for an ancient outdoor plant like the Monster. In this context, the tree is frequently photographed in cold, artificial lighting. These shots are, at times, juxtaposed with flashbacks of the tree bathed in natural light in its

original placement. This stark contrast appears to objectify the tree and accentuates the lack of concern displayed by the executives of the firm (who remain faceless throughout the film) and the unnaturalness of the tree's traumatic uprooting. To the German firm, the tree is key for their greenwashing strategy, but they could not care less about the suffering of the tree, or Alma's and her grandfather's suffering.

Figure 15.1 The grandfather visits the Monster's grave. Still from *The Olive Tree.*

Icíar Bollain, 2016.

The film's plot revolves around the economic reasons that led Alma's father, uncle, and aunt to agree to the sale of the Monster to the German firm in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the efforts that Alma embarks on to try to retrieve the tree and return it to its natural habitat, its place of origin: the field in which it had lived for practically two thousand years. *The Olive Tree* depicts the problem of environmental despoliation, which has become commonplace in rural Spain. When olive trees become 'old' and, therefore, less productive in terms of output, they are sometimes uprooted and sold to buyers around the globe who find it pleasing to have them as ornamental features in their gardens. These trees, in short, are treated as mere *inert* background commodities devoid of inherent worth by both their sellers and buyers. Alma's grandfather, by contrast, considers the tree to be a *living* treasure that stands for local history, heritage, and rootedness. In his non-anthropocentric, non-instrumental view, the tree is not just an economic asset; it does not even belong to him. It belongs to the land, to the community, as it has always been there: "it's not ours, it's life's; it's history's."

The tree symbolizes the grandfather's traditional sense of place and attachment to his place of origin, a bond that has become increasingly rare in

our urban, mobile, globalized Western societies.[26] As he explains, humans and trees have interacted from time immemorial, and the sale of the tree now that it has become more profitable as decoration than as a fruit-bearing living thing feels like treason to him. His sense of community, therefore, does not only include people but also the trees, which are essential elements of the ecosystem and, therefore, constitute an integral part of his particular sense of place, of his habitat, of his dwelling. As he says, "That tree is priceless; it is sacred. That tree is my life, and you want to take my life away from me." Thus, when the tree is uprooted, an overwhelming feeling of loss sinks the grandfather into depression.

Kelsey and Hoffman show that people who are attached to certain places and, by extension, to the nonhuman elements of their ecosystems are more likely to want to conserve them.[27] This is precisely the idea that *The Olive Tree* is trying to convey. Although the film may be criticized for being overly anthropocentric due to the excessive focus it places on Alma's anger and her grandfather's mental illness rather than on the equally heartbreaking uprooting of the olive tree itself, there is no denying the fact that it sends a powerful message regarding the need to redefine our relations to the more-than-human elements of the environments in which we live if we want to stall the relentless destruction of Earth's ecosystems in the name of economic growth. Eventually, Alma fails in her endeavor, but her determination to act reminds us that hope ultimately resides in our readiness to act rather than in the successful nature of our actions. As David Orr puts it: "Hope, real hope, comes from doing the things before us that need to be done in the spirit of … celebration, without worrying about whether we will win or lose." [28] The film, in fact, ends on a positive note as Alma is able to bring a branch from Germany. The symbolic return home of the olive tree (the branch of which signifies peace in ancient Greek, Roman and some religious cultures) leads to the reconciliation of the family despite the grandfather's death during Alma's absence. Her actions have contributed to the rest of the family accepting the error of their utilitarian values. Traditional perspectives on human-more-than-human interactions emerge as one of the necessary solutions to the current environmental crisis. Thus, the film's last scene focuses on Alma, surrounded by the remaining monumental trees and listening to a greenfinch singing, which finally provides her with the solace that only healthy environments can procure.

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[26] Cresswell, *Place*, 14.

[27] Kelsey, *Hope Matters*, 175; Hoffman, *Irreplaceable*, 13.

[28] David Orr, "Hope in Hard Times," *Conservation Biology* 18, no. 2 (2004): 297.

My Octopus Teacher

Oscar and BAFTA-winning documentary *My Octopus Teacher* declares via its title its intention to propose an alternative to anthropocentric thinking. Indeed, this documentary provides good evidence that it is possible for humans to rethink our position in the ecosystems that we inhabit and develop an identity that is free of anthropocentric bias. While *The Olive Tree* provided the spectator with a dramatic portrayal of solastalgia and topophilia, this documentary provides a case study of biophilia, a theory introduced by Edward O. Wilson in the 1980s.[29] The term, initially coined by Erich Fromm, can be broadly defined as the instinctive human attachment to nature and nonhuman forms of life. This innate attraction has been constantly eroded throughout history, and to this day, capitalistic values and increased urban migration continue to separate humans from our original natural ecosystems.

The story behind this documentary revolves around its protagonist's biophilia, or the gradual discovery of his "urge to affiliate with [nature and] other forms of life."[30] The film's protagonist, Craig Foster,[31] consciously acknowledges this urge from the very beginning of the film: "I had a deep longing to be inside this world," by which he means the ocean. He describes that he had been utterly stressed out at work for over two years and was on the brink of collapse. As a means of escape, Foster returns to his house by the ocean in South Africa and reminisces about spending time at the beach, playing in the rock puddles, which used to make him very happy as a child. As an adult, he laments that he has become separated from those experiences. He also remembers shooting a film in the Central Kalahari and admiring the local men for their ability to identify and follow animal tracks because, as he says, they literally lived embedded in nature; they were not apart from nature but a part of it and therefore were able to "read" the codes of nature not symbolically but literally. While the hunters were able to find food by following animal tracks and identifying their traces, such codes were total enigmas to Craig.

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[29] Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia*, (Harvard University Press, [1984] 2003).

[30] Ibid., 85.

[31] While Foster is a documentary filmmaker, he did not direct *My Octopus Teacher*. Nevertheless, he produced the film and provided the underwater footage used by directors Ehrlich and Reed.

As his personal form of nature therapy,[32] he resolves to go into the water every day to try to recover this missing part of himself. By doing so, he hopes to recover from anxiety and depression and regain the happiness that he associates with his childhood contact with the ocean. Kelsey says that "hope helps us to stay engaged with stressful situations."[33] In other words, it is what stops us from despairing and disengaging from the world around us. Direct contact with the ocean provides Craig with the hope and energy he needs to recover from his mental illness. Still, the film is more than just an individual case study of successful human health recovery via nature therapy. Craig's healing also leads to his determination to act in order to protect marine ecosystems, thereby returning to the ocean what he managed to obtain from it.

Only after a few days, Craig starts regaining the appetite for shooting that he had lost, and during one of his regular dives, he encounters a strange-looking being, which turns out to be an octopus hiding under a bunch of seashells. The documentary revolves around the 'friendship,' or interspecies entanglement, that develops between Craig and this octopus; what he comes to learn from the octopus during the year or so that the documentary spans is the focus of the film. Throughout the process, not only does he manage to recover from his mental illness, but he also acquires an environmental education, which the film effectively transmits, thereby providing spectators with a measure of environmental hope.

To develop closer contact with the nonhuman world, Craig engages with nature in its own terms, so to speak, and chooses to dive without oxygen or a wetsuit. As days go by, he starts feeling more at home in the medium, "you fly … you naturally get more relaxed in the water … I wanted to be more like an amphibious animal," he says. The happiness and relaxation that he experiences are constantly enhanced by the music soundtrack, as well as through certain visual effects. Craig is generally shot in slow motion in the water, often in the company of the octopus, while relaxing music is used to convey Craig's sense of peace and of being at home in the kelp forest. Slow motion is also used in those scenes outside the water, adding to the sense that Craig is starting to embrace a slow-life ethos.

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[32] There is plenty of scientific evidence that supports that contact with the wild (or with 'restorative environments') can help in mental health recovery processes. See Florence Williams, *The Nature Fix. Why Nature Makes Us Happier, Healthier and More Creative* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2017) and Lucy Jones, *Losing Eden. Why Our Minds Need the Wild* (Penguin Books, 2020).

[33] Kelsey, *Hope Matters*, 43.

Conversely, suspenseful music is used in those scenes when sharks are trying to hunt the octopus. This is done to transmit the idea of danger but also of fear, not only the octopus's, but also Craig's. He explains that he has been able to connect with this wild creature so deeply that he can empathize with her and identify key life connections between them. This is nicely depicted in a dramatic scene in which the octopus escapes a shark attack by going onto the surface and finding refuge on the shore. After this narrow escape, Craig's panting can be clearly heard. This sound effect provides an important illustration of their interspecies entanglement, as he verbalizes the fear that the octopus has likely experienced. Craig's therapy succeeds, then, in the sense that he can break the species border and connect with a fellow creature in a way that most other people cannot. Still, he recognizes that "there is a line that cannot be crossed." That is, while human and nonhuman animals can bond, they must remain differentiated and, especially, humans must not perform acts of superiority. They should not interfere with natural processes so as not to alter the healthy balance of the ecosystems, of which they are only one more element.

As the days go by, Craig becomes increasingly interested in finding out about marine biology and specifically about octopi, whose form of intelligence is still under-researched, the film underlines. The octopus's curiosity is particularly noteworthy; she is clearly aware of and often interacts with Craig's underwater camera, touching it, sucking it, and playing with it. Most importantly, she engages with Craig himself, an exemplar of an alien species in the kelp forest that she chooses to trust and likes to touch and swim with. Craig becomes more in awe of the animal, which he considers to be "a thousand times more intelligent" than himself, and wonders about what the octopus might be getting out of the relationship. He concludes it might be some form of "octopus joy," which is not inconsistent with scientific findings regarding this sentient species.[34]

What Craig indeed obtains from the relationship is the capacity to recover from depression, a surge in energy and creativity, and, most importantly, an environmental education via his ability to empathize and identify with another species. As a result, he can redefine his role in the habitat, of which he acknowledges he is only one part. Craig likens marine ecosystems to "a giant underwater brain" that has been able to keep everything in balance for millions of years. He says, "You just go into the water, and your worries and … life drama just dissolve. … You slowly start to care about all the animals … you realize that

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[34] Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds. The Octopus and The Evolution of Intelligent Life* (William Collins Books, 2016).

everyone is very important … What [the octopus] taught me is that you're part of this place, not a visitor. That's a huge difference." This is certainly reminiscent of Aldo Leopold's celebrated ecocentric, communitarian land ethic, which one can equally apply to aquatic environments.[35]

Figure 15.2 Craig and his octopus teacher/friend in *My Octopus Teacher*.

Still from *My Octopus Teacher* (Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, 2020)

I will conclude by referring to Craig's final, potent remarks. He has started diving in the company of his son. His son is a very powerful swimmer who also can display "gentleness," which is "what a thousand hours in nature can teach a child." This is the philosophy of care that Craig is now able to instill in his young son. While I have no space here to elaborate further on the film's construction of Craig's and his son's "eco-masculinity,"[36] it is essential to stress his conclusion as it foregrounds the male capacity for nurturing and making meaningful connections with nonhuman nature. Focusing on ecofeminist-influenced forms of masculinity is key at this junction when the capitalistic, exploitative values that inform traditional notions of masculinity have run amok and made the planet unsafe through the destruction of ecosystems. Both men and women need to develop a different, gentler relationship with nature; a care ethics through nurturing can lead to love, empathy, and identification.

[35] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: With Other Essays on Conservation from Round River* (Oxford University Press, 1949).
[36] Rubén Cenamor and Stephen Brandt, eds., *Ecomasculinities. Negotiating Male Gender Identity in U.S. Fiction* (Lexington Books, 2019).

Precisely in order to nurture the ocean, Craig founded the Sea Change Project organization, which campaigns for the lifelong protection of kelp forests through storytelling.[37] The film underlines this at the very end and uses aerial shots of divers near one of these irreplaceable underwater ecosystems in order to convey the idea of human embeddedness in and dependence on nature.

Craig's story illustrates that when people can make emotional connections with places that they hold dear, this can also lead to their identification with the nonhuman elements of the broader ecosystems that humans inhabit. Hopeful stories like Craig's are needed because films and other forms of creative work that revolve around the connections of emotion and ecology play an invaluable role in the development of a caring conscience among spectators. Presenting scientific data is essential to educate the public as to the threat of climate change and the need to preserve Earth's ecosystems. However, scientific reports may fail to make the hoped-for impact when information is presented in an excessively dry, matter-of-fact way.[38] As Hoffman says, "Along with science, it is equally important that everyday intellectual, emotional, spiritual and psychological responses to the natural world don't go unheard in the larger environmental discussion … For us to have any hope of salvaging what remains of the world's plenitude … it's imperative that those two voices complete and bolster one another."[39] Notably, only Craig's voice can be heard throughout the narrative, either as he is being interviewed or in voice-over. This stylistic choice likely accentuates spectators' identification with Craig, thereby allowing us to gain emotional access to his life-changing experience of interspecies entanglement.

Conclusion

In her study of green utopias and speculative fiction, Lisa Garforth explains that such texts "reveal what is wrong with the societies we have [and] function to

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[37] The project's objective is to connect people to the wild, thereby "motivating them to become part of the regeneration of our planet" ("Sea Change Project)," Sea Change Project, accessed February 5, 2024, https://seachangeproject.com/. Fittingly, the organization's motto is "Remember you are wild."

[38] Also see Peter Wohlleben, *The Secret Network of Nature* (Vintage, [2017] 2019), 252. This bestselling popular science author has often been criticized because his appeal to the senses and emotions is at odds with science's pursuit of pure objectivity. However, people's rediscovery of our need for nature is precisely one of the paths science has identified as key to averting the relentless destruction of ecosystems and preserving planetary "One Health" (World Health Organization, "One Health").

[39] Hoffmann, *Irreplaceable*, 74-75.

unsettle the status quo" as alternative ways of being and living in harmony with nature are presented.[40] The films I have analyzed perform the very same function and introduce "alternative and unorthodox ways of thinking."[41] Still, they are far from being utopian in the sense that they are not esoteric abstractions, and they represent alternatives that are not grounded in speculation about the future. Instead, they portray real or realistic entanglements with nature and send the powerful message that there is hope and that it is possible to be and live in a different way. More films such as these are needed as they have the potential to reverse the cinematic gloom and doom tide and encourage concerned spectators to act now to stop the persistent destruction of Earth's natural ecosystems.

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[40] Lisa Garforth, *Green Utopias. Environmental Hope Before and After Nature* (Polity Press, 2018), 11-12.

[41] Ambrose, *Film, Nihilism*, 5.

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