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Migrating Environmental Paradigms in Italian American Cinema

Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice by Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno

Abstract

In their ongoing exploration of issues related to race and social justice, independent filmmakers Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno have often focused on US cities and/or particular inner-city areas. The documentary Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice *(2006) stands out among their works for its emphasis on the geo-cultural links between America and Europe—for connecting the city of New Orleans and the rest of the Mississippi Delta to the world beyond the geographic and political borders of the US. This article examines the short film's investigation into the causes and consequences of hurricane Katrina in light of Anil Narine's notion of "eco-trauma cinema" (2014) and focuses on the transnational dimension of the environmental issues at stake. By connecting local struggles in two separate continents,* Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice *promotes affective alliances that reach from the local to the global and envisages shifting conceptions of US national consciousness and belonging. With its companion short video* NOLA *(2006), it raises awareness about the human-induced causes of 'natural' events and presents an effective picture of similar risk scenarios involving far and different places (eerily prescient of the 2019 Venice flooding). By highlighting the imbrication of local places, ecologies, and cultural practices in global networks, these films contribute to laying the basis for "cosmopolitan forms of awareness and community, both ecologically and culturally" (Heise 2007, 210) and to fostering ideals of "world-traversing and world-transcending citizenship" (Lipsitz 2011, 216).*

Keywords: *documentary film, climate change, eco-trauma cinema, Katrina*

Cinema has done much to help New Orleans recover from Hurricane Katrina. In order to respond to the complex question of how to represent this calamitous event and its aftermath, most filmmakers have chosen to simply show it as it was. Therefore, documentary

has been the dominant genre in the cinematic treatment of Katrina.[1] Works such as Spike Lee's television film *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) and its follow-up *If God Is Willing and Da Creek Don't Rise* (2010), Harry Shearer's *The Big Uneasy* (2010), and Carl Deal and Tia Lessin's *Trouble the Water* (2008) have all recorded Katrina's devastation and have shown the efforts of New Orleanians to ensure the city's survival while denouncing the US government's culpably inefficient response to the disaster.[2] Yet, as Harris (2012, 86) observes, many of the movies that have done the most to help New Orleans recover from Katrina do not focus on the flooding. They feature New Orleans as a setting or filming location but not Katrina as their subject.

Conversely, the hurricane—its causes and aftermath as well as its far-reaching implications in a global perspective—is the subject of the short documentaries *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* (2006) and *NOLA* (2006) by Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno.[3] This essay explores the two short films' representation of Katrina from an ecocritical standpoint, adopting the framework of what Anil Narine has called "eco-trauma cinema"—a brand of films depicting "the harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings, or the injuries we sustain from nature in its unforgiving iterations" (2014). The transnational dimension of the environmental issues foregrounded in these films will be also taken into account, in the attempt to show that, connecting what seem to be merely local struggles with similar ones engaged in other areas of the globe, these documentaries forge affective alliances that span from local to global. In *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice*, the Bongiornos explore the possibility to employ the paradigm of migration for the study of 'natural' phenomena, showing how environmental awareness can be enhanced by multicultural understanding.

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[1] Scott Jordan Harris remarks that "there is even a documentary feel to some of the fictionalized Katrina films—or rather television shows" (2012, 105).

[2] Also worth mentioning is the fictional treatment of Katrina in *Treme* (2010-2013), an HBO series set in the tumultuous months and years after the hurricane, by David Simon (author of the acclaimed *The Wire*) and Eric Overmyer.

[3] Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno are husband and wife filmmakers who formed their own production company, the Bongiorno Productions, in Newark, N.J. They co-write their scripts and have defined roles in their work: Marylou is a producer and director; Jerome is an editor, cinematographer, and animator. The Bongiornos have created numerous fictional, documentary, art, and experimental films and screenplays. They have also exhibited their video installations in museums and galleries. They have earned numerous awards, an Emmy nomination (for *Mother-Tongue: Italian American Sons & Mothers*, featuring Martin Scorsese, John Turturro, and Rudolph Giuliani), and received grants from The Film Society of Lincoln Center, Martin Scorsese, Lew Wasserman, Warner Bros. Pictures, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, The National Endowment for the Arts, and The National Endowment for the Humanities. Their screenplay and film, *Little Kings*, won numerous national and international awards.

1. Documentary filmmaking and environmental issues: a geo-cultural approach

The development of the concept of eco-trauma cinema follows the steps recently traced by a number of critics and theorists whose interdisciplinary approach connects traditionally separate fields of inquiry, allowing "landforms and languages" to interact "in a reciprocal and unfolding dynamic" (Dassow Walls 2011, 860).[4] Such an approach can hopefully represent "the foundation of something new, a deeply interdisciplinary fusion of language, literature, culture, and society with the earth and earth processes: literature and science and history as geography, born in one gesture" (Dassow Walls 2011, 861). With the inclusion of cinema as one of the fields that may contribute to such a paradigm shift, this perspective could be even more fruitful in its combining the concern of cultural geographers with "how different spatial scales are produced, contested, and transformed across time" with the literary scholars' consideration of "how texts create feelings of geographical belonging, and how those feelings can be mobilized to jump scales, from personal, to local, to national, to global" (Dassow Walls 2011, 862).

Film culture has played a significant role in the global environmental movement, and ecocinema has become a popular genre that calls for "activist viewing in the service of greater awareness and real-life engagement with ecological and environmental justice issues" (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010a, xii). Whereas literary ecocriticism focuses on a writer's use of language and metaphor and what this reveals about his/her perception and experience of nature, cinematic ecocriticism (or 'eco-cinecriticism') must engage with "how visual representations position nature and natural features, how these are framed by the lens of the camera or shaped by the editing process" (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010b, 8). It is widely acknowledged that the camera fosters a greater illusion of objectivity and realism, and that nothing is more ideologically charged than the presumed invisible style of classical cinema in its effort to hide the constructed nature of images. This is especially relevant to documentary film, a genre that by definition is supposed to convey the most objective representation of reality. In fact, as several studies illustrate, documentaries are "performative acts, inherently fluid and unstable" which are better understood as having recourse to "a new definition of authenticity, one that eschews the traditional adherence to observation or […] the transparency of film and replaces this with a multi-layered, performative exchange between subjects, filmmakers/apparatus and spectators" (Bruzzi 2006, 10).

[4] Lawrence Buell, Laura Dassow Walls, Ursula K. Heise, Hsuan L. Hsu, Wai Chee Dimock, Bertrand Westphal, Stephen Greenblatt, to name but a few.

Originally entitled *Watermark*, *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* was meant to be only a research piece for a feature film, a romantic drama about an American marine biologist and an Italian engineer who are both at work to save Venice from sinking, yet providing opposite solutions. Using the geological challenges of the Venetian lagoon as its backdrop, *Watermark* initially explored the threat posed to the city by further devastating sinkage due to the rising of the seas, which is aggravated by global warming. The film also aimed at examining the proposed solution—the retractable dam project (MOSE)[5]—and the controversy involving the hazards this complex system poses to the lagoon's ecosystem and global ecological balance, as well as its high estimated cost. In dealing with such complex matters, the directors were aided by their scientific backgrounds (they are both biologists). However, after completing the first draft of the *Watermark* screenplay, they decided to assemble a focus group of specialists and asked them to provide feedback that would inform the second draft (Bongiorno 2006).[6] This gathering became a Wingspread Conference hosted by the Johnson Foundation in Racine, Wisconsin. In July 2005, for three days the Bongiornos summoned thirty scientists, environmentalists, historians, journalists, policy makers, and film industry representatives to generate recommendations for the *Watermark* screenplay and to discuss the effects of global warming, and the consequent sea level rise, on international coastal cities. The script served as the centerpiece for discussion in a conference that, transcending the borders of scientific disciplines, gave rise, in Anthony

[5] Acronym for Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico, or Experimental Electromechanical Module (the designation is also a play on 'Mosè,' the Italian name for the Biblical prophet Moses, who parted the Red Sea to allow the Israelites' crossing during the Exodus). It is a high-tech project, intended to protect the city of Venice from floods through rows of electronically operated mobile gates, that has been underway since the early 2000s. Its estimated cost in 2014 amounted to 5.5 billion euros. Between 2013 and 2014 thirty-five people were arrested in Italy on corruption charges in connection with the MOSE project. As reported by ansa.it, "[o]n 10 July 2020, the first full test was successfully completed, and after multiple delays, cost overruns, and scandals resulted in the project missing its 2018 completion deadline (originally a 2011 deadline) it is now expected to be fully completed by the end of 2021. On 3 October 2020, the MOSE was activated for the first time in the occurrence of a high tide event, preventing some of the low-lying parts of the city (in particular Piazza San Marco) from being flooded" ("Venice's MOSE to be raised" 2020).

[6] After the hurricane, the backdrop of the devastating floods in Venice has been expanded to include post-Katrina New Orleans. "At that point, it was very clear to us that *Watermark* had to begin in a post-Katrina New Orleans and our main character should be a female biologist working in the wetlands of the Mississippi Delta, passionate about preventing future devastation from storms and floods by rebuilding the marshes. Then, she is sent to Venice on a similar crusade" (Bongiorno 2006). The *Watermark* screenplay was featured at Sundance's *Investing in Media That Matters,* the Hamptons Writers Conference, IFP Market's No Borders, and the Tribeca Film Festival/Sloan Summit. A related series of short films and photographs is in exhibition by PBS, film festivals, museums, and art galleries ("Watermark").

Tamburri's words, to "a sort of epistemological comparison and/or exchange in how we receive and perceive certain modes of knowledge" (Cappelli 2009).[7]

On July 23rd, thirty-seven days before Katrina hit New Orleans, one of the participants in the conference, Louisiana State University's professor John W. Day,[8] gave a presentation that included a computer simulation of the catastrophic effects of a category 4 hurricane coming in and flooding the city. The talk proved prophetic, even though, as Day affirms in the video, "Everybody down here knew this was coming" (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006a).[9]

In November 2005, Marylou and Jerome Bongiorno visited New Orleans, and the documentary they had planned for their research on *Watermark* started to take on a life of its own. Unlike most films dealing with Katrina and its aftermath, survivors are not the subject of *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice*. The video features the filmmakers' interview with John Day, who is the narrator and protagonist of the story and visually dominates the film—except for the director's brief appearance in front of the camera as she accompanies Day and his collaborator to collect data in the Louisiana wetlands. Donning hip-boots and sinking waist-deep in mud, Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno is shown experiencing the marshes firsthand. Such involvement by the director, who thereby also becomes a performer, reflects an established tradition of documentary film that in recent years has earned increasing acclaim (one has only to think of Michael Moore's work).[10] According to Bruzzi, the filmmakers' active participation in their films testifies to their interest in "discovering alternative and less formally restrictive ways of getting to what they perceive to be the essence of their subjects" (2006, 198).[11] The director's overt intervention in the film implies a questioning of the notion of objectivity that has long been a

[7] In 2009 *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* occasioned another international conference organized in New York by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and ILICA (Italian Language Inter-Cultural Alliance).

[8] The film's protagonist and narrator, Dr. John Day, is featured as Former Chair of the Louisiana Government Coastal Area Project.

[9] In the video, Day explains that the computer-designed model was developed in Louisiana for an emergency preparedness exercise.

[10] This kind of documentary falls in Bill Nichols's category of "participatory mode": a type of documentary that "emphasizes the interaction between filmmaker and subject. Filming takes place by means of interviews or other forms of even more direct involvement from conversations to provocations" (2010, 31).

[11] Bruzzi also observes that the means employed by these filmmakers "are not those conventionally associated with truth-finding post-direct cinema as they entail breaking the illusion of film, thereby interrupting the privileged relationship between the filmed subjects and the spectator" (2006, 198). The overt intervention of the filmmaker definitively signals the end of "documentary theory's idealization of the unbiased film by asking […]: what else is a documentary but a dialogue between a filmmaker, a crew and a situation that, although in existence prior to their arrival, has irrevocably been changed by their arrival?" (2006, 198).

staple of the documentary genre, and is part of a larger change that, in the last decades, has emphasized the personal over the institutional in literature and other forms of discourse.

In the first part of the documentary, the filmmakers follow Dr. John Day as he navigates the Mississippi delta and describes how the devastation of the city and neighboring towns/villages could have been prevented, if only the surrounding natural environment had been treated differently. Through satellite photos of the hurricane, scientific data, and illustrations of the research conducted by Day and his team, the short film elucidates the concomitant causes of the hurricane's devastation. Day, who has been working in the wetlands of the river's delta for nearly forty years, explains that their presence in front of the coast is crucial for reducing the strength of the waves (whose intensity increases with the temperature rise of tropical oceans), but he also reveals that in Louisiana an enormous area of 4,000 square miles of wetlands eroded away in the 20th century. The biologist states that one of the chief reasons behind this disappearance is the construction of levees along the Mississippi river: "The river that used to flood over its banks and nourish the wetlands is now contained by these dikes so that the fresh water, sediments, and nutrients flow directly out into the Gulf of Mexico" (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006a). The restoration of the coast is a prerequisite to having an effective flood control system, according to Day, who stresses the need to re-vegetate the area by reintroducing the river into the wetlands through diversion structures dug through the levees. As Day proposes his second solution, which is to avoid building anything below sea level again, a computer model is shown representing an apartment house built on foundations elevated above the waters and conceived to resist the flood.

It has been observed that media representations of environmental crises often induce a sense of passive resignation in the spectators. In their increasing amount and tone, environmental narratives, which are supposed to inspire political and social activities aimed at protecting the planet, may result in being counterproductive to the extent that they overwhelm the viewer and prevent any action. In such representations, nature remains sublime, that is, "something too vast in its beauty and power to comprehend," and the resulting sentiment of awe thwarts practical responses to ecological crises (Narine 2014). In this context, the concept of trauma—or 'eco-trauma'—offers a useful interpretive tool. It is recognized that trauma can afflict large groups of people not directly hit by the event, and that differing levels of trauma are produced in relation to one's position as victim, bystander, or witness.[12] When we observe traumatic events represented in the media, we are not actual witnesses but rather "viewers of visually

[12] See Kaplan and Wang 2004; Kaplan 2005.

mediated trauma" (Narine 2014). *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* falls, to a large extent, into both the second and third general forms that Narine identifies as characteristic of eco-trauma cinema: "(2) narratives that represent people or social processes which traumatize the environment or its species, and (3) stories that depict the aftermath of ecological catastrophe, often focusing on human trauma and survival endeavours without necessarily dramatizing the initial 'event.'" (2014).[13] The levee failure in New Orleans that trapped thousands of Americans and destroyed one of America's most distinctive cities was one of the few televised American tragedies. As Harris-Lacewell reminds us, before Katrina, only the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963 and the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001 "allowed Americans to share in the trauma of their fellow citizens in real time" (2007, 41). Yet, unlike these earlier events, "the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was an unfolding drama that lasted for days. Rather than a single, terrible moment replayed by the media, the horror of New Orleans increased daily, produced new images of agony and death, and generated increasingly awful narratives of suffering" (Harris-Lacewell 2007, 41).

Kaplan and Wang have shown that narratives and images designed to represent traumas are viewed with suspicion, for they seem to have "the seductive power to gloss over the horrendous fact and to distort the literal truth of trauma" (2004, 8). Since trauma implies "a shattering of a culture's meaning-making scheme and representational modes," it is, as many critics have stated, "beyond the reach of representation" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 8).[14] Yet the sheer amount and variety of films dealing with different types of trauma show that the representation of trauma is in fact characterized by a complexity (both in terms of the film's performance and of the effects it produces on the viewer) that cannot be easily dismissed. Hence, it is crucial to address the question of how trauma marks the viewer.[15] Kaplan and Wang have identified four main positions for viewers of "trauma films," according to differing cinematic strategies. Among these, "the position of being a witness" is defined as "the most politically useful" in light of the fact that such a position "may open up a space for transformation of the viewer through

[13] The first form consists of "(1) accounts of people who are traumatized by the natural world" (Narine 2014).

[14] Against this position Giorgio Agamben, among others, sustains the necessity of witnessing and representing what is deemed "unspeakable" in order to dispel the mystical aura, and power, the event would otherwise acquire (2012, 30).

[15] It is important to stress, as Harris-Lacewell does, that, while the appalling consequences of Katrina have been immediately evident to most, watching the aftermath of the storm must have had a very different impact on African Americans: "Hurricane Katrina was not colorblind in its effects and Americans were not colorblind in their interpretations of the disaster. There is a vast racial disparity between how black and white Americans understood the lessons of the storm" (2007, 41).

empathic identification without vicarious traumatization" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 10).[16] Indeed, *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* complicates the process of empathic identification,[17] which supposedly allows the spectator to enter into the victim's experience through a work's narration, because it focuses on the city more than on its inhabitants. Still, the unusual, anti-narrative stance of the documentary,[18] in which the emphasis is mainly on providing evidence of the human-induced hydro-geological damage inflicted upon the Louisiana coasts and the severe danger this entails, could be itself transformative in "inviting the viewer to at once be there emotionally […], but also keep a cognitive distance and awareness denied to the victim by the traumatic process" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 10). As recent studies on narrative empathy suggest, such cognitive distance could be equally conducive to viewers' engagement with the people/characters or events narrated.[19] According to Carl Plantinga, for instance, viewers can both respond to characters emotionally and maintain some critical distance: "Our modular minds are capable of multiple, ambiguous, and even conflicting responses" (2009, 127). In the ongoing debate about the core problem of effective communication with regard to environmental issues, the assumption that phenomena like climate change, to name the most widely discussed,[20] must be regarded as predominantly scientific problems has been challenged

[16] The other positions are: "First, the position of being introduced to trauma through a film's themes and techniques, but where the film ends with a comforting 'cure.' […] Second, the position of being vicariously traumatized—a potentially negative result, although at crucial moments able to productively 'shock' audiences […] into wanting to know more and perhaps do something about what [… they have] seen. Third, the position of being a voyeur […]; voyeurism is dangerous because it exploits the victims and secretly offers a sort of subversive pleasure in horror one would not want to encourage" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 10).

[17] Carl Plantinga argues that the term 'identification' is misleading, since it implies a losing of the self in the other, whereby our identity as a separate individual momentarily becomes lost or weakened as we identify with a character on the screen. Plantinga (1999, 244) observes that, if this experience is certainly possible, it is not the only way to engage with characters. As viewers, we most commonly engage with characters from the external perspective of a separate self. The broader and more neutral term 'character engagement' is therefore to be preferred as it is able to convey the wide variety of experiences that connote our orientation toward characters, ranging from empathy to antipathy, from sympathy to indifference.

[18] To some extent, *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* is an example of the "expository mode" (one of the six modes Nichols identifies as characteristic of the documentary genre), which "emphasizes the impression of objectivity and a well-supported perspective" and is especially suited to "conveying information or mobilizing support within a framework that preexists the film" (2010, 169).

[19] It is generally recognized that empathy is neither a simple process nor a clearly understood one. As a consequence, its definition has been a vexed question. Empathy is not a single emotion, but it incorporates varied sorts of emotional experiences. Scholars tend to agree that to empathize with another requires sharing her or his emotional experience. See also Keen 2010.

[20] Kluwick observes that climate change has infiltrated all kinds of social discourses. It is conspicuously present in the newsprint, it has spawned an impressive number of literary

by scholars who have convincingly argued that the environmental crisis "is also a cultural crisis, a crisis of representation" (Kluwick 2014, 506). As we have seen, climate change is not the main subject of *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice*, which focuses on the specific human-induced causes of, and the possible solutions to, the disaster caused by the hurricane.[21] With its pro-active tone, the documentary takes a distinctive approach in the treatment of Katrina's effects. Unlike other environmental documentaries—such as Davis Guggenheim's Oscar-winning *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006)[22]—this short film does not stop at 'pedagogical persuasion' but calls its viewers to both individual and collective action by indicating concrete solutions for the future. As Day positively states in the last part of the video: "We still have the ability to restore our coast in an effective way, a natural and functioning coast, and we are working on that right now" (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006a). In its appeal for activist viewing, not only in the service of greater awareness but also of real-life engagement with ecological and environmental justice issues, *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* can be counted amongst films that are both "practically and politically motivational" (Kluwick 2014, 506). Its mode, point of view, and imagery help build a cognitive map, aiding viewers in their quest to make sense of the traumatic event and challenging them to overcome stasis or passive acceptance and embrace their responsibilities as agents of change. Even though the eco-documentary's impact on public discussions of environmental issues cannot be measured, this short film can be understood as an attempt to answer "the essential dilemma" of communication related to environmental issues, namely "the challenge of forging a connection between knowledge and behavior" (Kluwick 2014, 506).

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accounts, and has been co-opted by the entertainment and film industry. In sum, climate change is in and of itself turning into one of our dominant discourses. Yet, interestingly, "the gap between public awareness of climate change and not only large-scale mitigating action but also individual social reaction remains in place, regardless of the ubiquitousness of climate change as a discourse. In the case of climate change, discursive reach and power do not seem related to its (in)effectiveness in influencing behavioural patterns and choices" (Kluwick 2014, 504).

[21] Global climate change is nevertheless an important factor in the issues dealt with in the documentary. Dr. Day points out how the burning of fossil fuels is leading to global warming, which in turn leads to accelerated sea level rise and the consequent death of the lagoons' vegetation. Day also criticizes the position of those experts who deny the existence of global warming grounding their theories in data collected over short periods of time. He explains that short-term variations (those registered over a decade, for instance) are not significant, "it's this long-term trend that we need to pay attention to. In the ten years that I worked in the Venetian lagoon we saw wetlands continue to disappear. We saw erosion take place. We saw vegetation die as it was sinking" (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006a).

[22] Guggenheim's was a key film in the solidification and rise to prominence of the environmental documentary. Also, 2006 is considered a turning point in which environmentalism achieved an unprecedented popularity and environmental media contributed to "a new norm" (Musser 2014).

2. A poetics of diasporic urban space

Several of the Bongiornos' films reveal a distinctive poetics of place in their focus on cities and/or particular urban sites.[23] *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* is unique among their works so far for its emphasis on the geo-cultural links between America and Europe, and for connecting the city of New Orleans and the rest of the Mississippi Delta to the world beyond the geographic and political borders of the nation-state. Hence, their work illustrates that documentary filmmaking is a significant section of Italian American independent cinema, one that "presents new ways of investigating the history and way of living of the diasporic community" (Muscio 2019, 292). After exploring the Italian American community in their first films,[24] the Bongiornos' vision has turned to other diasporic realities, offering "a more comprehensive and well-informed image" of these communities than is presented in the commercial media (Muscio 2019, 292) and emphasizing thus far unacknowledged commonalities between them.

Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice captures the spirit of a place where multiple languages, national histories, and traditions collide and coalesce, turning the city into a global crossroads. Within such complex cultural interactions, the African diaspora has played a pivotal role. As George Lipsitz observes, it is precisely "the adaptability, syncretism, gregariousness, and generosity at the core of West African culture that accounts for much of the ability of generations of New Orleanians to make creative use of conflict, to forge balance and unity out of opposites, to fashion life-affirming and pleasure-affirming artistic expressions as a central form of revolt" (2011, 216). Thus, complicated lineages of suffering, struggle, sacrifice, tragedy, and triumph intersect in New Orleans, and diasporic Africans have succeeded in creating ideals of "world-traversing and world-transcending citizenship" through cultural production that explains the unique role of New Orleans in the world (Lipsitz 2011, 216). Without underplaying the importance of individual histories and distinctive cultures, *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* engages such ideals by drawing attention to the striking similarities between the two cities, both visually and through the protagonist's voice.

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[23] See, for example, their 3R's trilogy on urban America which comprises the documentary films *Revolution '67* (2007), *The Rule* (2014), and *Rust* (2018), all focusing on Newark, NJ—the first explores the city's 1967 riots, the second examines urban school reform using the model of St. Benedict's Prep, the third investigates solutions to intergenerational poverty, including prisoner reentry, in inner cities. These works are characterized by insightful socioeconomic readings of complex racial experiences. The Bongiornos have also produced a series of art films called *New Work. Art in 3D*, which includes *Newark in 3D*, *The Brooklyn Waterfront in 3D*, and *SI3D (Staten Island in 3D)* and takes inspiration from the 1920s city symphony films.

[24] The aforementioned *Mother-Tongue: Italian American Sons & Mothers* (1999) as well as the feature film *Little Kings* (2003) and the TV movie *Rubout* (2003).

The second part of the documentary begins with satellite snapshots of Italy. Then the camera zooms in on the Venetian lagoon. Dr. Day's interview resumes as he observes that, as in South Louisiana, human impact has had tremendous effects on Venice: "Over the centuries the Venetians have diverted all the major rivers around the lagoon because they didn't want the lagoon to fill in. They thought the enemies would walk across the marshes and attack Venice" (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006a). As with the Mississippi Delta, this implies that all the sediments and fresh water and nutrients that used to flow in the Venetian lagoon through rivers like the Piave and the Brenta now run directly into the Adriatic Sea. Once more, Day's suggestion is to reconnect the rivers to the lagoon in order for the sediment to build up and for the marshes to become established. After calling attention to the predictable failure of the MOSE by the middle of the 21st century, given the projections for sea level rise, Day proposes to encircle Venice with the same system of dikes realized in New Orleans.

Through the satellite images and computer models accompanying Day's words, the film shows that, beside human-caused flooding issues, New Orleans and Venice also share the fact of being virtual islands geographically.[25] In addition to such geological peculiarities, they have in common relevant cultural traits. They are both "decaying" cities, characterized by "a wonderful, unique architecture," and both are the sites of well-known pre-Lenten celebrations such as Mardi Gras and Carnival (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006a). Day perceptively stresses the "feeling of being threatened, of being impermanent" that is shared by their inhabitants and links the two cities' characteristic 'party culture' to their awareness of being doomed. This last consideration, which also concludes the film, shifts the discourse to the city's affective register,[26] a subject the filmmakers explore in the companion short video *NOLA* (2006).

Characterized by the absence of a narrating voice, *NOLA* complements *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* in its focus on New Orleanians' lives after Katrina. It is composed of an impressionistic series of images set to music whose underlying theme is water. From a generic standpoint, the short can be defined according to Nichols's "poetic mode": a category of documentary films that emphasize "visual associations, tonal and rhythmic qualities, descriptive passages, and formal organization" (2010, 31).[27] The film's opening visuals

[25] Digital technology is often employed in the Bongiornos' videos. As Heise points out, "the digital network is the counterpart and in some sense the master trope for the ecological connectivity." Google Earth and other digital imaging tools "offer the most far-reaching and comprehensive aesthetic models for considering ecological crisis and environmental as well as cultural connectedness across different spatial scales" (Heise 2007, 209).

[26] On affect as a vital—albeit too often neglected—element of cities, see Thrift 2004.

[27] This mode bears a close resemblance to experimental, personal, and avant-garde filmmaking—genres that the Bongiornos have successfully practiced with their art films. At any

emphasize movement:[28] like *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice*, *NOLA* begins with a sequence shot from a boat sailing on the Mississippi. Each successive take seems to convey a feeling of being moved by waves as if during a flood. Images of the devastation caused by Katrina are juxtaposed with a computer-designed planet earth, increasingly reddened by global warming, which changes to a computer-based model of the hurricane reaching the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans. Gigantic waves are shown as they hit the river's ditches. Then the film cuts to aerial images of the city submerged by water. The subsequent sequence reveals whole neighborhoods devastated by the inundation, and the levees built along the river, which were supposed to contain the flood, bent by the force of the water. Next, the camera moves into one of the houses in the city's periphery where black people are trying to salvage a TV and some other furniture from the debris.

The short film pays homage to the resilience of the people of New Orleans,[29] who are shown as they are in line to get water and food from the relief team, or sit eating in an improvised canteen, while a woman dressed as a clown tries to provide entertainment. The narration is punctuated by freeze frames showing New Orleanians' attempts at going back to normal life. The montage uses brief unresolved sequences that require the viewer to complete the narrative linking the images with one another. The camera zooms in on the wall of a house where the inscription "I'll be back!" has been spray-painted, or on a shop window notice announcing: "Yes, we are open" (Tibaldo-Bongiorno 2006b). Other shots compellingly focus on strings of colorful plastic beads (the most common throws that float riders traditionally toss into the crowd during the Mardi Gras parades), the American flag waving out of a house in the French Quarter, and a Bourbon Street signpost fixed to a bent streetlamp. If New Orleans is "a place where things can change quickly, where human will and desire can make things happen suddenly" (Lipsitz 2011, 226), *NOLA* uses affect to convey the city's *genius loci* and to facilitate a connection across time and

rate, such categorization must be intended as non-restrictive. As Nichols contends, each mode displays considerable variation based on individual filmmakers' styles and personalities, national concerns, and period tendencies. Moreover, modes overlap and intermingle: "Individual films often reveal one mode that seems most influential to their organization, but individual films can also 'mix and match' modes as the occasion demands" (Nichols 2010, 32).

[28] Recalling that the word 'emotion' stems from the Latin *emovere*, an active verb composed of *movere*, 'to move,' and *e*, 'out,' Bruno points out that "[t]he meaning of emotion, is historically associated with 'a moving out, migration, transference from one place to another'" (2002, 6).

[29] "The human spirit leans toward hope and in the midst of all the devastation, political corruption, and social injustices, the people we met were generous and strong and on the rebound." The inadequate response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is well documented, as the director testifies: "[i]t was the faith-based groups that provided the Thanksgiving dinner, fresh fruit, entertainment, and built community" (Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno, personal e-mail, June 23, 2016).

space with its viewers. It engages the audience with Katrina's dispossessed, inviting them to project their own emotionally charged associations onto the screen. In this documentary, the victim bears witness to the catastrophe, but the viewer becomes the point of communication that "reasserts continuity and humanity. It is this triangular structure—i.e. the structure of the horror, the victim, and the listener/viewer—that witnessing involves and which may promote inter-cultural compassion and understanding" (Kaplan and Wang 2004, 10).

Ultimately, inter-cultural understanding and an imagination that, transcending national borders, envisions alliances among different communities seem to be at the core of both videos. The shifting geographical borders suggested in *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* are reminiscent of the transnational routes that, over the 19th and early 20th century, converged in major US cities like New Orleans (where a large community of Italians also migrated),[30] while the empty houses framed in *NOLA* stand as a reminder not just of the US government's inadequate response to the disaster but of the more recent intra-national moves forced by governmental policies after Katrina.[31] In their far-reaching implications, both films establish affective alliances that spread from local to global. As Hsu (2010, 24) maintains, while such texts, and such alliances, may not transform the concrete spaces we inhabit, they can at least give glimpses of "alternate geographies" that revise and reconstruct the local histories of our communities.

It is now widely recognized that nations are constructed out of perceived affiliations, and that, invested with psychic and emotional power, they bear the force of individual and collective belief and experience, making real that which is imagined. As Jeffrey Geiger maintains, "documentary films have always been important to forming ideas of the US nation, both as an imagined space and as a real place" (2011, 2). Still, with its "potential to transform the experience and comprehension of a national imaginary," documentary has powerfully contributed to both the nation's making and its unmaking—the genre's impact lying in its "ability to gesture towards worlds, experiences, emotions, and structures of feeling beyond the 'evidence' it depicts" (Geiger

[30] It is worth recalling that New Orleans was the site of the lynching of eleven Italian immigrants in 1891, the largest ever in the United States. On April 12, 2019, for the first time after 128 years, New Orleans Mayor La Toya Cantrell made a formal apology to the families of the immigrants whose murders capped a period of anti-Italian sentiment in the city and country (Williams 2019). For further reading, Salvetti 2017; Smith 2007.

[31] As Lipsitz reports, "after the hurricane, city, state, and federal officials colluded with private investors to disperse nearly half of the city's population to far-flung destinations in an effort to fulfill the promise made by George Bush's Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Alphonso Jackson that 'New Orleans is not going to be as black as it was for a long time, if ever again'" (2011, 211).

2011, 5; 4). Characterized by open-endedness and fluidity, *Protecting New Orleans/Saving Venice* and *NOLA* engage with shifting conceptions of US national consciousness and belonging. These short films raise awareness about the human-induced causes of 'natural' events (eerily prescient of the 2019 Venice flooding) and project an effective picture of similar risk scenarios involving far and different places. The value of such works lies precisely in not just reflecting or engaging with national consciousness, but in helping us imagine "ideas and futures beyond its immediate framework and subject matter" (Geiger 2011, 5). By highlighting the imbrication of local places, ecologies, and cultural practices in global networks, these films contribute to laying the basis for "cosmopolitan forms of awareness and community, both ecologically and culturally," and actively participate in the "search for the stories and images of a new kind of eco-cosmopolitan environmentalism" (Heise 2007, 210).

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