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VISUAL CULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

**WRITTEN BY
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INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days which accepted prescribed, linear, one-size-fits-all development projects and practices. Left in their place is a rhetoric of local participation and ownership, and flexibility. However, there remains a question of what means are best fit to continue this transition. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) would argue that the most important variable in future development is creativity (read: innovation), and that one of the “vital forces” of human development has become creative industries (OECD, 2018; Palanivel, 2019). Further, ‘the arts’ and other creative industries have become important sites of inclusion, communication, and visibility. This has become particularly true in climate crisis and environmental justice discussions.

The term ‘art’ will be avoided in this paper for two reasons: first, because it is not a broad enough term to encompass all the creativity which is currently being used to address the climate crisis, and second because ‘art’ is both historically and currently highly exclusionary; for example, galleries which ethnographically categorize creations or altogether exclude those creations which are not made by white, Western hands. Here, ‘visual culture’ should be understood to include painting, sculpture, and drawing, but also architecture, marketing, design, fashion, and beyond. Those who are working within these creative spaces will be referred to as ‘creators’.

This paper will analyse the connection between visual culture and the climate crisis with the goal of better

understanding how creative industries might be leveraged to address environmental injustices. This will be done through the lens of environmental justice in order to assess the particular accesses and exclusions built into the structures of our physical environments. Important to this analysis is the understanding which this paper will endeavor to build of how creative industries may be seen as one of the most effective tools of communication for the climate crisis. Visual culture has become an important tool to employ in learning and communication as we continue to seek solutions to a more sustainable future.

Communicating the Climate Crisis

The climate crisis has been allowed to advance to its current level because of its nature as a slow, largely ‘invisible’ violence. ‘Slow violence’, a concept outlined by Rob Nixon, describes the phenomenon by which destruction of environments is disbursed across time until it is rarely viewed as violence at all, while accruing massive harm to those located in and around these environments (Dehm, 2020). Some of the ways which slow violence manifests in communities is as higher rates of cancer, heavy metals poisoning, and depletion of natural resources which communities rely on as livelihood sources. However, because there is no instant or perfectly clear way of seeing the changes in the environment that are a result of toxicities, populations who are removed from the direct harms of the degradation have been allowed to maintain a level of cognitive dissonance regarding the link between our actions, the environment, and the human consequences of environmental degradation (Hulme, 2016).

This dissonance is only compounded regarding marginalized communities, who are both structurally less visible and less heard, and who are more likely to be located in areas that are disproportionately affected by climate change (Newell, 2015).

This double-burdening of marginalized communities both locally and internationally has created a dual-violence in which the “under-classes” are made to bear the burden of socio economic, and environmental hazards of industrial wealth accumulation (Newell, 2015). These marginalized communities have specific vulnerabilities that are cultural, geographical, and social, and the disproportionate burden-sharing in which wealthier populations have been less affected is a man-made process (Coventry & Okereke, 2017). So long as it remains focused on its mandate to critically assess the structures of power which determine the distribution of harm done by environmental degradation,

environmental Justice (EJ) scholarship has been flexible enough to account for the multiplicity of these vulnerabilities while maintaining a unified purpose in addressing environmental inequity (Sze, 2008). By marrying the issue of harm-burdening with visibility, the question becomes how to incite change in the perception of and action for sustainability in our communities both local and global.

The challenge of making the climate crisis more visible has been serviced particularly well by visual culture’s ability to fold points in time together to draw a more complete, clearer view of the slow degradation of environments and climates (Hulme, 2016). In Canada, through both history and policy, Indigenous peoples

have been overburdened with environmental degradation and toxicity. Lawrence Paul Yuxelupton is one creator who merges traditional Indigenous shapes and symbolism with contemporary painting practices to communicate the colonial violence which Indigenous people in Canada have faced. His piece, *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to fix Hole in Sky*, depicts two white scientists attempting to fix the sky. In a 2016 interview, Yuxelupton commented on this piece, saying, “This scientist is passing this scientist a screwdriver – that is about as hopeless as we can get”(Yuxelupton, 2016,) as quoted in Newton, 2016).



Yuxwelupton, Lawrence Paul. (1990). *Red Man Watching White Man Trying to Fix Hole in Sky*. [Acrylic on canvas, 142x226.1cm].



The painting is meant as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the technocratic approach to the Western-made climate crisis while Indigenous populations who are reliant on the environment and the precarious and 'hopeless' balance which Western technology attempts to strike, are systematically left out of discussions. Paintings and visual representations like Yuxelupton's are ways to directly show audiences what has escaped the popular imagination for so long. There is much invested in the extractive and exploitive industries which are causing a large portion of the harm marginalized populations have been burdened with. These corporations hold power in the structure of our policies, legislature, and narratives of sustainability (Sze, 2008). Now, in terms of textual information sharing, there are confused discussions of what it will mean to transition to a more sustainable societal structure both in the mainstream and in academia, driven in part by the narratives which corporations weave. These narratives could be classed as corporate 'greening' (Serrano & Zaveri, 2020).

Visual culture has been increasingly engaged in discussions of environmental sustainability, both in terms of making the climate crisis visible and the dialogue for sustainable mediums. Creative practices have been particularly good at making the invisible, visible, by employing imagination to demonstrate the harms associated with environmental degradation and its sources (Gabrielson, 2019). Images like Yuxelupton's create a tangible interpretation for the climate crisis in ways that scientific reports and interviews cannot. The current challenge in the climate crisis for the general public is

finding a way to change what we know into what we understand, at the risk of falling back to the cliché, "seeing is believing". Creative visual representations of the climate crisis have proven one of the most useful tools in this critical shift. Creative works may make the same moral appeals to the future as articles and news casts, but they are also particularly good at showing us what scientists are telling us, at reconfiguring how we perceive our lives and progress, and at bundling the past, present, and future into a more tangible and consumable moment (Hulme, 2016).

When speaking of the essential union of science and visual culture to address the climate crisis, Volope (2018) writes, "creativity is where knowledge and imagination meet, where to know and to invent join with to marvel and to love... Could creativity, as common ground between art, science, and spirituality, help us to re-vision how we inhabit the Earth" (p.622). Creative industries are particularly powerful in their ability to create change because of the repetitive exposures which they create opportunity for, casting visual culture as a socializing agent capable of shaping opinion and understanding (Gogarty, 2017). We see through our individual lenses of socialization, and we read images through a complex version of sight shaped by discourses, technology, and subject agency and context (Gabrielson, 2019). Critical art historians credit journalistic photography during the civil rights movement and its portrayal of "Black excellence" with the eventual normalization of Black presence in America, for example (Gabrielson, 2019). The power of visual culture as a tool of communication lies in its ability to show,

rather than tell, alongside the current context of fast and consumable information sharing finds the most success in our increasingly digital lives.

Art as a tool of development in the climate crisis

If we are to merge an understanding of visual culture as a socializing tool which makes the violence of environmental change visible, then it can also be understood as a point of voice- elevation for marginalized communities. Of course, this must be taken in measure, as even the previous citation in this paper which quoted Yuxelupton from a *Museum of Anthropology* video has deep colonial, racist connotations. The message which must be heard in the presentation of Yuxelupton's exhibition in an anthropology museum is an ideological containment of the creator's work as Other than those works which would find themselves outside of the ethnically classed collections of galleries, and among the collections which are sorted by theme or timeframe. However, increasingly, works by creators living in or near sites of environmental degradation are reaching the mainstream. While it is still true that a photograph by a UN-press passholder will sell for approximately fifty dollars in Europe or the US while local photographers earn most of their income shooting weddings and other celebrations for seventy-five cents a photo (Bruce, 2016), images by local photographers like George Osodi have been increasingly making it into environmentally-focused exhibitions and creative events (Milbourne, 2014). The point is that while there is still much work to be done to change the narrative of environmentalism from a

performative act which white cultures participate in, visual culture is causing a change in this perception, and people are listening. More importantly, people are hearing the experiences of marginalized communities and their relationship with environmental degradation.

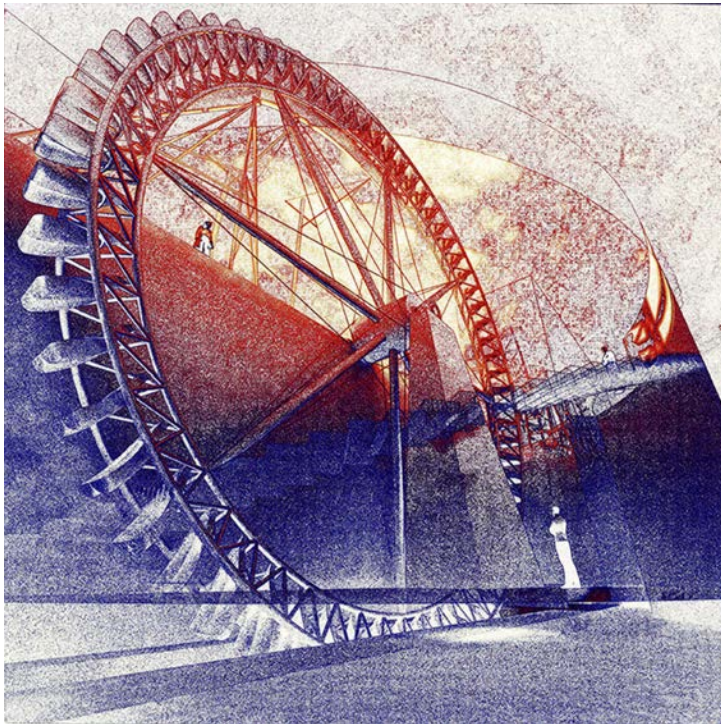


Osodi, George. (1974). *Children at Waterside Slum. Port Harcourt*. [Digital Copy, photograph].

It would be remiss not to mention the particular importance of creative industry for gender equity. As both a source of income and social inclusion for women and youth, creative industries promote ownership and stimulate innovation while adding to national GDP (Palanivel, 2019). Further, in its ability to foster innovation which is environmentally minded, creative industries have increasingly offered sustainable solutions to issues like the relationship between economic development and industrial development, and the tension of this relationship with sustainable development (Palanivel, 2019).

Creativity is an essential component to innovation, and this is what will be required not only to address the climate crisis but also to plan and create future development programs and practices. Visual culture is filling the "imagination gap" (Hulme, 2016) and is bringing people

in closer contact with the realities of the climate crisis while stimulating a rethinking of our response to the climate crisis. Take, for example, Lauren Bon's LA-based project, *Bending the River Back into the City*, which reimagines city planning and architecture to divert water to her downtown LA studio where it will be cleaned to then supply water to downtown parks (Valope, 2018).



Bon, Lauren. (2012-present). *Bending the River Back into the City*. [Architectural planning sketch]

The project is a commentary on the criticality of rebuilding the relationship between people and the environment, incorporating micro-projects like installations of in-house nurseries with the hopes of creating healthier soils which will again be distributed in downtown LA (Bon, 2020). Another example can be found in Earth Vision Institute's Extreme Ice Survey project, in which 27 cameras have been set up to capture one frame during every daylight hour over different ice fields and glaciers in order to compile

time lapse footage of melting ice (Valope, 2018).



Balog, James. (2009). *Greenland Ice Sheet*. From photo series ICE: portraits of Vanishing Glaciers. [Digital Copy, photograph]

By speeding up the time it takes to watch the melting happen, the hope of the project is that people will be less inclined to put off climate action as a far-off, intangible phenomenon. The belief facilitating this project is that "the creative integration of art and science can shape public perception and inspire action more effectively than either art or science can do alone" (Earth Vision Institute, 2019). One final example, leaning into the innovative side of visual culture and environmental response, is John Sabraw's project of working with labs to extract the heavy metals from Ohio river's toxic runoff, and to convert them into pigments (Valope, 2018). These creators have challenged our understanding of our relationship to the environment, and also to each other. Through their messages and mediums, they are challenging their audiences to rethink how we can respond to the climate crisis, and what entanglements race, urban life, and slow violence might have in this response.



Siegel, Ben. (2018). *John Sabraw painting in his studio, in Athens, Ohio.* [Digital copy, photograph].



Siegel, Ben. (2018). *John Sabraw deep in acid mine drainage in Bat Gate cave, Sulpher Springs Hollow, Ohio.* [Digital copy, photograph].



Sabraw, John. *Chroma S4 Chimaera.* [Pigments on paper]

CONCLUSION

Visual representations of climate change are bringing us into more intimate proximity with the climate crisis, both spatially and temporally, and are giving new vigor to communication of the urgency of the climate crisis in ways that scientists have been unable to. We are now being shown, in no uncertain terms, the distinct harms which are being done via environmental degradation to marginalized communities on the local and global scales. Visual culture is giving channels for these communities to be heard where they have been silenced. As the rate of change in our economies and information habits increases, the creativity and innovation which is fostered by a deep inclusion of creative industries in economies and societies will be absolutely required if we are to be successful in our planning of future sustainability and development.

We are currently living in an 'attention economy', in which those who are the most successful are those who can capture the most views and 'likes', and a key to attaining that success is fast, easily consumable digital outputs (Beverly, 2021). Compounded by the rate of reproduction which we are now afforded by social media and the internet, the best conduit for this attention becomes images. This is dangerous when considered with the selective context which images and visual information affords us, and the limited, socially produced visual literacy which we each have, particularly in the West (Clost, 2013). Because of the culture of information sharing which now relies on images and video catapulted around the internet, it has become more important than ever to pay attention to *who* we are

listening to, rather than just what they are saying. If we are to fulfill this directive, then we will find that there are many, many creators from the locations which are being most deeply affected by the climate crisis; creators who are showing us in no uncertain terms the experience of marginality during the climate crisis (Milbourne, 2014).



Sinead Dunne is a recent graduate of the International Development and Globalization program at the University of Ottawa, and at the time of publication is a settler on the unceded territory of the Mississauga and Anishinaabe peoples. Much of what she has learned for the two essays included in this publication has come from creators she met while acting as the Gallery Coordinator for both Climate Crisis X Design, and Equity X Design, gallery exhibitions hosted as part of the 2020 and 2021 uOttawa International Development Week conferences.

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