

Beyond Greenwashing: the Practical and Political Role of Environmental Coordination Under Capitalism

This report will investigate the emerging (far too late) and ecologically necessary importance of tangible environmentalism in UK film and television production through an examination of the industry role and function of the sustainability coordinator – also referred to as ‘eco-manager’, ‘eco-supervisor’, and ‘green production manager’, among other titles. A 2015 paper notes of the emerging role, ‘A specified term has not yet emerged nor has a recognisable framework for how this crew member does their job’ (Victory, 2015). This role and its alleged function will be analysed through a radical lens, and explored in critical relation to surface-level eco-capitalist practices.

In the words of contemporary anthropologist David Graeber, “the ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make and could just as easily make differently” (2024) – a sentiment that perhaps reads as platitude but often fails to be seen reflected anywhere in the mind-numbing plethora of neoliberal capitalist errors that face all aspects of current political affairs, perhaps most of all the ongoing (not *impending*, or *hypothetical*, or *reversible*) climate disaster.

What does a Sustainability Coordinator do?

In the wake of the climate crisis that has become an increasingly pressing matter in recent decades – despite environmental scientists observing and raising awareness of this issue since the 1980s and earlier (Pester, 2021) – a great importance has been placed in many industries on the reduction of carbon emissions and a change in attitude towards the wider ecological effects of business practices. A lesser but by no means irrelevant facet of this shift has taken place in the film industry - traditionally, film productions are carbon-intensive, reliant on diesel-powered generators, single-use materials, long-distance freight, and unsustainable catering and accommodation practices. Perhaps this wastefulness and arrogance of filmmaking practice stems from a more general, historical Western trend of imperial domination over everything – regardless, it is an issue that must be addressed from the ground up in the film industry. In response, sustainability coordination in film and television production has become a consideration of growing importance. Organisations such as the British Film Institute, the BBC, Channel 4, Netflix, and BAFTA Albert all now have guidelines in place for sustainable production. The responsibility of sustainable production practice, of course, should lie on all members of cast and crew, but on larger-scale productions it is becoming more common to delegate sustainability planning to an appointed person or small team.

According to Screenskills (n.d.), a Sustainability Coordinator (sometimes called a Green Steward, Sustainable Production Manager, or Environmental Production Consultant) reports to the production manager, often joining production at the shooting stage or later, and is responsible for calculating the carbon and waste used by the production each week and completing relevant analysis and collecting data. They will often also have to explain to the cast and crew the importance of sustainability and supply information and advice on sustainable practices. They may also be involved with communications with local communities to ensure that location environments are not disturbed and are left as found. The responsibility of a sustainability coordinator will vary greatly between projects, depending on the scale of the

production, the kinds of locations used, and industrial channels through which the project is realised.

History and Industrial Context

In order to understand the history of the role of sustainability coordinator, we must examine the history of climate change as a whole, and its inseparable relationship with capitalism. Climate change dates back to the dawn of the industrial revolution in the 18th century, with the invention of large-scale machinery and manufacturing plants. In 1824, French physicist Joseph Fourier noted the earth's natural greenhouse effect – how the gases of the earth's atmosphere essentially trap heat (cited in BBC News, 2013). A century later, in 1927, carbon emissions reached one billion tonnes a year. In 1975, the term 'global warming' entered the public zeitgeist thanks to scientist Wallace Broecker, and gradually in the succeeding decades people became increasingly aware of the devastating effects of carbon emissions on the earth's climate and meteorological properties.

As people learnt more about the effects of their daily activities, such as driving and disposing of waste, on the environment there became an increased pressure for individuals to change their behaviour to practice a more eco-friendly way of living. However, this overlooks the important fact that the climate crisis is an institutional, systemic problem rather than a personal one – as an almost unbelievable example, just 57 companies were responsible for 80% of all CO₂ emissions between 2016 and 2022 (InfluenceMap, 2024). Individualist neoliberal politics attempt to transfer blame onto a vague mass of separate consumers rather than a structural, collective, industrial root cause.

The raw materials required for production equipment and the electrical power required for film shoots can have a substantial impact on the environment, especially considering that feature film productions can last for several weeks, if not months. Environmental costs include the raw materials needed to manufacture sets and costumes, the logistics to organise scouting and securing locations – often including remote outdoor locations, which are disrupted during production – as well as the multitude of cast and crew members whose transport and accommodation needs to be accounted for, the facilitation and disposal of their waste, regulating the temperatures of set environments, and generating electricity for lighting and other equipment. Larger-budget productions could be employing hundreds if not thousands of people for months on end – and major film studios typically produce five to eight of these a year. Furthermore, the list above only covers the *production* stage – beyond that, there is the making and distributing of marketing materials, theatrical and home distribution, potentially even promotional items such as 'Happy Meal' toys and branded popcorn buckets.

Addressing the Issue of Time in Film and TV Production

Film and television productions, notoriously, operate on extremely tight schedules. From a production standpoint, this is obviously to ensure adequate haste and momentum so that projects can effectively be realised, distributed, and the waterfall of money can flow – without this, needless to say, the industry would collapse. However, this causes great problems in the way of sustainability. For example, if a production has to ship a load of costumes from China, this action will likely occur long before the environmental coordinator is able to involve

themselves; production cannot hinge on ethical considerations (or so is the standard). As such, it is easy to assume that in a lot of cases – at least as it stands currently – the role of the environmental coordinator is largely retrospective. One concept that comes up abundantly in reports and manifestos from film councils and organisations is *climate offset* – the act of ‘making up for’ environmental damages caused. This is a nice consideration, but it is surely a terribly inverted way of working. But, as long as the film industry assumes the profit-driven pace it currently races away at, it is unlikely that climate considerations will occur in the first instance, which would render post facto environmental discussions unnecessary.

Environmentalism and Capitalism

The role exists in a complex ideological space. Many industry sustainability efforts can veer toward green capitalism — prioritising carbon offsetting, superficial branding, or marketing-friendly optics over systemic change. The sustainability consultant has the potential to act not merely as a regulatory figure but as a radical agent of change, engaging with intersectional environmentalism, labour rights, and decolonial frameworks within production practice – a potential that is limited in itself by the individualist, specialised compartmentalisation of having one person or a small few allocated to a task that should be a shared practical and intellectual pursuit of the entire industry.

Even in the film industry, it is easy to discern considerable limitations on the way environmentalism is being approached in relation to capitalism – and the opportunity, as with many things, for capitalists to exploit and monetise its own opposing forces. Neoliberalism has demonstrated previously (with organic foods, electric vehicles, et cetera) an incessant tendency to re-package and commodify environmentally conscious ethical decisions – just one of the many ways ‘responsibility’ is passed onto the consumer, with a price tag and a smile. There is a lot of money to be made in ethical consumer markets (in a kind of chicken/egg situation of corporate blame-shifting/public environmental awareness): ethical spending increased by nearly 24% from 2019 to 2020, and a 2023 report by Ethical Consumer valued the ethical market at a total of £141 billion. On the consumer’s end, this is obviously a good change. However, from a corporate perspective, this means that there is the potential to sell to two markets – those who don’t care, and those who do (at a premium).

Environmentalism, though it is not popularly considered so and may often be argued otherwise, is necessarily and fundamentally an anti-capitalist political position. There is no valid dissection of humanity’s wasteful and destructive use of resources without concluding that enterprise and consumerism are the very core causes. People are not inherently wasteful – it goes against our biological and sociological imperative. The capitalist invention of profit margins and a near-farcical economy (that is genuinely the transaction of imaginary sums between a very small collection of corporate bodies) would posit – and has convinced us, the consumer – that the irreversible and harmful destruction of Earthly materials is somehow a necessary part of ‘keeping the wheels turning’.

The term greenwashing was coined in 1986 by ecologist Jay Westerveld, after being prompted by a hotel to consider re-using his bath towel rather than have it washed each day, an act which would essentially just save the hotel money – the same hotel, simultaneously, was destroying a coral reef to expand its resort. Greenwashing describes any ‘PR tactic used to make a company or product appear environmentally friendly, without meaningfully reducing its environmental

impact' (Das, 2022). A critical look at programs like BAFTA's albert initiative could argue that they are practicing greenwashing – making films with the bare minimum of environmental considerations primarily for the *label* of environmentalism, while still operating within the capitalist framework of conventional filmmaking.

Film & TV's Agitprop Potential

The relevance of environmental imperative as it applies to the film and television industry boils down to its position as a mass cultural influence: the broad reach of these media means that their ideals, aims, and practices have a potentially tremendous and deep effect on society at large. To borrow a Soviet term, the film industry has a fairly unique position wherein it can act as agitprop (agitation propaganda) to provoke the masses – in both the ideological content of its products *and* through its production ethos – into radically changing the ways they think and act in their own industries, roles, and lives. It is hard to think of many other industries or cultural devices so effective as film and television in raising awareness of complex sociopolitical issues, through positive portrayals of marginalised groups, depictions of historical injustices and so on.

However, film's potential as agitprop is often overlooked in favour of simply reinforcing normative ideas that will not challenge audiences for fear of making them uncomfortable. Francis Ford Coppola's 1,200 gallon explosion at the beginning of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) *could have been* a profound, stomach-turning, self-reflexive commentary on the destructiveness of filmmaking in favour of spectacle, but instead is used purely as a tool for spectacle itself at the behest of an auteur's outlandish creative vision – with zero consideration for the ecological and political consequences of doing so on both an industrial and audience level. In filmmaking, creativity is *only* limited by money, not by any kind of moral duty; any filmmaking practice that is transgressive is deemed inherently justified simply due to the fact it's a transgression. bell hooks describes American society as obsessed with transgression, regardless of the subject (hooks, 1994) – an obsession that both plays into and is a product of Hollywood spectacle, 'justifying' environmentally reckless instances of transgressive creativity such as Coppola's napalm scene.

Case Study 1: BAFTA Albert

Albert is an environmental filmmaking organisation headed by BAFTA, established in 2011. It began as a carbon calculating tool for BBC productions and has since expanded into the industry standard for environmental certification in UK film and television productions.

Contractually, all BBC, ITV, Channel 4, UKTV, Sky and Netflix productions based in the UK are required to log their carbon footprint using the Albert carbon calculator.

In its 'Screen New Deal' report, published in 2020 in cooperation with the BFI and Arup, Albert offers a 'route map to sustainable film production' by laying out steps for UK production companies to take to become carbon neutral by 2050. They detail the importance of collaborative, systematic change: 'radical co-operation and coordination must be considered the most vital recommendations of all.' The report also includes statistics on industry-related carbon usage and wastefulness, such as the fact that an average hour filming equates to the carbon footprint of a return flight from London to New York (as of 2020).

Despite Albert's well-meaning and proactive work in changing the film industry's approach to sustainability, it is not so straightforward to assess the positivity of their impact. In 2023, the average emissions per hour of content actually increased by 33% (BAFTA Albert, 2023), highlighting a number of complexities and ongoing issues in both the industry's slowness to change and the rigour and extent to which companies are tracking their carbon footprints. It could be, as Albert argues, that the increase is largely due to an increase in carbon calculation and registering across the industry. Other likely factors include the rise of large-budget prestige television, the great deal of air travel used in co-productions with Europe and America, and the industry's recuperation post-Covid. Regardless, there is a clear level of inconsistency and complexity in determining the results of Albert's actions – while the organisation may have made progress in creating a conversation about how filmmakers approach sustainable practices, it is more difficult to say for certain that they have made any significant difference in tangible, empirical terms.

Case Study 2: *Enys Men*, dir. Mark Jenkin, 2022

It is important to consider that the film 'industry' is a loose term that applies to a large range of economic and organisational scales, structures, and sectors. In addition to analysing mainstream, high-budget, London-centric industry norms (spearheaded by BAFTA Albert), this industrial report will look at sustainable practices and approaches on the other end of the spectrum. *Enys Men* is a 2022 Cornish folk-horror film directed by Mark Jenkin (previously renowned for 2019's *Bait*). Jenkin's approach to sustainability goes hand in hand with his filmmaking philosophy – resourcefulness, independence, and locality.

The film was produced by Bosena, a Cornish production company whose primary focus is environmentalism – rather than treat sustainability as an afterthought or bare-minimum requirement to pass Albert certification. A Big Issue article on the film details that *Enys Men* produced 4.5 tonnes of CO₂, compared to other small-scale independent films which average about 400 tonnes (Barradale, 2023), and large-scale tentpole films that can produce up to 5,127 tonnes (id est 2023's *The Little Mermaid*, which no one even saw). The article goes on to compare the tangible, philosophically rigorous sustainability practices on *Enys Men* to the greenwashing of Netflix, whose go-to carbon credit enterprise Verra (who negotiate and carry out carbon offsetting projects in exchange for money) was exposed by the Guardian, SourceMaterial, and German newspaper Die Zeit for essentially being a confidence trick on the public: over 90 percent of their rainforest carbon offsets were revealed to have made absolutely no difference to anything (Greenfield, 2023).

Enys Men reveals film and television production's dilemma when approaching sustainability: environmentalism clashes with the industry-at-large's very structure. It is time consuming, relies on a great deal of care and deliberation, and there's no profit incentive. To simplify even further, and get to the crux of this report's argument: environmentalism is at odds with capitalism. It is way past the time to allocate a specific industry professional to disseminate environmental values to the crew so they can start thinking about ways to alter existing industry practices to maybe, potentially achieve 'carbon neutrality' (if its even a palpable improvement) by some arbitrary moving target (the year 2050 comes up a lot in eco-capitalist discussions about action, as if a quarter of a century is supposed to be an impressively expeditious amount of time to make change). We are in the danger zone. We are in crisis – one that is both ecological (in every sense) and deeply systematic. It is time to make radical, actionable changes to all

aspects of all things that we do – sustainability coordination is a collective responsibility of everyone involved in film and television production. As Graeber put it, we can just as easily make the world differently.

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