

“I Need to Wake Up”

The narrative function of soundtracks in climate change documentaries

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MA Thesis Applied Musicology
Utrecht University, August 2020

Abstract

Climate change has been a much-debated topic for years and will continue to be so. The documentary is a medium to inform people about climate change issues. Soundtracks in these documentaries cast our perception of and attitudes towards the environment. Research on the soundtrack in environmental documentaries is lacking, while consciousness about climate change is rising. To contribute to the analysis of soundtracks in environmental documentaries, this paper provides a close reading of *Before the Flood* (2016), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (2017). The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent the soundtrack contributes to the narrative in documentaries about climate change. The case studies feature a dystopian storyline, which are often found in the genre of horror films. Therefore, this paper will also examine to what extent these documentaries incorporate horror conventions with regard to the function of their music and their placement in the narrative. The analyses are conducted by using theories from the current discourse on the study of environmental documentaries, the narrative role of soundtracks, horror conventions and immersion. The soundtracks and visuals of the case studies will be closely analyzed to determine the similarities and differences between the documentaries. I argue that the soundtracks in the case studies enhances the narrative and that horror conventions are used to trigger the viewer to reflect upon themselves.

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Introduction

Climate change has been a much-debated topic for years and will continue to be so. The urge for humans to solve the climate change problem is continuously growing. To inform people about climate change issues, various mediums have been used, such as books, films, and documentaries. According to writer and associate professor of communications and media studies John Duvall, environmental documentaries in the 21st century have been a turning point in ecological history.¹ Some of the first prominent documentaries that addresses environmental challenges that were created by mankind were Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1935) and *The River* (1937).² In these documentaries there is an authoritative narrator, synced with the musical score and images. The relationship between the images and audio appealed to the emotion and the intellect of the viewer, according to Duvall.³ The style of these documentaries has set the tone and can still be seen in contemporary documentaries. Since the first environmental documentaries in the twentieth century, the goal was to both educate and entertain the viewer.⁴ Then, environmental documentaries were created to point out the critique and failures modern civilization has undertaken to protect the environment. In the 21st century, environmental documentaries benefit from advances in scientific research, cinematic technologies, and innovative storytelling forms.⁵ When discussing documentaries about climate change this paper will discuss the term ecocriticism. Specifically looking at the connection of ecocriticism and the documentary. This because, ecocriticism has had an influence on how the topic about climate change has been discussed and developed in various mediums.

In the early 1990s, ecocriticism has expanded beyond the area of literary analysis to other cultural productions such as film and documentaries.⁶ English literature scholar Serpil Opperman argues that ecocriticism does not work with a defining theoretical model.⁷ Ecocriticism rather promotes ecological awareness and consciousness and interest in environmental literature. Ursula Heise goes further by arguing that ecocriticism is a field which is not easily defined. Rather than theoretical and methodological assumptions,

¹ John A. Duvall. *The Environmental Documentary* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 317.

² Duvall, *The Environmental*, 37.

³ Duvall, *The Environmental*, 37-38.

⁴ Duvall, *The Environmental*, 48.

⁵ Duvall, *The Environmental*, 48.

⁶ Paula Willoquet-Maricondi. *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 1.

⁷ Serpil Opperman, "Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 13, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 105.

ecocriticism acts more as a common political project whereby the details are continuously revised and challenged.⁸ Nevertheless, scholars have approached the topic to form a theoretical model.

According to American literature scholar Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* there are three criteria that identify works that have an environmental orientation which ecocriticism identifies: (1) “works in which the nonhuman world is not mere backdrop for human action but helps us situate human history within natural history; (2) works that do not single out human interest as the only significant interest; and (3) works whose ethical orientation includes human responsibility and accountability toward environment and the nonhuman sphere”.⁹ Media scholar Paula Willoquet-Maricondi states that ecocriticism is an acknowledgment that the social sphere and the ecosphere are interrelated. The social sphere cannot be considered without the context of the ecosphere.¹⁰ Something which can also be applied to an environmental documentary.

The documentary according to Oppermann is a tool in which nature is represented as a reality that shapes our cultural attitudes to the natural environment.¹¹ Resulting that the viewers’ expectation of nature is often more shaped by their own consumption of nature images than their own experiences. Thus, accepting the images as reality.¹² Willoquet-Maricondi agrees with Oppermann and adds that environmental films and also documentaries are socially constructed by various factors, such as capabilities of the cinematic technology, objectivity, film budget, the prevailing concepts of nature and the acknowledgment of the viewers’ taste.¹³ For example, from 1948 on, the films of Walt Disney helped to define the environment for young children, and also inspired other generations with their presentation of a romantic vision of nature. The score only accompanies this vision, by carefully matching the score to the rhythm of the animals’ movements.¹⁴

The soundtrack casts our perception of and attitudes towards the environment. The soundtrack in documentaries is one important tool to get messages across to the viewer and helps influence the viewer on how to interpret this message. As art scholar Heidi Hart states,

⁸ Ursula K. Heise, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” *PMLA* 121, no. 2 (March 2006): 506.

⁹ Lawrence Buell. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7-8.

¹⁰ Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, 3.

¹¹ Oppermann, *Theorizing Ecocriticism: Toward a Postmodern Ecocritical Practice*, 112.

¹² Derek Bousé. *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 7.

¹³ Willoquet-Maricondi, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, 8.

¹⁴ Duvall, *The Environmental*, 39-40.

music has a significant role in eco-cinema.¹⁵ In the last few years, research has been conducted on the ecological awareness in popular music. For example, Mark Pedelty¹⁶ and Tyson-Lord Gray have researched eco-protest music as a tool for environmental activism.¹⁷ And John Parham conducted a study about eco-cinema and the rhetorical codes which are used to attract a large audience.¹⁸ Therefore, it is relevant to conduct studies on the soundtrack in environmental documentaries.

Even though this paper will focus on documentaries, I will apply theories that were originally discussed and applied for film music analyses. I will be using among others the theories of film-theorist and composer Michiel Chion, musicologist Nicholas Cook, film studies scholar Claudia Gorbman, director and writer Peter Hutchinson and communication studies scholar Joe Tompkins. In order to contribute to the discourse of soundtracks in environmental documentaries, this paper provides a close reading analysis of *Before the Flood* (2016) directed by Fisher Stevens, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) directed by Davis Guggenheim and *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (2017) directed by Jon Shenk and Bonni Cohen.¹⁹ These documentaries were chosen because they triggered further discussion on the topic of climate change in politics and in the film world. All are created in the 21st century in the United States of America and had a budget between 1 to 1.5 million to spend. The documentaries were created to be shown to a large number of viewers. The case studies have been chosen due to their importance. They are acclaimed climate change documentaries, with *An Inconvenient Truth* among other awards winning the 2006 Academy Awards for Best Documentary Feature.²⁰ All three contain newly composed music and showcase the climate change issue in a large-scale broad view.

The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent the soundtrack contributes to the narrative in documentaries about climate change. This paper will also examine the use of horror conventions that are used in environmental documentaries. The reason why I will look

¹⁵ Heidi Hart, "Mozart on Ice," In *Music and the Environment in Dystopian Narrative: Sounding the Disaster* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 59.

¹⁶ Mark Pedelty, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk, and the Environment*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012).

¹⁷ Tyson-Lord J Gray, "Eco-Protest Music and the U.S. Environmental Movement," In *Sounds of Resistance: The Role of Music in Multicultural Activism*, ed. Eunice Rojas and Lindsay Michie (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013).

¹⁸ John Parham, "'Eco-cinema': Art Film and Documentary," In *Green Media and Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

¹⁹ Fisher Stevens, dir. *Before the Flood*. Appian Way Productions, RatPac-Dune Entertainment, 2016.

Davis Guggenheim, dir. *An Inconvenient Truth*. Lawrence Bender Production, 2006

Jon Shenk and Bonni Cohen, dir. *An inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*. Participant, 2017.

²⁰ "memorable-moments," Oscars, last modified 2019,

<https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2007/memorable-moments>.

at horror conventions is that these documentaries feature both a storyline that invokes behavioral change and a dystopian storyline. These dystopian storylines are often found in the genre of horror films. Also, horror conventions are used to trigger an emotion of the viewer.²¹ The same applies to environmental documentaries. Therefore, as a sub-question, this paper will examine to what extent these documentaries incorporate horror conventions with regard to the function of their music and their placement in the narrative. A close reading of documentary fragments is conducted to examine these questions.

²¹ Joe Tompkins, "Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films," In *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 190.

Chapter 1 Theoretical Framework

To answer the question to what extent these three documentaries correspond to their soundtrack functions and placement within the narrative, I will first discuss the current discourse on (1) the study of environmental documentaries, (2) the narrative role of soundtracks, (3) horror conventions that are used in soundtracks, and (4) immersion.

1.1 Environmental Documentaries

Filmmaker and communications scholar Derek Bousé's study examines the function images have on influencing the viewer's perceptions and attitudes towards nature. Bousé argues that wildlife films portray animal protagonists that resemble the human society. In the documentary, these stories are told as if the animals have human emotions and human customs. Because of this, the natural world is misrepresented.²² Film studies scholar Helen Hughes approaches the study of environmental documentaries as a response of beliefs, emotions and ideas that come from audio-visual research. She believes that the filmmaker must acknowledge that he or she is always involved in the documentary at both a professional and personal level. According to her, the filmmaker must therefore justify herself what the documentary has to contribute to the discourse of environmental consciousness.²³ However, Hughes states that there is an exception if an environmental documentary is created as a response to the lack of engagement in environmental issues. Hughes proposes to place the environmental documentary in the complex context of communication or "environmental consciousness", which possibly claims an intentionality as a fundamental for environmental documentaries.²⁴

1.2 The Narrative Role of Soundtracks

Claudia Gorbman argues that to understand the music in a narrative feature film, one must understand its pure musical codes.²⁵ However, this is not enough, the soundtrack in a film or documentary is always linked with the images. All the case studies have a length of about 1 hour and 40 minutes, a duration that is affiliated with a narrative feature film. The case studies have been shown in movie theatres and were produced as if they were feature films. Because of this, I will apply theories that were intended for feature films to the case studies.

One should look at the context when understanding the music in a documentary, Gorbman describes this as understanding the "cinematic musical codes". Nicholas Cook

²² Derek Bousé. *Wildlife Films* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 152-153.

²³Helen Hughes. *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the Twenty-First Century*, Intellect (Intellect, 2014), 5.

²⁴Hughes, *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the Twenty-First Century*, 5.

²⁵ Claudia Gorbman, "Narrative Film Music," in *Yale French Studies* no. 60 (1980): 184.

goes further by saying that one must understand music in what it does in its context, rather than discussing the meaning the music has.²⁶ James Buhler approaches the relationship between audio and image in “Analytical and Interpretive Approaches to Film Music (II): Analyzing Interactions of Music and Film”. Buhler states that the audio can be in parallel with the images, and therefore be in agreement.²⁷ But the audio can also contradict the images and therefore be contrapuntal.²⁸ Film scholar Randolph Jordan introduces the term “reflective audioviewing”. This term describes how the manipulation of sound in a film triggers the viewer to actively engage with the represented soundscape. This way soundscapes are used to encourage the viewer to reflect upon certain issues while seeing images of them.²⁹

Cook argues that the interaction of audio and images results in new meanings. Cook calls this “transfer of attributes”.³⁰ This is different than understanding the music in what it does in its context as said earlier, because here Cook talks about the interaction of audio and images rather than the audio itself. He notes that external factors, such as the audience, also play a role when understanding this meaning.³¹ Because of their interaction, both the aspects of audio and visuals co-create a new meaning. Cook also introduces three ways of interaction: *Conformance*, *Complementation*, and *Contest*. (1) Conformance is when the audio and images collaborate with each other and express the same meaning when watched separately.³² For example, when an image shows people dancing a waltz, an accompanied of a waltz is heard in the audio. (2) Complementation is when the audio and images add meaning to each other and are interrelated.³³ For example, when a temple is shown, accompanied by a pentatonic scale, the association will be that the temple is of Asian heritage, making the audio locational. Lastly, (3) Contest, is when two meanings are contradictory.³⁴ For example, when images of an active battlefield are shown, accompanied

²⁶Nicholas Cook, “Multimedia as Metaphor,” In *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9.

²⁷ James Buhler, “Analytical and Interpretive Approaches to Film Music (II): Analyzing Interactions of Music and Film,” *Film Music: Critical Approaches*, ed. by K.J. Donnelly, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 19.

²⁸ B. Langkjaer, *Filmlyd & filmmusik: Fra klassisk til moderne film*, (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, 1997), 36.

²⁹ Randolph Jordan, “The Ecology of Listening While Looking in the Cinema: Reflective Audioviewing in Gus Van Sant’s *Elephant*,” *Organised Sound*, 17 no. 3 (December 2012), 248.

³⁰ Cook, “Multimedia as Metaphor,” 70.

³¹ Cook, “Multimedia as Metaphor,” 70.

³² Nicholas Cook, “Models of Multimedia,” In *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100.

³³ Cook, *Models of Multimedia*, 103-106.

³⁴ Cook, *Models of Multimedia*, 102-103.

by tranquil audio. Cook's theories are useful when analysing music in environmental documentaries, because the relation between images and sound play a big role when making a message convincing.

In *Audio Vision: Sound on Screen*, Michiel Chion argues the sound is perceived to come "naturally" from what is seen and what is contained in the image itself.³⁵ The added value gives the impression that sound is unnecessary, because the sound merely duplicates a meaning that is already seen in the image.³⁶ However, he also states that sound and image create an added value, in which a sound enriches the image given. Thus resulting that the soundtrack enriches the narrative. Chion goes further by introducing the term "synchresis", in which the phenomenon of added value with regard to sound and image synchronism is at work. The term which derives from the words synchronic and synthesis, signifies "the forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears at the same time."³⁷ It allows the viewer to accept both the combination of the audio and images which are presented to them. Both added value and synchresis according to Chion are important when experiencing a soundtrack of a film. The audio itself adds value to the film

Film studies professor Dominique Nasta argues that the narrative structure of a film is heavily relied on the soundtrack and that the soundtrack and film cannot be seen separately.³⁸ Chion however, created the "masking" strategy, to analyze if the narrative of a film would be different depending on the music.³⁹ This is done, by analyzing the film without the soundtrack on. This results in knowing how important the soundtrack is for the narrative message to come across to the viewer.

Media scholar Johnny Wingstedt proposes using six general categories of narrative musical functions: *Descriptive* refers to actively describing something, usually used in describing the physical world, *Emotive* refers to the ability music has to communicate emotive qualities, *Guiding* refers to guiding the viewer thought and mind to perform specific actions, *Informative* refers to explaining events by communicating on a cognitive level, *Rhetorical* refers to how the music comments on the narrative events by contrasting the music to the images or referring to known music and *Temporal* refers to the time dimension of

³⁵ Michel Chion. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 224.

³⁶ Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 224.

³⁷ Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 224.

³⁸ Dominique Nasta, *Meaning in film: relevant structures in soundtrack and narrative*, (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 1992), 43.

³⁹ Chion. *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, 187.

music and provides continuity, structure and form.⁴⁰ I will use these categories for my analysis.

1.3 Horror Conventions

Horror soundtracks are a peculiar genre that since the 1930s entailed a wide range of narrative situations, styles, and themes.⁴¹ The soundtrack of horror films uses various musical styles such as orchestral and choral scores but also jazz, rock, electronic and avant-garde musical experimentation. Besides serving the same function that the soundtrack serves in other genre films such as setting the atmosphere and mood, characterizing a character, dramatic effects, cinematic sphere and entertaining the audience,⁴² horror soundtracks according to Hutchings exhibit a generic specificity “that seems to require not just particular types of music but also particular deployments of that music within the films.”⁴³ Therefore, to define what is distinctive for horror music, one should look at how it deviates from the norms and conventions of the soundtrack in other film genres.

There is not one specific convention that is always used in horror films. However, soundtracks of horror films are known to contain dissonances, chromaticism, ascending or descending lines, stingers, tritone chord and the use of synthesizers and other electronic instruments.⁴⁴ Often these conventions are to create an uncanny or disturbing feeling. These conventions have changed over the years. Phillip Glass composed horror soundtracks for various films including *Dracula*. He intentionally composed scores that would evoke offscreen space.⁴⁵ A space that is not physically present in the frame of the scene but rather in the narrative. The viewer becomes aware of an offscreen sound or character. It is a method to bring information to the viewer without letting them see the physical place or character. In the 1940s, suspense was created by composing music for the overall atmosphere, rather than for moments of shock.⁴⁶ Then atonal music crept its way in the horror scene combined with electronic instruments and synthesized scores, creating a more industrial noise.⁴⁷ According to Joe Tompkins moral connotations are incorporated in horror’s musical affects, certain

⁴⁰ Johnny Wingstedt, “Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film” *Visuals Communication* 9, No. 2. (May 2010): 194-195.

⁴¹ Peter Hutchings, “Horror: Music of the Night: Horror’s Soundtracks.” In *Sounds and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview*. Edited by Graeme Harper (New York: Continuum, 2009), 221.

⁴² Claudia Gorbman, “Narrative Film Music,” *Yale French Studies* no. 60 (1980): 184.

⁴³ Hutchings, *Horror: Music of the Night: Horror’s Soundtracks*, 222.

⁴⁴ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror: The Discourse of Music and Horror Films,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), 190.

⁴⁵ Hutchings, *Horror: Music of the Night: Horror’s Soundtracks*, 222.

⁴⁶ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror,” 195.

⁴⁷ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror,” 197.

sounds are associated with horrific action and events.⁴⁸ Another common musical function in the horror convention is the ostinato. The ostinato is used to again create tension. For example, in the 1975 film *Jaws*, the repetitive minor second interval creates an uncanny and threatening feeling.⁴⁹ The incorporation of silence is also associated with horror movies. Silence can cause the feeling of suspense, often used before an impulsive moment of shock. However, according to Hutchings, silence can also be used as an expressive function, rather than marking the absence of music.⁵⁰ This, for example is heard in the 2013 film *All is*, where the main character has almost no dialogue, because he is alone at sea, trying to survive his boat wreck.⁵¹

Tompkins argues that most horror movies incorporate similar strategies to convey a generally suitable tone. It corresponds with our culturally constructed sense of musical right and wrong. Horror movies, therefore, compose music that we as audience think about when we see disturbing or horrific situations.⁵² Lex Baxter who composes soundtracks for horror movies said “the composer can use any notes that he wishes without staying in the realm of something that is pretty”.⁵³ However, this does not mean that the soundtrack has to be fully dissonant or atonal to create an uncanny feeling. Horror soundtracks can invoke a responsive act of interpretation from the viewer. One can use soundtrack that presents disjuncture between an image and sound, therefore creating confusion to the viewer and a need to find an explanation. An example of this can be found in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970), a score by Ennio Morricone, whereby children voices and low-registered instruments are simultaneously scored to lead the impression of twisted and disturbed psychologies.⁵⁴

1.4 Immersion

According to media studies professor Gundolf S. Freyermuth, when discussing immersion in audio-visual media, one should look at the four modes of immersion according to the four modes of mediality.⁵⁵ Primary audio-visuality refers to immersing oneself in the real, for example acting as one while losing oneself in an event. Secondary audio-visuality refers to

⁴⁸ Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror,” 190.

⁴⁹ Mervyn Cooke, “State of the Art: Film Music Since the New Hollywood,” in *A History of Film Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 461.

⁵⁰ Hutchings, *Horror: Music of the Night: Horror’s Soundtracks*, 220.

⁵¹ Chandor, J.C., dir. *All is Lost*. Black Bear Pictures, 2013.

⁵² Joe Tompkins, “Mellifluous Terror,” 191.

⁵³ Hutchings, *Horror: Music of the Night: Horror’s Soundtracks*, 223.

⁵⁴ Dario Argento, dir. *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*. Titanus, 1970.

⁵⁵ Gundolf S. Freyermuth, “From Analog to Digital Image Space: Toward a Historical Theory of Immersion,” *Immersion in the Visual Arts and Media* Volume 9 (2016): 194-195.

immersion in the illustration, for example when one loses one's selves in artifacts or movies in an autonomous pace where one would like to be, but where they are not and be with certain people with whom they are not. Tertiary mediality refers to immersion in the photo-realistic, for example when one loses one's selves at a heteronomous pace in movies. The quaternary mediality refers to immersion in hyper-reality, for example where a viewer loses oneself at an autonomous or heteronomous pace in non-linear audio-visions such as games. This enables the viewer to be at places they wish they were and can act like a person whom they might want to be but are not.

According to media and communications scholar John Corner, documentaries differ from feature fiction in the way that documentaries will usually not invite the viewer to immerse themselves in the worlds they view.⁵⁶ As Corner states, “we watch documentaries from a position in the same world as the events, circumstances and people depicted in them, although it may seem at points to be an alien world.”⁵⁷ I do not fully agree with Corner, because a documentary can use its images and soundtrack to guide the viewers' thought. The case studies in this paper, however, are an example of how immersion and critical reflection are invited for the viewer. The documentaries portray the damages climate change is causing to the world and send a message to the viewer on how they can change their behavior and help solve the problem. The use of horror conventions in the soundtrack and the alternation between sounds and absence of music provokes an immersed feeling and invites the viewer to critically reflect on themselves.

⁵⁶ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” in *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 135.

⁵⁷ John Corner, “Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World,” 135.

Chapter 2 Case Studies Analyses

2.1 Analysis: musical narrative of *Before the Flood*

For the three case studies this paper will pay attention to important moments in the soundtrack aligning the visuals with musical analysis. The documentary *Before the Flood* invites the audience to critically reflect on the damage global warming is causing to our planet. The soundtrack was composed by Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross, Gustavo Santaolalla and Mogwai. The opening scene of the documentary begins with an image of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* painted by Jeroen Bosch in 1503-1515, specifically with the centerpiece of the three-fold panel which shows us the garden of earthly delights. It portrays humanity in all its freedom, while engaging in various pleasure-seeking activities. According to art historian Wilhelm Fraenger, the panel portrays “an utopia, a garden of divine delight before the Fall or – since Bosch could not deny the existence of the dogma of original sin - a millennial condition that would arise if, after expiation of original Sin, humanity were permitted to return to Paradise and to a state of tranquil harmony embracing all Creation.”⁵⁸ Alongside this image we hear birds chirping and an owl hooting, while a synthesizer is playing sustained notes. In a slow tempo the soundtrack goes on while the narrator talks about the left and center panel painting. When the narrator describes what is seen in the right panel at 00:2:12, the soundtrack changes. Bases join the synthesizer, the piano pitch lowers and the volume increases. This creates a tension with the viewer. The music which is in a 4/4-time signature is at its loudest when the documentary’s introduction credits are shown. After this, images of disaster are shown of what climate change can do to the planet. Together with the soundtrack the viewer hears voiceovers of presenters. Using Wingstedt’s six general categories of narrative musical functions, this is an example of emotive.⁵⁹ Here the soundtrack uses its ability to communicate its emotions through the increasing tempo and volume which correlates with the images.

The interaction between audio and images occur frequently in the documentary. For instance at 00:12:04, an acoustic guitar plays the main melody, then a ticking clock increases its presence when the narrator talks about the effects of climate change, this is an example of Cook’s conformance. This continues for about a minute. The soundtrack stops when the title of the documentary appears on the screen. At 00:7:22, an electronic sound smoothly comes

⁵⁸ Wilhelm Fraenger. *The Millennium of Hieronymus Bosch: Outlines of a New Interpretation*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 11.

⁵⁹ Johnny Wingstedt, “Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film” *Visuals Communication* 9, No. 2. (May 2010): 194-195.

in. Images show various landscapes, the melody is now played by an acoustic guitar, giving it more of a country vibe. This is an example of reflective audioviewing. The images without the soundtrack can be viewed in a different way. However, because of the guitar soundtrack the viewer is manipulated to view the landscape in a country vibe.

At 00:08:56, images are presented of oil factories and a low loud drone sound made by a synthesizer is heard. Together with this the viewer hears car sounds and the sound of fire and explosions alongside the electronic pitch that is continuously heard. In this example, the sound of fire and the explosions are post-produced together with the soundtrack, to create an immersive force. This is often the case for environmental documentaries, as is seen in *Before the Flood*. As Mervyn Cooke argues, the real underwater sounds are different than the sounds which are post-produced for the documentary.⁶⁰ The real underwater music alongside the post-produced underwater music work together to create an immersive force.

Then, at 00:09:39, the soundtrack produces a siren sound incorporated in the soundtrack, the electronic sound rises higher in pitch, again giving this uncanny feeling and the sense of urgency. The theme motif is regularly heard in the soundtrack.

When images are shown of the Canadian arctic and the narrator says *how we can stop it* at 00:13:31 everything goes silent, showing visuals of the beautiful landscape.⁶¹ The use of silence is an example of what Parham argues to be a tool that provides an art film a contemplative space.⁶² The silence is providing the audience room for thought to reflect on the visuals. Throughout the documentary when anyone but the narrator talks, the soundtrack stops. The viewers' attention is solely set on the dialogue and the images, the soundtrack provides continuity which refers to the temporal narrative function. Then again, when the narrator is speaking, the theme motif is heard.

An example of Cook's complementation interaction⁶³ and Wingstedt's descriptive narrative musical function are found in various scenes.⁶⁴ For example, in a scene set in China at 00:30:29 the viewer can hear a pentatonic scale on a synthesizer and at 00:33:28, the location is set in India. The moment we see an image of India, the viewer hears a quick melody played on the sitar (illustration 1).

⁶⁰ Mervyn Cooke, "Water Music: Scoring the Silent World," In *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken, Taylor and Francis, 2014), 108-109.

⁶¹ *Before the Flood*, 00:13:31.

⁶² John Parham, "Eco-cinema': Art Film and Documentary," In *Green Media and Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 178.

⁶³ Cook, *Models of Multimedia*, 100.

⁶⁴ Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film", 194-195.

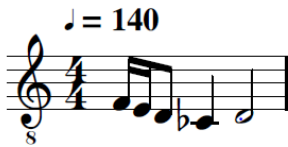


Illustration 1: melody Sitar

At 00:40:24, the documentary stops for two seconds. This is a clue that the documentary was intended to be shown on, with commercial breaks in between. When the documentary is broadcasted on commercial television, commercial breaks are interspersed in the documentary, creating different sequences. Raymond Williams calls this planned flow.⁶⁵ The soundtrack stops for two seconds but then continues to follow when the images restart to appear.

At 1:15:48 the viewer sees images of the earth from the sky above, we hear one lingering D5 pitch, immersing ourselves in the scene. At 01:25:21 the image of the Garden of Earthly Delights is shown again, the soundtrack at the beginning reappears.

During the credits, a pop song is played. For the first time a voice is used in the soundtrack. The song, “A Minute to Breathe” by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross is not uplifting, which is regularly used in end credits of a cinematic film, but rather melancholic and dramatic.⁶⁶ The lyrics of the refrain are *I don't want to say goodbye*, the instrumental accompaniment is by a piano.⁶⁷ The song is in the key A-flat major, giving it an uncanny touch to the song. The lyrics are about climate change. The song is composed for this documentary. The music leaves space for the viewer to contemplate. At the end of the song, the volume increases while the lyrics are, *Just need a minute to breathe*, referring to the increasing urgency to solve the climate change problem.⁶⁸ A climax is built up slowly, with incorporations of a siren call. The climax abruptly breaks off into silence.

Before the Flood contains both a dystopian storyline as well as a storyline which is based on hope. When following the dystopian storyline, some horror conventions are seemingly used. At 00:04:00 a piano is playing a melody while a woodblock is ticking at the first beat and a synthesizer on all the beats (illustration 2). This imitates a ticking clock, creating a sense of urgency. The ostinato is the theme of the documentary. This is an example of what Chion calls a negative image. “*Negative images in the sound - ‘present’ solely in the*

⁶⁵ Raymond Williams, “Programming as *Sequence* and *Flow*,” In *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 234.

⁶⁶ *Before the Flood*, 01:29:31.

⁶⁷ *Before the Flood*, 01:30:38.

⁶⁸ *Before the Flood*, 01:34:26.

suggestion the soundtrack makes.”⁶⁹ The sound calls for them, but the film does not produce the images for us to see.



Illustration 2: ostinato from 00:04:01

At 00:05:38, the ticking gets louder and thus becomes more present in the soundtrack. This comes alongside with the images showing climate change protestors around the world.

The audio and images complement each other while addressing the viewer with the same message. An example is at 00:45:44 when an alarm sound is featured in the soundtrack. Alongside the soundtrack, images are shown of the absorbent of carbon dioxide while the melody is playing alongside the alarm sound. At 00:08:55, when images of oil and gas stations are shown, a deep low repetitive bass drone is heard in the soundtrack (illustration 3). The tension in the soundtrack correlates with the visuals. The combination of the two provoke an uneasy feeling.



Illustration 3: repetitive drone

The same applies to the scene at 00:51:34, when the narrator talks about deforestation in cohesion with the images of deforestation. An alarm sound with a repetitive low drone sound is heard in the soundtrack.

At 1:00:40, a marimba plays the melody, that is joined later by a synthesizer that produces a scratching sound. The visuals show examples of what carbon tax is. Every time we see an image of a carbon dioxide used product, a high-pitch uneasy scratching sound is heard in the soundtrack. The soundtrack in these scenes are uncanny and unpredictable.

2.2 Analysis: musical narrative of *An Inconvenient Truth*

The documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* begins with a black image, while the viewer listens to post-produced nature sounds of birds chirping, water running, and wind accompanied with a piano and a narrator talking. Then the soundtrack composed by Michael Brook becomes silent and the viewer sees a large room with a stage with Al Gore on it. Half of the

⁶⁹ Michel Chion, Claudia Gorbman, and Walter Murch, “Introduction to Audiovisual Analysis,” In *Audio-vision: sound on screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 192.

documentary shows Al Gore presenting to the audience in the room. The documentary is filmed in such a way that the viewer is looking at the presentation just as the audience is in the physical room. The viewer might forget that they are watching a documentary, but rather think that they are watching the presentation live in front of them. Throughout the documentary clapping is heard. While the viewer could think it comes from the audience in the room, that clapping is post-produced. Using Freyermuth four modes of mediality, this is an example of secondary audio-visuality.⁷⁰

Throughout the documentary while the viewer is watching the presentation, most of the time the soundtrack is absent. When the viewer sees images of Al Gore touring around the world at 00:02:14 the viewer hears a melody for about a minute. The melody consists out of strings and a flute. When we see images of the destruction climate change is causing, we hear natural environmental sounds such as the raging of fire and the crashing of water. This is an example of conformance.⁷¹ At 00:09:57, a video of the Simpsons is showed in the documentary which is explaining in a child-like way what global warming is. The soundtrack that is heard with these images are sync effects when the sun is being punched, with optimistic music in major mode just as is heard in the Simpsons series. The short video demonstrates how the soundtrack takes an informative role.⁷²

At 00:11:55, strings and a synthesizer come in, followed by a guitar. A slow tempo guitar melody is played, giving it a melancholic feeling to it, when the narrator is talking about his first encounter with the issue of global warming. The guitar is then accompanied again with strings playing chords. The same melody is heard again at 00:25:20, when again images are shown of Al Gore's past. The soundtrack narrative function in this case is emotive as well as guiding the viewer's thought and mind.⁷³ The soundtrack is melancholic but also a bit dramatic because of the sustaining notes and the slow tempo in which the narrator speaks. It gives the viewer time to contemplate. The soundtrack stops when Al Gore says in a voice over manner, *we were almost going to lose him*,⁷⁴ the soundtrack starts again when he says *he finally took a breath*⁷⁵. The soundtrack uses its emotive narrative function to engage with the viewer.⁷⁶ At 00:27:05 a heartbeatlike beat accompanies the soundtrack almost unnoticeable

⁷⁰ Gundolf S. Freyermuth, "From Analog to Digital Image Space: Toward a Historical Theory of Immersion," 194-195.

⁷¹ Cook, *Models of Multimedia*, 100.

⁷² Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film," 194-195.

⁷³ Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film," 194-195.

⁷⁴ *An Inconvenient Truth*, 00:26:08.

⁷⁵ *An Inconvenient Truth*, 00:26:16.

⁷⁶ Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film," 194-195.

when the narrator talks about his son almost dying. This is an example of conformance using Cook's model. The images alone are not dramatic and urgent enough. What makes the scene powerful is the association with the sound of a heartbeat which adds meaning to the image and thus creates a sense of urgency. The soundtrack stops when the narrator says *we take for granted what might not be here for our children*.⁷⁷

The theme motif is played on an acoustic guitar at 00:31:55 when images are shown of the disaster hurricane Katrina is causing. The same melody is heard every time Al Gore is heard as the voice over in the documentary. At 00:40:06, a guitar melody is heard, associated with country music when images are shown of the farm Al Gore was brought up in. This is an example of complementation. The country music adds meaning to the images, making the audio locational.⁷⁸ At 01:27:00 the soundtrack changes its tune and atmosphere when it returns to the first melody that was heard in the documentary. A piano, strings and synthesizers all play in the key of B major when the narrator talks about hope to fix the climate change problem. The strings imitate the narrator when he states *Rise Again to secure our future*⁷⁹, the strings are then accompanied with an A6 pitch of a clarinet.

The documentary ends as it begins with the sound of nature such as insects buzzing and the running of water. At 01:29:40, while information about climate change and the end credits are shown, a pop song "I Need to Wake Up" sung by Melissa Etheridge, is played.⁸⁰ The song is uplifting and leaves the viewer with an optimistic mode. The lyrics correlate with the topic of climate change, the music is in the key of B flat major and upbeat. It is a song that lets viewers go home with the determination to change their lifestyles and fix the climate change problem. In 2006 the pop song was the first song of any documentary to win the Academy Award for Best Original Song.⁸¹

There are many scenes in the documentary that have no soundtrack but only audio. For the most part this happens when the viewer watches the presentation. This is probably done to immerse the viewer because normally no music would be heard during a presentation anyway. But also, silence can stress the importance of the scene, leaving the viewer with only visuals and most of all a monologue to hear. The viewer is therefore, forced to concentrate on the monologue. The absence of music is used as a tool to stress the important message the

⁷⁷ *An Inconvenient Truth*, 00:28:00-00:28:05.

⁷⁸ Cook, *Models of Multimedia*, 100.

⁷⁹ *An Inconvenient Truth*, 01:27:55.

⁸⁰ *An Inconvenient Truth*, 01:29:40.

⁸¹ "memorable-moments," Oscars, last modified 2019, <https://www.oscars.org/oscars/ceremonies/2007/memorable-moments>.

documentary is sending the viewer.

Just as is seen in *Before the Flood*, *An Inconvenient Truth* also contains a dystopian storyline. Even though the soundtrack of this documentary is minimal and repetitive, there are examples to be found of the use of horror conventions in the soundtrack. An example of this is heard at 00:31:50 when images of the damage hurricane Katrina caused are shown. In the soundtrack we hear strings playing sustained notes, with an ostinato in the guitar (illustration 4). Together with noises of helicopters and a news reporter voice over, high strings come along. The suspense is built for two minutes.



Illustration 4: Ostinato in the guitar

2.3 Analysis: musical narrative of *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*

The documentary of *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* begins with a scene of a dripping iceberg. In the soundtrack, composed by Jeff Bael, we hear a piano that imitates the droplets of water accompanied by high strings playing sustaining notes. Together with the music, we hear voiceovers from news reporters that critique Al Gore's first documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. The next scene shows beautiful landscapes, with a slow and calm soundtrack in the background. The images and the soundtrack correlate with each other but are in contrast with the inciting news reporters.

Just as is seen in *An Inconvenient Truth*, this documentary uses the same format: Al Gore presenting a presentation altered with scenes from Al Gore's past. When scenes from the presentation appear, the soundtrack is almost always absent. Also here, we can speak of secondary audio-visuality, the viewer loses herself in the documentary.⁸² The moment we hear the narrator in a voice over, the soundtrack appears alongside it, even if it is just used as background music.

At 00:03:55, the viewer hears the main motif for the first time, an upbeat melody that at this time is played by strings and a guitar. The guitar plays a descending line and repeats itself, while the strings play a repetitive rhythm altering with long sustained pitches. The theme is surprisingly used more as background music.

When the viewer sees images which are not the scenes of Al Gore's presentation, the soundtrack is always mixed with "natural noises". For example, when there is a scene in an

⁸² Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film," 194-195.

airplane, we hear the ventilation. If there is a scene by water, we hear the water and so forth. At 00:08:20, while looking at landscapes of Greenland from within an airplane, the soundtrack slowly and in low volume comes in the foreground. Horns are playing the melody, strings are playing a repetitive line and a drum is playing on the first beat. Steadily the volume increases. The increase of volume builds tension and leads to a climax that slowly fades out. Here we can talk about reflective audioviewing, the soundtrack manipulates the viewer to actively engage with the Greenland landscape and encourages the viewer to reflect upon it because of the ominous soundtrack. The instrumentation that brass instruments (mostly horns) are playing the melody and strings are the accompaniment playing sustaining notes is regularly used in this soundtrack. This in comparison to other scenes that have a calm and soft piano melody accompanied with strings in the soundtrack.

At 00:11:33, the soundtrack comes in the foreground when the viewer hears the words *That's the big moulin*,⁸³ while we see an image of rushing water which comes from the ice captures. The scene at 00:12:34 is an example that the soundtrack leaves the viewer time to reflect on what they have seen. We see a scene that shows the earth from above for a while, while hearing a slow soft melody played by horns in key B flat major used as background music. The same melody is heard several times, all incorporated when calm images of landscapes are shown.

The documentary gives the viewer numerous times to reflect on what they have seen as well as reflect on their own doing when it comes to climate change. An example of this is at 00:45:00: the narrator looks back at a prediction he made in his documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* about the New York City memorial being flooded. Sceptics did not believe this would happen. However, unfortunately it did happen, and the documentary shows images of the flooding. The soundtrack that accompanies these images are a piano, strings and brass all playing a slow-paced melody. A feeling of melancholy arises. Especially for Americans this scene could be a wake-up call that climate change is damaging the world. The soundtrack uses its emotive narrative function to convey the message to the viewer.⁸⁴

At 1:32:01 a violin and cello play a slow paced and calm melody and we see images of the beginning of the documentary, the icebergs.⁸⁵ The soundtrack which in this case uses its temporal musical function, goes on for about 10 minutes.

As the end credits appear, a pop song "Truth to Power" in key A minor performed by

⁸³ *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, 00:11:33.

⁸⁴ Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film," 194-195.

⁸⁵ Johnny Wingstedt, "Narrative Music, Visuals and Meaning in Film," 194-195.

OneRepublic written by Ryan Tedder and T Bone Burnett is played.⁸⁶ The lyrics reflect the message the documentary is trying to tell the viewer. The song is an upbeat song, performed by guitars, drums, a piano and a voice joined by a gospel choir. A song which gives hope and gives determination for the viewer to change themselves.

There are less horror conventions to be found in comparison to the other two documentaries. This because the main storyline is about informing the viewer about the actions being taken to act upon climate change. It is less about showing the viewer the horrors that can happen if we do not do something about climate change, which is mostly the focus of *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Before the Flood*. However, there are some examples that correlate with horror conventions.

At 00:14:28, the viewer hears a beat played by a drum while the volume is increasing. We see images of the damages flooding has caused on the earth. The beat and the increase of volume create tension. At 00:16:15 a piano plays an ostinato on the pitches D5 and A5, the basses and the timpani follow the piano (illustration 5). The high strings play a staccato melody above it. The soundtrack changes from being background music when there is a dialogue, to foreground music when the dialogue stops.



Illustration 5: Piano Ostinato

At 00:17:55 a piano performs a melody which is accompanied by sustaining notes in the strings. It creates the feeling of melancholy but also has an uncanny touch to it. The creation of tension is heard often in this soundtrack. Another example of this is at 00:54:15 when strings play a repetitive melody, when images of storm and fighting in Syria are shown. Because the strings play a repetitive line the soundtrack creates a tension and uncanny feeling.

⁸⁶ *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, 01:34:30.

Chapter 3 Comparison of the Case Studies

3.1 Similarities

When comparing the three documentaries certain aspects come forward. The documentaries show a broad view on the issue of climate change. They contain a political view, two of them have former vice-president Al Gore as narrator, the other one, actor Leonardo DiCaprio.

When looking at the soundtrack, there are also similarities to be seen. For instance, the soundtrack is mostly used in the documentaries as emotive and temporal narrative musical functions, keeping the flow from one scene to another, which creates a sense of continuity. The soundtrack and the visuals in the case studies mostly enhance each other. When the soundtrack is in the foreground, most of the times without any dialogue, the music is as John Corner argues fully active in the narrative's meaning.⁸⁷ Also the case studies only use instrumental music in the soundtrack, using instruments that are affiliated with the western symphony orchestra. However, the only time the soundtrack deviates from this, is at the end credits, whereby a newly composed pop-song is performed that reflects the message the documentary is trying to convey to its viewers.

Another feature that they have in common is that the case studies contain a theme that is regularly played during the documentary. The theme motifs in the case studies consists out of repetitive strings and creates a tension. The case studies also incorporate post-produced sounds and effects when scenes are shown of landscapes. This is often heard alongside the soundtrack. A method used to convince the viewer that they are listening to "natural sounds", which lets the viewer think that what they are seeing and listening to is using a shot of the reality world.

The case studies all use common musical signs from horror conventions. The soundtracks' relation with the images created new meanings and urgency for the topic, calling for immediate action. This was done by composing music that creates a feeling of unease and fear. By incorporating sustained notes, ostinatos, imitating sounds of alarms and sirens and other unsettling sounds, the soundtrack reminded the viewer of horror soundtracks. Whether the viewer would know this consciously or not. The use of silence was incorporated

⁸⁷ John Corner, "Music and the Aesthetics of the Recorded World," In *Music and Sound Documentary*, ed. Holly Rogers (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis), 128.

in the documentaries to create a sense of suspense and focus to the viewer, which is known to be also used in horror films.⁸⁸

3.2 Differences

There are also differences between the case studies. For instance, while conveying the same message: explaining the issue of climate change and acting upon the viewer to help fix the problem, the case studies incorporate different durations of silences. In *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, there were more silences incorporated during the soundtrack in the documentary in comparison to the other two. While *An Inconvenient Truth* and its sequel have two main motifs, *Before the Flood* has one distinctive main motif with numerous other instrumental music in its soundtrack.

When incorporating the masking strategy by Chion on *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, the narrative of the documentary does link with a documentary about climate change. However, the soundtrack in overall is minimal and calm, with a few exceptions. The narrative with the soundtrack creates a calm vision on the issue of climate change rather than exploiting the topic to the viewer. This in comparison to *An inconvenient Truth* and *Before the Flood*. When conducting the masking strategy on those documentaries, the narrative stays the same. The soundtrack of these two documentaries complement the narrative in a strong way.

⁸⁸ Peter Hutchings, "Horror: Music of the Night: Horror's Soundtracks," In *Sounds and Music in Film and Visual Media: An Overview*, ed. Graeme Harper (New York: Continuum), 221.

Conclusion and Discussion

In response to a lack of research on environmental documentaries, this paper has conducted a close reading analysis to explore the function and placement of music in relation to the narrative in the environmental documentaries *Before the Flood*, *An Inconvenient Truth* and *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* as well as looking at the usage of horror conventions to support the narrative. The soundtrack can make a difference in the viewers' experience of the images. Taking the case studies as an example, the soundtrack can add or eliminate characteristics such as the sense of urgency, sense of contemplating and the feeling of melancholy. The soundtrack can highlight certain images of the film by guiding the viewer's perception, thus proving that the soundtrack can have an interpretive role.

The analyses of the case studies revealed that the soundtrack contributes to the narrative in various ways. Using Cook's model, the soundtrack was often in conformance and in complementation with the images. The orchestral score and the images were closely linked, making it easier for the viewer to get immersed. However, at those moments where the soundtrack was absent, it allowed the viewer some space to reflect on the visuals.

The use of musical signs from horror conventions were used to create tension and create an uneasy feeling. This paper argued that the tension in the case studies, repetitive rhythms in a low register pitch while increasing the volume, underlines the urgency of the message the narrative wants to reach the viewer. The analyses also showed that the use of silence in the soundtrack of the case studies correlated with the use of silence from horror conventions.

The soundtrack can either take the foreground, middle ground or background in comparison to the images. In the case studies the soundtrack both functioned in the foreground as well as in the background as a means of continuity.

This paper has examined the narrative role the soundtrack has in three specific documentaries that were produced in the United States of America, discussed a broad view on the issue of climate change, were created in the 21st century and were created to be shown to a large audience. This paper also examined if these documentaries incorporated specific musical conventions that are affiliated with horror movies. This paper only analyzed three documentaries, but it can be a starting point to represent the genre of climate change documentaries. Nevertheless, to fully understand the narrative role the soundtrack has in climate change documentaries, a wide variety of documentaries should be analyzed. Such as climate change documentaries from various countries, various time periods and various views

on the issue of climate change to assemble a wider data for the discourse. This paper only looked at the horror conventions that are used mainly in blockbusters films. To fully understand the use of horror conventions in documentaries about climate change one should look at various horror films from different countries and production houses.

The different functions and roles soundtracks have in a documentary are interesting to examine. Because of the increase of interest in the climate change issues, documentaries about climate change are deserving more musicological research. Besides examining the place of the soundtrack in the narrative, it would also be interesting to examine whether the function of a soundtrack can trigger emotions since this paper has showed that the documentary left space for the viewer to contemplate on the content of the documentary.

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