

NEW NATURALISM AND WRITING A NEW FILM PRODUCTION MANIFESTO

BAFTSS Conference 2023. Presented on April 4th 23

Jack Shelbourn
jshelbourn@lincoln.ac.uk

Abstract

'New Naturalism isn't just about the cinematic form, but also about the films' content. A recurring theme in Malick's films is that human encounters with nature are transformational, transcendent events.' (B, 2021)

The dogma of *New Naturalism* in its visual form, was first defined by Terrence Malick and Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki, ASC, AMC. with reference to their film *The New World* (2005). This was developed further for *Tree of Life* (2011). More recently It has been used to describe the cinematography of Chloe Zhao's Oscar winning film *Nomadland* (2020) by writer Benjamin B with reference to shooting only with natural light which Zhao and cinematographer Joshua James Richards successfully achieved.

Benjamin B expanded beyond Malick and Lubezki's visual dogma by exploring the feel and visual dynamics of what appears on screen and ultimately how the characters are portrayed. But by looking beyond the creative impact of the dogma an intriguing question now comes into view.

Could New Naturalism and its expanded interpretation, completely without intention, contain the formula for sustainable practices for cinematography embedded within it?

At a critical time in which we all need to make fundamental changes to our way of doing things a manifesto devised from *New Naturalism* could make a positive contribution to combatting the effects of climate change.

By taking positive action now it would help provide the next generation of film makers with a 'manifesto' that embraces restraint and helps discover new creativity solutions, just as with the Dogma 95 movement of Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg.

Could it aid films in becoming more sustainable in the wider sense, such as in the community and financially? And what would this new manifesto look like? What restraints would be included or excluded? This paper aims to address these questions by focusing on the early research conducted as part of Jack Shelbourn's on-going PhD.

Author Biography

Jack Shelbourn is a working cinematographer and senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln. Jack has recently begun a PhD by practice. With the working title of:

Sustainable practices in the art and craft of cinematography. Can 'New Naturalism', with its emphasis on natural light, lead to more sustainable and environmentally friendly practices in cinematography?

Jack's work as a cinematographer has won awards. Most notably *Mind-Set* (2022, Dir. Mikey Murray) winning best UK feature film at the Manchester International Film Festival 2022. Jack specialises in low budget film making, shooting with natural and available light.

Contents

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Author Biography</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Contents.....</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>What is New Naturalism and what are its creative restraints?.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>The manifesto, taking a visual driving force & focusing on sustainability.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>The manifesto.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>References.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Filmography.....</i>	<i>9</i>

Introduction

The film industry has a requirement to become more sustainable. In many ways, from environmental, to community and economically. With environment most under the microscope helped by the success of BAFTA albert and other green initiatives. With the film industries hunger for power and transport as well as its desire to entertain and attract audiences with big spectacles. It is a key contributor to global carbon emissions, especially if streaming services are included in the calculation and the production of the capture and consumption devices used within the industry and by the audience. My research, as a practicing cinematographer, has been to look directly at cinematography's impacts. When reflecting on my own practices I was introduced to the concept of New Naturalism, in an article written for American Cinematographer by one of their writers Benjamin B. My colleague had read the article and could see the similarities to how I describe my practice; favouring natural light, hand held, working with the environment and searching for balance. This was the moment my practice and research interests clicked and has lead to me undertaking a practice based PhD as part of my role as a senior lecturer at the University of Lincoln.

My PhD project is currently titled:

*SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN THE ART AND CRAFT OF CINEMATOGRAPHY.
Can 'New Naturalism', with its emphasis on natural light, lead to more sustainable and environmentally friendly practices in cinematography?*

The concept of *New Naturalism* has gained prominence in recent years even if you've never heard of it. This is primarily due to the cinematic techniques practiced in films such as the Oscar winning *Nomadland* (2020) by Chloe Zhao. Which was shot entirely using available light. Not a new concept. But one that is available to a wider set of film makers due to the advent of digital cinematography and digital sensors with higher sensitivity to light.

I have been practicing forms of *New Naturalism* my whole career, even if I didn't know it. Favouring handheld camera operation, wide angle lenses and shooting with natural or available light. These techniques can be seen in my most successful films: *Mind-Set* (Murray, 2022) and *How You Look At Me* (Gonzalez, 2019). Both mainly handheld and both shooting natural or available light, augmented with traditional lighting fixtures when required. In the case of *Mind-Set* (2022) it was all LED.

A key aspect of my PhD is the development of a new sustainable cinematography Manifesto. Developed upon the dogme of *New Naturalism* and presented through creative restraints. Designed to enable and fuel creativity instead of hinder and clamp down on the artistic process in favour of sustainability. Film makers need to want to be involved and to try the manifesto, just as those who once took on Dogme95 did to critical acclaim.

This paper will introduce the concepts of *New Naturalism*, the impacts of cinematography on the industry and begin to outline the manifesto and where my research will go next on its journey to enable cinematographers to better practice their art and craft sustainably. And ask the question: *Could New Naturalism and its expanded interpretation, completely without intention, contain the formula for sustainable practices for cinematography embedded within it?*

What is New Naturalism and what are its creative restraints?

'New Naturalism isn't just about the cinematic form, but also about the films' content. A recurring theme in Malick's films is that human encounters with nature are transformational, transcendent events.' (B, 2021)

Let's begin with defining what *New Naturalism* is. When *New Naturalism* first emerged as a concept, Malick and Lubezki formulated and defined a visual form. It fell short of a manifesto but is the foundation of one. They still used the concept and term 'Dogme' and stuck to it to various extents, when shooting *The New World* (2005) and *The Tree of Life* (2011), amongst other film projects. Though it is clear, especially in *The Tree of Life* (2011) that it was not a governing factor for the whole film. With large VFX sequences taking up part of the film's opening.

The dogme they created for *New Naturalism* is as follows:

- *'Shooting exclusively in natural light by day*
- *Using existing lighting in dark interiors and nights*
- *Favouring backlight to create continuity between shots from different times and places*
- *Shooting with wide-angle prime lenses, sometimes very close to the actors, to give a sense of immersion*
- *Seeking resolution, avoiding filters, seeking depth of field*
- *Handheld and Steadicam cameras movements defining space in depth (in the "Z axis")*
- *A constant desire to embrace serendipity... a willingness to stop everything to shoot a butterfly*
- *Article "E", for "Exception", to acknowledge that all good dogmas are made to be broken upon occasion.'* (B, 2021)

At this stage I must point out a major problem with my research so far, in that it needs to expand beyond reading articles and the limited writing so far on the subject. As the above list is from an article and it is not yet clear if this is a literal dogme created by Lubezki and Malick, or Benjamin B's interpretation. The next phase of my research beyond creating a context of study is to interview those mentioned. With conversations with Benjamin B already beginning.

When examining the dogme as listed, for me this is all about putting in place creative restraints to help keep a focus on the filmmaker's visual style of storytelling whilst in production. To restrict them creatively to enable to not drift from their pre-production plans and goals. But then I ask, can some of their dogme have sustainable impacts? Perhaps unintended, but impactful none the less. The first two, shooting exclusively in natural light by day and using existing lighting in dark interiors and nights would almost certainly have due to the removal of all the common lighting fixtures, generators and the associated carbon emissions that come with them.

As stated in the 2020 BFI published 'A Screen New Deal', looking at the industries impacts between November 2019 and July 2020 also highlighted:

'Data analysis shows that one average tentpole film production – a film with a budget of over US\$70m – generates 2,840 tones of CO2e, the equivalent amount absorbed by 3,709 acres of forest in a year. Within this, transport accounts for approximately 51% of carbon emissions, mains electricity and gas use accounts for around 34%, and diesel generators for the remaining 15%. (BFI, 2020)

Therefore, it's clear this dogme would have positive sustainability impacts. With some adjustments to the dogme needed to reinforce it beyond just helping maintain a visual aesthetic. I began to consider writing a manifesto and adopting it for my own practices and research moving forward.

The manifesto, taking a visual driving force & focusing on sustainability.

My manifesto, which currently is taking on the name *New Naturalism*, is born out of experiences within my own practice just as much as the original dogme developed by Malick and Lubezki and put into writing by Benjamin B. Almost all the projects I have shot as a cinematographer started out with no/micro budget and limited resources. Myself and a number of film makers, especially writer/director Gabriel Henrique Gonzalez during our early years as developing artists. We would embrace what we have and use it as a restraint to push us creatively. Especially filming with natural or available light. Learning most importantly to work with the environment, rather than the more common method utilised by film crews to fight against the environment to shape the world to the story they are telling. Be it with huge lighting rigs or with studios. Both of which are key contributors to the film and televisions global carbon emissions. Without realising it, the avenue of creativity I was pushed down due to financial and logistical constraints created a more sustainable way of working. Like how Hjort discusses 'The twin factors of limited resources and a consistent emphasis on the cultural, social and political contributions of film making create a fertile environment, I content, for the emergence of sustainable filmmaking practices.' (Hjort, 2022)

For the likes of Gonzalez and me the limited resources were key but also the drive to tell stories that were born of the cultural experiences we both shared and also experienced separately. Gonzalez grew up in the urban landscape of London, where I grew up in the rural landscapes of Rutland. But both of us would talk about light in a similar way. Low sun, light silhouetting objects in the distance or light bouncing off objects. The objects were different in nature but the feelings we would discuss were the same. With it came the desire to work with our environments, and by chance, filming more sustainably.

My manifesto builds upon the dogme of *New Naturalism*, my practice, and experiences with the joy of creative restraints and then places sustainable and green cinematography at its heart. If these creative restraints can, as I hope, encourage film makers creatively and enable them to enjoy working with them. The same way film makers embraced and enjoyed *Dogme95*. But with the added benefit of producing a more sustainable film production. Not only in the environmental sense but also with regards to economy and community.

Therefore I feel able to conclude that now is certainly the time to write and test this manifesto based on the current global environmental crisis we are facing.

A major consideration of any manifesto writer is how closely do the rules need to be followed. As Hjort discusses in *Italian for Beginners* (Hjort, 2010) There are 4 keyways a film crew or head of department can work with a manifesto or dogme.

1. Sincere submission to the rules
Where the rules are followed as written.
2. Rule-following within reason
Where the rules are followed with some flexibility in places
3. Rule following when it suits
Where rules are followed only when it suits the film or film makers intentions or creative goals
4. Rule following as a cynical ploy
Where there is a claim of following the rules to gain publicity or visibility

With regards to my proposed manifesto these 4 methods of adaptation are expected and will form part of practice-based testing in the coming years. Especially when the manifesto is passed to an international audience of film makers and participants from a wide range of funding and ability backgrounds.

However, due to the global crisis and the need for the film industry to embrace change and push forward at a rapid pace alongside all industries. There are some warnings that will form part of the final manifesto. But would be perhaps hidden from those testing it during my research for now. With the final manifesto only taking shape once the tests are complete to see how well the film makers stick to the rules.

The warnings are:

1. Sincere submission to the rules is the desirable, or perhaps a must.
2. Rule-following within reason is possible only when ignored rules are balanced out.
3. Rule following when it suits is not possible.
4. Rule following as a cynical ploy is possibly dangerous.

The manifesto

As you can imagine, the manifesto is currently an early draft. More of a set of ideas, than a defined set of rules. But there is some shape to it. Currently in the form of 8 rule headings read to be explored and expanded. Much of which is already based on the original dogme of *New Naturalism*.

The 8 areas currently explored are:

1. Natural or available light preferred. No more than 2 powered light source per location if there is no other option. Favour reflected or bounced light using a Dedolight DPB70 or similar when required.
2. All on screen must be sustainable. (Note. What does that mean?)
3. Local production & locally sourced (cast?). Being carbon neutral and balanced.
4. No fossil fuel generators - Prioritize eco-friendly production practices, such as using renewable energy sources and minimizing waste.
5. The exit strategy – What do you do with consumables? What could be used instead?
6. Community focused - Work with local communities to minimize the impact of filming on the environment and support sustainable development.
7. Do not engage with projects that do not practice sustainability at its core, especially in the screenplay
8. Educate audiences about sustainable filmmaking practices and the importance of environmental stewardship.

Rule number 8 is of great interest to me due to my role in education. I decided early on that the manifesto needed to include an educational element. To promote the on-going practice to future generations. Especially as achieving net zero now and creating a sustainable and balanced world is about handing over something better to the next generation. Therefore, I would like to see it realised that there is the need for education on set for the crew, but also an educational element produced per film. Something to help guide and inspire future film makers as well as to make sure the environment for the crew, is a balanced and respected collaboration. Hopefully beginning to create a more sustainable and enjoyable working environment as well.

Conclusion

With the first concept of the manifesto written and it introduced publicly in this paper. It is time for me to drive forward with my research. I am beginning to develop the context of my studies looking at wider practitioners utilising Natural Light cinematography and concepts like *New Naturalism*. As well as beginning interviews and conversations with the wider industry and most importantly, Luzbeki and Benjamin B. With regards to my practice, I will adopt *New Naturalism* as my main principle of practice moving forward. For all aspects of my cinematography. From interviews to fiction films. *New Naturalism* will be at the core in my decision to take on a film/project.

My context of studies will specifically look at director and DOP partnerships where natural light has been at the core of their working practices, as well as my own, but each with a different driving force. I will use this work to then reflect on how my new driving force is to find sustainable practices using natural light and practicing *New Naturalism* and improving on sustainable education.

A brief look ahead at my currently plans for this project further down the road is the aim to gain funding to give the manifesto to collaborators nationally and internationally to make projects and reflect on the creative restraints of the manifesto. Report back and outline the impact, how closely they stuck to the rules, did it enable or inhibit creativity, amongst other factors yet to be determined.

Carbon calculation will be key and what is currently missing is a control referencing traditional film production. With high carbon emissions. Which is a current issue for my research. As it is vital, we stop high carbon emission production it would be wrong for me to shoot a film twice. Once using traditional high carbon emitting practices and again practicing *New Naturalism* as defined in the manifesto. My proposed experiment to navigate this is to recreate a scene or film which was made traditionally, by practicing 'new naturalism'. Aiming to match the original as closely as possible. The original would ideally have been carbon calculated or could be carbon calculated post completion. Then carbon calculating the new version, a comparison can be drawn up. Hopefully adding validity to my research.

Referring back to the key question this paper has been looking at: ***Could New Naturalism and its expanded interpretation, completely without intention, contain the formula for sustainable practices for cinematography embedded within it?***

I believe my research is certainly pointing me in the direction that yes, *New Naturalism* can and will play a key part in not only improving the environmental sustainability of cinematography but to also begin to address the social and economic aspects of sustainability as well. But I will leave exploring those expanded areas for another time.

For now, I leave you with the encouragement, especially any film practitioners reading this paper, to consider their wider environmental impacts and where they can improve. I believe with restraints that can fuel creativity instead of inhibiting. And with engaging and challenging stories to shoot, that have sustainability at their core. The art and craft of cinematography can become a key driver for change in our fight to improve our planets climate for future generations.

References

Bibliography

- B, Benjamin (2021) Nomadland: New Naturalism. Available from <https://ascmag.com/articles/nomadland-new-naturalism> [accessed 04 November 2022]
- B, Benjamin (2021) Nomadland - New Naturalism - Light as Nature. Available from <https://ascmag.com/blog/the-film-book/nomadland-1-new-naturalism> [accessed on 04 November 2022]
- BFI (2021) *A screen new deal. A route map to sustainable film production*. BFI
- Hjort, M. (2010) *Lone Scherfig's Italian for Beginners*. USA: University of Washington Press.
- Hjort, M. (2022). The Necessity of Sustainable Filmmaking: Production Notes from Palestine, Burkina Faso, and Zanzibar. In: Kääpä, P., Vaughan, H. (eds) *Film and Television Production in the Age of Climate Crisis*. Palgrave Studies in Media and Environmental Communication. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Filmography

- Gonzalez, G. (dir.) (2019) *How You Look At Me* [film]. TTOU Ltd.
- Malick, T. (dir.) (2005) *The New World* [film]. New Line Cinema
- Malick, T. (dir.) (2011) *Tree of Life* [film]. Searchlight Pictures
- Murray, M. (dir.) (2022) *Mind-Set* [film]. Middleman Productions
- Zhao, C. (dir) (2020) *Nomadland* [film]. Searchlight Pictures