

# NEW NATURALISM AND SUSTAINABLE CINEMATOGRAPHY

CoA PGR Showcase 2023. Presented on 22 June 23

Jack Shelbourn  
[jshelbourn@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:jshelbourn@lincoln.ac.uk)

## Abstract

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). 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.

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 emerges.

*Does New Naturalism and it’s expanded interpretation, contain the formula for sustainable practices for cinematography embedded within it?*

This paper delves into the concept of New Naturalism, a cinematic approach that has gained prominence in recent years. As a senior lecturer and practitioner in the field, Jack Shelbourn has been unknowingly practicing forms of New Naturalism throughout his career, favouring techniques such as handheld camera operation, wide-angle lenses, and shooting with natural or available light. In this paper, Jack will introduce the concept of New Naturalism, discuss its impact on the film industry, and outline my research focus on developing a sustainable cinematography Manifesto.

The Manifesto, inspired by the principles of New Naturalism, aims to foster creativity while addressing sustainability challenges in cinematography. Furthermore, this paper explores the potential for New Naturalism, along with its expanded interpretation, to inherently contain a formula for sustainable cinematography practices.

This paper aims to address this question 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

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Author Biography .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Contents.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Understanding Sustainability for Film &amp; Tv.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>New Naturalism: An Introduction.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Developing a Sustainable Manifesto .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The manifesto.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>9</b>
Bibliography .....	9
Filmography.....	9

## Introduction

As I approach the end of my first year of doctoral research, this paper reflects my area of research, which revolves around shooting with natural light and exploring sustainable film production. The term "sustainability" often elicits varied interpretations and political discourse. However, it has proven to be a useful concept for my work, particularly when considering the film industry's environmental impact. This paper aims to shed light on sustainability and its significance in the film industry, paving the way for a discussion on New Naturalism.

I also introduce the manifesto I am creating, which forms a major part of my PhD Practice. Which will be tested in future research and practice as I continue my research into year 2.

## Understanding Sustainability for Film & TV

Sustainability encompasses more than just environmental considerations; it also encompasses financial and quality aspects. The original definition, dating back to Han Carl von Carlowitz's book '*Sylvicultura Oeconomica*' in 1713, emphasizes the concept of balance: taking only what can be replenished. When applying sustainability to my practice and research, achieving balance becomes a crucial element. A sense of equilibrium arises from working collaboratively with others and the environment, as well as adopting sustainable approaches to film production.

Balance is a key part of my practice. The most joyful experience on a set is when balance is found. Not just in nature but also with the crew, locations, story, and actors. Such as when I find unity when filming with those around me. The actors fall in the right place as the light hits them perfectly. The lens is in focus and the framing works just as the director wishes. This balance is a personal joy for me and when connected with sustainability, this balance expands to contain new goals and therefore new possibilities to find joy in my practice.

The film industry, often overlooked as a significant contributor to carbon emissions, plays a substantial role in environmental pollution. Large-scale productions, such as blockbuster films, generate enormous amounts of greenhouse gases through transportation and travel. The BFI's study in 2020 revealed that productions with budgets exceeding \$70 million generate significant carbon emissions, with transportation accounting for 51% of these emissions. Moreover, cinematography, often relying on diesel generators for lighting, constitutes a major contributor to the industry's carbon footprint. (BFI. 2020)

Television shows like *The Traitors* (BBC, 2022) and films such as the *James Bond* franchise captivate audiences with their theatrics and escapism. However, when critically examining the sustainability aspects, one can identify problematic elements, such as excessive use of vehicles, helicopters, and wasteful actions. It is crucial to strike a balance between audience entertainment and responsible sustainability practices. Recognizing the role of the film and television industry as one of the largest polluters globally, it becomes evident that sustainability measures are necessary to mitigate its environmental impact.

But to remove all the theatrics would likely result in dull film and TV. Is escapism not a key reason why audiences watch Film and TV? Often constraints on film sets, imposed by sustainability coordinators can be similar. In that they limit creativity by telling those making the Film and TV what they can and cannot do.

Which is why I am exploring creative restraints, putting in place restraints that both improve and produce sustainable practices. Whilst equally encouraging creativity. I call these creative restraints. And these creative restraints will form a manifesto based on the concept of *New Naturalism*.

## New Naturalism: An Introduction

*'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.

## Developing a Sustainable Manifesto

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

The concept of New Naturalism offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between creative expression and sustainable cinematography. By embracing the principles of New Naturalism and incorporating them into a sustainable cinematography manifesto, filmmakers can contribute to mitigating the environmental impact of the film industry. The manifesto provides a roadmap for integrating sustainable practices into all stages of film production, from pre-production to post-production. Through collective action and a commitment to sustainability, the film industry can move towards a more environmentally responsible and socially conscious future.

As my research progresses, I will continue to explore the potential of New Naturalism and its impact on sustainable cinematography. By developing and disseminating the sustainable cinematography manifesto, I hope to inspire a positive change in the film industry and encourage a collective effort towards a more sustainable and environmentally friendly approach to filmmaking.

## 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]
- Carlowitz H. (1713) *Sylvicultura Oeconomica*. The Bavarian State Library
- 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
- (2022) *The Traitors* [TV]. BBC