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**Filmic Eco-warnings and Television:
Rolf de Heer's *Epsilon* (1995) and *Dr. Plonk* (2007)**

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While a culture of celebrity candidacy threatens to turn the election race for the office of the leader of the free world, the US presidency, into performance (low) art; while the travesties of religious fundamental extremists promote more internecine hatred; and while wars are fought over control of the Earth's finite fossil fuel resources, contemporary cinema audiences, like the rest of the community, are offered few reasons to be optimistic. Movie makers seem to frequently delight in depicting our irredeemable present and apparently bleak future. Wheeler Winston Dixon argues: "The cinema of the 21st century makes our most violent dreams of self-destruction simultaneously mundane yet instantly attainable" (Dixon 132), as there are now a multitude of different ways for humanity to enact the nightmare of self-extinction. In addition to the usual trepidation regarding nuclear apocalypse, recent years have seen an increase in fears of global cataclysm due to climate change resulting from the Greenhouse Effect. Disturbing visions of world-wide rising sea-levels as the polar ice caps melt and wild weather events destroying whole communities now suggest a man-made disaster resulting not from a decision to carelessly detonate a nuclear bomb, but the accumulated effects of decades of irresponsible behavior by individual consumers and big business alike. But such an outcome is considered by many in the general community to be more preventable than a deranged individual's decision to press the doomsday button, and viewers of Al Gore's eco-political campaign in *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim 2006) are easily rallied to the ecological cause by this eco-warning: it is a cautionary film which both frightens and encourages useful individual action.

Another film-maker who has contributed to the genre of the eco-warning film is Australian writer, director and sometime producer Rolf de Heer. Released twelve years apart, de Heer's *Epsilon* (1995) and *Dr. Plonk* (2007) reflect two very different approaches to ecological agenda in film. The former uses relentless harangues from both an extraterrestrial antagonist and a grandmotherly narrator to bully the audience into acceptance of the threat their lifestyles present to the future of the planet and humanity, whereas the latter uses slapstick comedy and references to the apocalypse so unremarkable they may even pass unnoticed by an audience engrossed in the physical humor. Although in an interview he dismisses his latest work as "an aberration, in a way, in that it's a bit of froth" (Starrs 20), it is evident upon analysis that de Heer has not stopped making films with

a social conscience, rather he has simply disguised his usual message in a packaging of light comedy. The plot remains essentially the same as his previous filmic eco-warning: an enlightened male individual – or ‘eco-hero’ - struggles to convince the world of its impending ecological doom. Mark J. Lacy describes with disappointment the apparently eco-politically correct, counter-capitalist cultural movies such as *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg 1993) and *The Lost World* (Steven Spielberg 1997) as contributing to an unhelpful eco-mythology in which:

... dynamic individuals confront the dangers of ‘risk society’ and restore order and security (maintaining their status as escapist myths) [... and] reinforce the (neo)liberal political imaginary (where the ingenuity of the individual can overcome structures of instrumental rationality), limiting alternative ways of articulating the ‘political’. (Lacy 636)

As Marxists claim religion functions as an opiate of the masses, preventing action by the proletariat, likewise some eco-warning films discourage individual action and uprising.

This paper considers if de Heer’s ongoing ecological concern, in failing to offer either religious guidance or secular direction and unhelpfully gestating hope for an heroic ‘dynamic individual’ to save us all as we sleep, also disappoints by perpetuating the eco-mythology Lacy despairs of. If this is the case, then although *Epsilon* and *Dr. Plonk* may not be instantly recognizable as genre films, they both represent textbook examples of what Judith Hess Wright argues is the mainstream genre film functioning politically to support the maintenance of the social status quo by offering “absurd solutions to economic and social conflict” (Wright 42), instead of encouraging individuals to take individual responsibility for preventing the end of the world. This paper also considers if television, regarded by many to be a soporific enemy of action and solely concerned with promoting consumerism, has the potential to effectively carry the message of eco-warning.

The religious notion of the Apocalypse as suggested by the Book of Revelation is one that suggests world-wide destruction, Edenic renewal and the unveiling of God, for a select few, amidst a glorious utopia. Prophets of the Judeo-Christian faiths make the teleological prediction of a new era of salvation for the pious, and the literature of western culture frequently drew on such eschatology for its end-of-times narratives in the apocalyptic discourse of the centuries following the exile down to the end of the Middle Ages. In contemporary culture, however, the cinema has overtaken church writings in terms of audience reach. The first film explicitly concerned with the aftermath of global man-made apocalypse was the British-made *Things To Come* (William Cameron Menzies 1936), the screen version of H.G. Wells’ 1933 novel *The Shape of Things To Come*, which predicts the Second World War and the devastation caused by air-borne bombing raids. Then Hollywood began exploiting the genre with *Five* (Arch Oboler 1951), which, in its story

of the survivors of nuclear war struggling to survive in a hostile radiation-ravaged environment, established the thematic conventions for later films of this genre, including the romantic plot device of the new Adam and Eve who must repopulate the Earth. Frequently expressed is a curiously reassuring sentiment of joy and optimism regarding a world cleansed of the corrupt old order by the re-invigorating apocalypse. The less optimistic *Planet of the Apes* (Franklin J. Schaffner 1968) was soon followed by other dystopic movies such as *Silent Running* (Douglas Trumbull 1972) and *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer 1973), and each stressed growing concerns in Western society about the future of the world given the alarming rates of over-population, despoliation of nature, nuclear arms proliferation and depletion of resources. Many earlier films had been primarily concerned with apocalypse caused by alien invasion, as H. Bruce Franklin points out: “Whereas the alien and monster films of the fifties showed our worthy civilization menaced by external powers, these movies [futuristic films since 1970] typically project our awful future as a development, often inevitable, of forces already at work within our civilization” (Franklin 48-9). Exemplified by *Mad Max* (George Miller 1979), in which the world is desert and petrol is still valued as a scarce resource for the filthy habit of driving fast cars, and *Twelve Monkeys* (Terry Gilliam 1996), in which out-of-control eco-warriors try to wipe out destructive humanity with the aid of time travel, Toni Perrine notes that, far from glorifying eco-heroes, “Most postnuclear films depict a dystopic future of neobarbarianism” (Perrine 21). Less concerned with the natural environment, other secular doomsayers predict an Orwellian nightmare of maximum social efficiency and minimal individual freedom as a result of over-exploitation of late capitalist production techniques or ultra-utilitarian governments, as illustrated by *Gattaca* (Andrew Niccol 1997). Many films allude to the biblical Revelation with James Cameron’s *Terminator II: Judgment Day* (1991) foregrounding the concept in the film’s title.

Although he avoids any overt reference to religion, ‘The Man’ (played by Syd Brisbane) in de Heer’s 95 minute film *Epsilon* (1995), enlightened by the revelations of a sexy female alien (Ulli Birve), serves as a messianic savior-hero as at the end of the film’s narrative he devotes his life to warning the rest of humanity of its impending doom. In this, his fifth feature film, De Heer indirectly resorts to a postmodern retelling of the Judeo-Christian vision with his mythopoeic construction offering a sense of hope for the audience, despite the absence of any actual imaging of the ecological disaster to come. The feel of mythology is furthered by the absence of personal names, as Albert Moran and Errol Veith summarize: “De Heer removes specificity and particular identity from the characters, as in *The Tracker* (2002), generalizing the characters by not naming them (‘She’, ‘The Man’, ‘Grandmother’)” (Moran and Veith 137). The meta-narrative of post-modernism may be reduced to several tenets, one of which suggests that a future social order beyond capitalism is conceivable - and indeed, preferable - if the concomitant product of capitalistic

drive, unfettered environmental exploitation resulting in cataclysmic obliteration of not just humankind but the entire Earth, is not ceased. Such a postmodern alternative seems to interest de Heer, but rather than the idea, proposed by classicists, that this environmental decline is predetermined and inevitable, de Heer's counter-hegemonic discourse seems at least superficially optimistic that change can be wrought. If the warning is heeded, a turnaround in the direction of ecological degradation may be achieved by the action of certain venerable individuals. De Heer's cautionary sub-text in *Epsilon* is not a nihilistic acceptance that humanity's immorality will result in a divine retribution, but rather that greed and ignorance can be countered by a singular male hero's application of rational knowledge, forethought, and his life's work to the task.

The Man's role of traveling eco-hero for the planet in *Epsilon* is foreshadowed by the grandmother (Alethea McGrath) narrating the story at the film's start, retelling her encounter with the Earth's savior to two small children around a campfire as one might imagine the tales of legendary heroes and their deeds have been passed down from generation to generation for millennia, and we frequently hear her voice-over continuing to narrate throughout the film. Certainly, The Man is constructed in accordance with Joseph Campbell's definition of the master-narrative's hero: "The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation-initiation-return" (Campbell 30). We first discover him camping alone, under the stars, in a remote outback Australian location. For the bulk of the film the beautiful but hectoring alien blasts the simple earthling with pro-Green rhetoric about the way the world's ecology is being destroyed by unthinking people: "Having the Earth mentality is the one thing that is truly unforgivable in the rest of the Universe", she self-righteously declares. Since this spacewoman is able to zap herself and her bewildered witness anywhere instantly, she takes him first to see the smog and pollution of an unidentified Australian city, then to the outskirts of Las Vegas - where he disappears for the night to play the casinos - and then to a landscape denuded of trees, all the time offering up scathing annotations about the stupidity of humanity. This is his initiation into the role of eco-hero. Finally, he returns to human civilization to serve his monomythic purpose. The metaphorical dragon to be vanquished and slain by The Man is the monster of ecological ignorance and his muse was the beautiful alien who stumbled, naked and lost, into his surveyor's camp. Utilizing long takes obeying the primacy of the extended and seemingly un-mediated shot and featuring spectacular time-controlled vision of stars and clouds in the un-still sky, de Heer's camera suggests the enlightening - possibly even therapeutic - potential for contemporary environmental cinema. The mere act of displaying such sublime landscapes and awe-inspiring imagery of nature may serve a conservationist function by changing the spectator's consciousness about the environment: Temporarily removed from his or her concrete and glass existence and transported to climes of unsullied and uncorrupted natural beauty, the audience is

reminded of its own role as polluter. But what does this film suggest is the practical means the audience member should adopt to avert such eco-cide? Nothing more than patiently waiting for an unencumbered figure of performative masculinity to receive enlightenment from a female alien, like an angel delivering the Annunciation, before commencing his wandering odyssey of ecological evangelism through which he single-handedly saves the world.

Similarly, de Heer's latest feature film may be interpreted as failing to give useful advice on the means by which ordinary members of the audience can rectify the situation of impending ecological apocalypse. Indeed, the 84 minute black and white silent film *Dr. Plonk* (2007) is even less optimistic than *Epsilon*: the ecological evangelizer that is the eponymous, time-traveling protagonist is mistaken for a terrorist by our twenty-first century contemporaries and locked up, never to be released, his warning to the law-makers of a century ago unheard and unheeded. As Tom Redwood understates, "*Dr Plonk* takes on a rather substantial subject for a slapstick comedy: it is a film about the end of the world" (Redwood 14). In 1907, a seemingly rational scientist and inventor, Dr. Plonk (Nigel Lunghi, a street performer also known as 'Mr. Spin'), is married to a caring woman (Magda Szubanski) with a faithful man-servant (Paul Blackwell) in a well-appointed Adelaide mansion. The good doctor calculates that the world will end in 101 years, but his warnings are ignored by the Prime Minister of the day so he invents a time machine and travels to the future, intent on bringing back incontrovertible proof. What he discovers in 2007 is a polluted, over-industrialized world in which ordinary folk sit side by side in their comfortable living rooms, mesmerized by wide-screen television, as outside the eve of the apocalypse apparently approaches. But the exact nature of the catastrophe remains unclear: it is neither expressed nor explained by de Heer. It is not God's destruction of the universe and salvation of the morally just that is presented as the eschatological rationale behind the forthcoming apocalypse. Nor is there an Armageddon-like nuclear conflagration to be feared. Attempting to return to the year of 1907 with a TV set (which is what we can only surmise he believes to be the culprit, as the film's narrative is restricted to a handful of intertitles), Dr. Plonk is mistakenly imprisoned after much Keystone Kops styled hijinks. Will our enlightened male savior escape his Kafkaesque prison and succeed in his mission of ecological warning? Like *The Man in Epsilon*, who is doomed to wander the Earth alone as he preaches eco-awareness, Dr. Plonk is an essentially tragic figure and unfortunately, De Heer's narrative here peters out. The end of the world - as vaguely portrayed as it is in *Dr. Plonk* - is a fate that seems sealed.

Of course, mainstream cinema is rarely utilized as a site for detailing an ecological manifesto. Indeed, Judith Hess Wright argues that genre film serves to maintain the status quo because westerns, science fictions (particularly those featuring threatening aliens), horror and

gangster films:

... produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt. They serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo, and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and therefore afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts. [...] Genre films address these conflicts and solve them in a simplistic and reactionary way. (Wright 42)

According to Wright, Hollywood's genre films discourage audiences from rebelling against social change and they do this by neglecting to deal with the social or political problems of the immediate present, preferring to set their dramas in the past (as with westerns) or future (as with science fiction). The social revolution demanded by our warming planet involves large numbers of people eschewing conspicuous, wasteful consumption and reducing their individual 'carbon footprint'. It is the place of documentary films such as the Academy Award winning *An Inconvenient Truth* to outline rational, productive steps to take to avert eco-disaster now: steps such as implementing taxes on carbon emissions. Narrative films such as de Heer's should be, as he asserts himself, no more than a superficial 'bit of froth', but one must question if in the distant wake of his unproductive *Epsilon*, his apparently equally unhelpful twelfth feature film, *Dr. Plonk*, really is an 'aberration', since both portray a disobliging eco-political myth in which a messianic eco-hero sets about saving the world, while we audiences sit back and watch.

But perhaps this is de Heer's guileful project? Whereas his message in *Epsilon* was loud and clear thanks to relentless diatribe from the alien and too frequent voice-over narration from the sanctimonious grandmother, *Dr. Plonk*, with its complete absence of narration, may be a far subtler attempt to educate the audience. There are no voices to be heard at all in de Heer's latest film and although his decision to make a black-and-white silent film has been attributed to his discovery of unused film stock deteriorating in his refrigerator at home, it is just as likely the writer/director was responding to the box-office failure of *Epsilon*, with its excessive voices. Narrative authority is rendered virtually unquestionable by the voice-over, as Sarah Kozloff says: "The voice-over couches a film as a conscious, deliberate communication" (Kozloff 139). Michel Chion tells us that the human voice and the intelligibility of dialogue are fore-grounded in film recording and post-production: "In stating that sound in the cinema is primarily vococentric, I mean that it almost always privileges the voice, highlighting and setting the latter off from other sounds" (Chion 5). But superior to all diegetic voices in the cinema is the voice-over of the invisible narrator. He or she commands respect, exudes authority and his or her utterances are usually vital to the audience understanding the film. Too much voice over, however, as beginning scriptwriters are told, is something to be avoided. Robert McKee, author of *Story* (1997), is played by Brian Cox delivering

a seminar to students in the film *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze 2002) in which he says: “And God help you if you use voice-over in your work, my friends, God help you. It’s flaccid, sloppy writing. Any idiot can write voice-over narration to explain the thoughts of a character.” Rather than court accusations of ‘flaccid writing’, de Heer may have decided to take the opposite approach to message delivery in *Dr. Plonk*. Claiming that: “Sound is, from my point of view, 60% of the emotional content of a film” (Starrs 18), de Heer seems to have learnt a great deal from the box office failure of *Epsilon* and concluded that if his ecological message of warning could not be delivered by ‘shouting’, perhaps the desired result could be achieved by ‘whispering’.

In *Dr. Plonk*, his second attempt at a didactic eco-warning on film, De Heer has also avoided a Manichean depiction of cinema’s usual eco-villains such as those David Ingram argues the ‘film vert’ is characterized by: “The second recurrent villain in the environmental movie [after the white hunter] is the representative of big business: the property developer, oil tycoon or nuclear plant manager” (Ingram 3). This absence of an obvious scapegoat may lead to a guilty conclusion: the villain is ourselves. The people of *Dr. Plonk*’s future (that is, the citizens of 2007) are shown sitting idle, watching widescreen TV as the world turns around them. Rather than sitting back and applauding as a messianic savior figure averts apocalypse, de Heer may be subtly suggesting we get out from in front of the television and take action ourselves. He certainly does not hesitate to condemn television in interview, stating: “If I could do one thing to improve all of humanity it would be to get rid of television. It has had such a negative social effect in every society that it’s been introduced to ... it’s allowed society to get as consumerist as it is” (Starrs 21). This statement may be interpreted as authoritarian and dismissive to the so-called masses. Certainly, de Heer’s powerful animadversion smacks of the long-standing Marxist tradition that holds that mass culture and media such as television deceptively lull the population into thinking they’re content with our fundamentally unequal society, while advertising actively creates consumer desires which audiences come to perceive as ‘needs’. Such a stance sits easily with Wright’s view of the genre film serving to support the status quo but it is not just class stasis that is encouraged, but the refusal of a different future too. As the box in the corner of the living-room that is always on, television serves to deaden the population to new ideas through their repetition, thus consolidating the present culture of simultaneous resignation and disavowal that seems to characterize many people’s attitudes to an impending ecological or nuclear apocalypse. The once-new abstraction of man-made apocalypse has been staged and re-staged so many times on the small screen, run and re-run as the disaster movie of the week or the nightly shock-horror news bulletin, that we have become numb to its threat and inured to its imminence. Life in our TV culture is a constant post-apocalyptic state in which the end of the world is only a metaphor. Like the horrifying symbol of the mushroom cloud appropriated by music videos or computer games, both the nuclear and greenhouse gas caused

apocalypse have been diminished to the status of fable. A global zeitgeist of fear, unfocused and unresolved, has morphed into ennui. As to life after the apocalypse – that uninviting tableau is itself un-screenable if TV's advertising revenue is to continue. Television has an insatiable appetite for the visual image, but a post-apocalypse world is entirely theoretical, and, if it includes an absence of humanity, it is virtually invisible: there is nothing to watch in the post-apocalypse wasteland. As Paul Boyer wryly observes, "Perhaps the only adequate television treatment of nuclear war would be two hours of a totally blank screen in prime time. But who would sponsor it?" (Boyer 362). The addition of commercials, intersecting a message of eco-warning like blows to the cranium, serves to dilute the apocalyptic threat even further. This dependence upon what television producers deem fit for our digestion, so frequently determined by advertising interests, is what de Heer may be so belligerent about and why he apparently believes the micro-environment of the darkened cinema remains a site where his eco-warnings to humanity may still be heeded.

As well as being guilty of promoting rampant consumerism, television has been widely criticized for reducing viewer's social capital, by which Robert D. Putnam means the

... features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives [...] TV viewing is strongly and negatively related to social trust and group membership [...] and] other indicators of civic engagement, including social trust and voting turnout. (Putnam 1996).

The privatization of leisure time that solitary TV viewing seems to result in means people are less likely to engage in their community and less likely to participate in ecologically sound group activities such as recycling drives, environmental clean-up days or supporting election campaigns for politicians with positive ecological agendas. Like de Heer's TV audiences depicted in Dr. Plonk's future, people with low social capital sit immersed in their widescreen television while the apocalypse descends around them. But as Steven Maras hints, Putnam's theory is becoming outdated as television viewing becomes interactive: "Indeed, it is possible that Putnam's lack of generosity towards television masks a different issue to do with the changing nature of cultural engagement and participation, and how it happens" (Maras 106). With the rapid growth of the adaptation of free to air television to incorporate mobile telephone and other interactive content, Putnam's theory loses currency; television viewers are engaging more in social networks. Increases in bandwidth have seen new media technologies proliferate and streaming digital video, both professionally produced and user-generated, is a familiar medium for the person Christina Spurgeon and Gerard Goggin call the "consumer-citizen" (Spurgeon and Goggin 319), noting that "Both the solitary broadcast [television] audience member and the mobile communications [phone] consumer no longer make sense" (318). Spurgeon and Goggin foreshadow a not-too-distant future in which

business interests shape entirely new areas of interactive retro-fitting of what used to be called televisual entertainment: “Scalable, consumer-citizen customization media and communications, for example selecting a unique combination of mobile handset, ringtone and wallpaper and then using this device to participate in deciding the outcome of a talent quest, is only the beginning of this trajectory” (326). These “New Circuits of Culture” (ibid.) may offer alternatives to the closed culture of television in which the marketers of advertising dictate content, alternatives in which consumer-citizens exercise greater civic participation. This realization leads me to wonder if de Heer’s disdain for the medium of television is closing off potential reception of his eco-warnings by consumers whom are not only technologically enabled but actively inclined to institute personal change? Spurgeon and Goggin’s consumer-citizen may not only be the potential audience for eco-warning, he or she may also participate in on-line statistical evaluation of community opinions. Compared to the effort involved in attending a polling booth in person, the consumer-citizen may some day participate in the relatively undemanding process of voting via their mobile telephone. Short Message Service (SMS) has been responsible for voter turnout in the multi-millions for popular contests such as Chinese TV’s *Super Girl’s Voice* (*chaoji nusheng*) (see Jakes 2005). Last year Taylor Hicks won the final of *American Idol* in an election that nearly 64 million people voted in - more than voted in the 2004 US presidential elections - and this year Australian politicians began posting their campaign videos on *YouTube* (see Meikle 2007). Increasingly, the electronic device that is always on is not the TV set but the interactive multi-media device that in reductive terms is known as the mobile or cell telephone, and unlike the inhibition of civic engagement the traditionally private mode of television viewing promotes, the interactive technologies can result in increased civic engagement, by which interacting audiences develop stronger senses of interpersonal trust, reciprocity and teamwork in their pursuit of communal objectives. With the astounding growth in and acceptance of such technology it is not such an inconceivable prediction that governmental election votes may someday be cast by citizens using their mobile phone or its technologically advanced equivalent in a simultaneously virtual and actual environment they have become engaged in by the audiovisual content streamed to them on their self-same hand-held multimedia device. In China, the country Spurgeon and Goggin call “the world’s largest consumer market for mobile handsets and services, with more than 350 million mobile subscribers” (321), the authoritarian Communist Party is justifiably concerned at the ability for mobile phone led revolt by political dissidents: interactive technology has the potential to overthrow governments. Others have recognized the potential for a paradigm shift in the way politics works: Axel Bruns speaks of increasingly more active “producers” of democracy, i.e. individuals who, empowered by the new media to simultaneously consume, use, produce and create new content in a knowledge economy, turn their technology towards politics:

... a shift towards produsage may revive democratic processes by leveling the roles and turning citizens into active producers of democracy again. The beginnings of this shift may already be visible in the increasing role of blogs and citizen journalism in recent elections in the U.S. and elsewhere ... (Bruns 7).

Curiously, de Heer's limn of the woeful present in *Dr. Plonk* is devoid of any cyber-age digital technology despite the likelihood that the online consumer-citizen may be just the audience de Heer should be seeking for his eco-warnings.

The world's most famous eco-politician, although not presently running for office, is Al Gore. His slide show has been presented to corporate audiences everywhere and his filmic eco-warning has had great impact. But, as Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann contend, *An Inconvenient Truth* utilizes the rhetorical strategy of environmental nostalgia, and "mainly succeeds not because of its predictions but because of the eco-memories it evokes" (Murray and Heumann 2007). The film suggests "... we can go 'home' to a world more like that of the 1970s by making a few changes, not by giving up our lives [... Gore] serves as a personal example and a conveyor of hope" (ibid). While his rhetoric may be derided as a crudely over-determined signification of a romantic Earthly perfection, his eco-warning – regardless of its methodology – succeeds in motivating audiences to change their lifestyles. Perhaps, if Gore had gained the US presidency back in 2000, he could have been the messianic individual male who single-handedly saves the world, but instead, the former vice-president campaigns for people to make small lifestyle changes by reminding them of a not-too-distant utopic past. Nor is de Heer necessarily interested in the role of messiah. But although his impassioned railing against the idiot box might alienate some constituents, his interest in improving humanity is fore-grounded by his comments such as the above regarding TV and while he has never indicated any such proclivity, I wonder if the man who was awarded the title of South Australian of the Year in 2006 has considered a post-cinema career on the hustings? Celebrity candidates have frequently parlayed their idolatry for votes, usually drawing upon constituent's recognition of their achievements in the popular world of movies or sport. Were de Heer to run for office, canny voters might be reminded of his recent cinematic effort to improve humanity in which, like Gore and Guggenheim's *An Inconvenient Truth*, the taking of individual responsibility is indirectly promoted, in lieu of maintaining the status quo by proffering Wright's 'absurd solutions' involving Lacy's heroic 'dynamic individuals'. At first glance his two eco-warning films both seem to be further examples of Lacy's unhelpful eco-mythology, a '(neo)liberal political imaginary' in which a messianic male figure stands up and saves the world in blithe disregard for the more realistic difference to be made by individuals everywhere changing their lifestyles. But de Heer's second film shows that even a man with wealth and education enough

to build a time machine cannot save the world alone. Rather than perpetuating a cultural anxiety regarding apocalypse due to untrammelled technology as the science fiction films of the twentieth century did or an inevitable consummation of humanity's greed as the dystopic visions of Toni Perrine's neo-barbarianism depict, de Heer has struck a subtle blow against fatalistic apathy. Adopting a quieter approach than the admirable Al Gore's plan for a "mass persuasion campaign" (Raju 2007), de Heer makes no stump speeches for he is interested in gently encouraging his audiences themselves taking responsibility for averting the apocalypse. Demonstrating the communication skills of a consummate eco-politician himself, de Heer's last shot in his latest film is of the would-be messianic savior, alone and impotent. His avatar, Dr. Plonk, is shown gripping his prison bars as he stares directly at the camera, not shouting but silently pleading with his eyes to we, the audience, to mobilize ourselves and do something, be it recycle waste, reduce greenhouse gas emissions or even take an interest in eco-politics. Time will tell if my prediction of government elections being determined by online voting eventuates or if we are all wiped out beforehand by global apocalypse. Hopefully, if and when *Dr. Plonk* is eventually broadcast on the ubiquitous small screen de Heer so despises, the new culture of interactive television consumption via the mobile multimedia telephone will result in audiences heeding his subtle eco-warning, changing their lifestyles and voting for an eco-politician, rather than engaging in unhelpful eco-hero worship.

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