

"Grump Mountain": Viewers' Attributions of Agency to a Climate Fiction Film

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Abstract

Environmental narratives—such as the genre of climate fiction—have been the topic of much theorization and discussion in terms of their potential to enrich human ways of thinking about the nonhuman environment. In this paper, we discuss the responses of a small sample of participants who watched a short climate fiction narrative, the trailer to a climate change documentary called *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*. Using discourse analysis, we focus on how participants construct agency for the nonhuman narrator of the story—a mountain and former volcano named Ok that was once the site of Okjökull (Ok glacier). Participants' responses reveal how simple nonhuman agency becomes woven into more complex constructions when the trailer is discussed. Our analysis shows that only participants who took the perspective of Ok mountain and seemed to relate to it as the narrator of the story constructed more complex agencies for the mountain. Participants who did not relate to Ok mountain as the narrator conveyed simpler forms of nonhuman agency. Representing nonhuman agency in the mountain and animating the figure with a human voice (of narration) is a particular narrative strategy; in this study, we were interested in understanding how such a figure might challenge simple tropes of nature's agency and invite more complex ways of conceiving nonhuman agency. The cli-fi trailer also led viewers to ponder the destructive anthropogenic impacts on nonhuman environments. Some participants took the material to be merely an environmental message without engaging the nonhuman narrative aspects. The anthropomorphizing of Ok mountain's story, as was the case in the video material, may, we argue, limit interaction-oriented accounts of the entanglement of (non)human agencies. Finally, we conclude, many participants' tendency to understand environmental stories as (solely) moral messages presents a challenge to both climate fiction and narrative communications.

Keywords: Climate fiction, empirical ecocriticism, nonhuman agency, interview study, environmental films.

Resumen

Las narrativas medioambientales, como el género de ficción climática, representan un tema de gran interés a nivel de teoría y discusión respecto a su potencial para enriquecer formas humanas de pensamiento sobre el medio ambiente no humano. En este artículo, presentamos las respuestas de un

pequeño grupo de participantes que vieron una corta narrativa de ficción climática, el tráiler de un documental sobre el cambio climático denominado *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*. Utilizando el análisis del discurso, nos hemos enfocado en cómo los participantes crearon agencia para el narrador no humano de la historia—una montaña y antiguo volcán llamado OK, que fue una vez el emplazamiento de Okjökull (el glaciar Ok). Las respuestas de los participantes indican cómo la simpleza de la agencia no humana se convierte en construcciones más complejas cuando se debate la narrativa. Nuestro análisis demuestra que sólo los participantes que adoptaron la perspectiva de la montaña Ok y que parecían identificarla como la narradora de la historia construían una agencia más compleja de la montaña. Los participantes que no identificaban la montaña Ok como la narradora expresaban formas más simples de agencia no humana. Representar la agencia no humana en la montaña y animar la figura con una voz humana (de narración) es una estrategia narrativa particular; en este estudio, nos interesaba comprender cómo esa figura podría desafiar la simpleza de los tropos de la agencia de la naturaleza y dar lugar formas más complejas de concebir la agencia no humana. El tráiler también llevó a los espectadores a reflexionar sobre los impactos antropogénicos destructivos en entornos no humanos. Algunos participantes interpretaron el material simplemente como un mensaje medioambiental sin considerar los aspectos narrativos no humanos. La antropomorfización de la historia de la montaña Ok, como en el caso del material audiovisual, puede limitar los relatos orientados a la interacción sobre la implicación de las agencias (no) humanas. Por último, concluimos que la tendencia de muchos participantes de entender las historias ambientales como (únicamente) mensajes morales plantea un desafío tanto a la ficción climática como a las comunicaciones narrativas climáticas.

Palabras clave: Ficción climática, ecocrítica empírica, agencia no humana, estudio de entrevista, películas medioambientales.

Introduction

In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in climate fiction. As a genre, climate fiction (or “cli-fi”) is a narrative mode exploring the theme of climate change with regards to social, cultural, and psychological issues; it typically combines fictional plots with speculation on the future as well as reflection on the human-nature relationship (Goodbody and Johns-Putra; Trexler). Much discussion has emerged on the potential effects of cli-fi, but studies with actual readers and viewers are still rare.¹ In terms of cli-fi films, the only studies concerning the perspectives of actual audiences are those on Roland Emmerich’s 2004 blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* (Leiserowitz; Reusswig and Leiserowitz; Reusswig et al.). Given that cli-fi is a burgeoning area of creative production in film, text, and other media, there is a growing need to understand how audiences are interpreting, engaging, and integrating climate fiction narratives into their larger understandings of socioenvironmental dynamics.

In this paper, we present our study on how participants discuss a short video that is narrated by a nonhuman subject; specifically, we analyze how viewers construct varying kinds of agency for the film’s nonhuman narrator, a mountain in

¹ One of the few examples of empirical studies on climate fiction are in the work of Schneider-Mayerson (2018, Schneider-Mayerson et al., 2023).

Western Iceland. Following a series of interviews, we discuss the potentials, limits, and implications of filmic cli-fi and narratives that center nonhumans.



The caldera at the apex of Ok mountain, the talking mountain, in the trailer to the film, Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World.

This study is situated within the emerging field of *empirical ecocriticism*, which focuses on people's responses to environmentally oriented narratives. A central theme in ecocriticism has been to understand the potential of literary texts to nuance the ways that people view ecological phenomena (Garrard). Ecocriticism has also addressed climate change, arguing that fiction occupies a central role in conveying the scale and impacts of the crisis (Trexler). Climate fiction—a genre ranging across media, including digital media, television, film, short fiction, the novel, and the memoir (LeMenager)—has been depicted as providing a space of critical reflection on consumption-oriented lifestyles, as well as collective and individual actions and visions of the future (Goodbody and Johns-Putra; LeMenager; Malpas; Weik von Mossner, *Franny*).

However, the often-discussed challenge of climate narratives is that climate change is such a vast, multi-scaled phenomenon that it seems to resist the affordances of the traditionally human-centric and linear narrative form (e.g. Caracciolo). After all, climate change demands that we envision humans as a collective geological agent, with impacts upon the Earth system of great magnitude. Yet, individual humans can only experience specific effects of the climate crisis, meaning that each of our positioned observations are only a partial view of a larger dynamic created by the human species writ large (Chakrabarty). We note too that it is overwhelmingly the exploitation of fossil fuels by industrialized countries historically and in the present that have led to the climate crisis and that populations in the less industrialized world will be those who will most bear the consequences. Climatological precarity is not a great equalizer; it is instead a barometer of inequality (Howe). In addition, climate change and the discourses revolving around it reflect Western culture's anthropocentrism—that positions the nonhuman environment in the role of an object, or resource, to be exploited (Plumwood; Weik von Mossner, *Affective*). The question of how climate fiction films might encourage people to challenge their linear

and anthropocentric ways of constructing the world is a critical element of scholarly discussion and one that also implicates the politics of climate more broadly.

The growing field of ecocritical scholarship bridges narrative reading and reader's attitudes about, or interpretations of, the environment. Underscoring readers' engagements with storyworlds, Erin James (*Storyworlds, Narrative*) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (*Affective*) have argued that literature and film can make new things matter to us, widening our concern to include human and nonhuman others. A related direction in literary scholarship has focused on the exploration of nonhuman narratives—those which focus upon, or are narrated by, a nonhuman object or animal. Bernaerts et al. conceptualize nonhuman narration to emerge from a double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization as well as human and nonhuman experientiality. As is common in much environmentally oriented scholarship, the nonhuman narrators that Bernaerts et al. consider are either nonhuman animals or inanimate objects.

There have been very few attempts to investigate the affordances of environmental narratives empirically, especially in the context of human-nonhuman relationships to climate change. Filmic cli-fi has received relatively little attention compared to its literary counterpart. Previous analyses of filmic cli-fi narratives have evaluated movies such as Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer*, a post-apocalyptic dystopia reflecting the sociopolitical problems prevalent in the times of climate crisis (Chu), Roland Emmerich's dystopian disaster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (Weik von Mossner, *Facing*), the first Hollywood blockbuster to self-consciously address climate change, and Franny Armstrong's apocalyptic *The Age of Stupid* (2009), a documentary mixing fictional and factual elements (Weik von Mossner, *Franny*). To our knowledge, no previous research has addressed real audience responses to short, filmic cli-fi narratives representing a nonhuman perspective. The objective of the project we illustrate here aims to begin to remedy that omission, joining other ecocritics in the project of challenging what Monika Fludernik (13) has called the "anthropomorphic bias" of storytelling -narrative's tendency to privilege human characters.

A central concept we highlight in this study is *agency*—the ability to act toward some end. In conversations about the climate crisis and other ecological catastrophes, agency serves as a key point of discussion. Traditional notions of agency are human-centric and refer to a feeling of control over oneself and the surrounding nonhuman world (Dürbeck, Schaumann, and Sullivan; Marchand; Yamamoto). Such a notion defines agency as an attribute of a single, autonomous human being, whose identity as a human is rendered as distinct from, and superior to, the nonhuman. Agential capacity in this form is thus intrinsically intertwined with the problematic use of Northern, industrialized power that looms behind ecological crises (Marchand; Plumwood). In recent theoretical debates, such traditional notions of agency have been questioned especially by new materialist interpretations. In these accounts, agency arises from complex interrelated networks of beings, phenomena, and processes (Barad; Braidotti; Haraway), not solely or even primarily, adjacent to human will. In a related manner, in Bruno Latour's actor network theory agency is

not an attribute of separate human individuals, but something intrinsically networked between and among humans and nonhumans (*On actor-network theory, On network theory*). Thus, separation becomes a fiction.

In this article, we approach agency as a discursive project; we are interested in how participants construct the capacities and abilities of the nonhuman narrator of the video narrative they watch and then discuss in an interview setting. Our analysis focuses upon understanding what *kinds* of constructions of agency are available to the participants as they interpret the video. We approach the interview data by defining agency loosely as different discursive descriptions of *being-ableness* (Toivonen, Wahlström, and Kurri)—ability and capacity in a wide sense—as we aim to move away from conceptualizations that assume agency is synonymous with intentional, deliberate actions traceable back to human psychology. This language-centered perspective does not imply that we disregard the fact that watching a film is an embodied and emotional activity, as Alexa Weik von Mossner has illustrated (*Affective*).

Another recurring term used frequently in this paper is *nonhuman*—a term being employed in humanistic disciplines that has been called the “nonhuman turn” (Grusin), or the “more-than-human turn” (Howe). We acknowledge that the phrasing of nonhuman can be seen as problematically reinforcing the binary opposition between humans and the rest of the environment (Kortekallio). In this article, we primarily use the term to refer to the mountain narrator of the cli-fi video material.

Our study is embedded in a larger project of nonhuman-centric narratives. It is also critically related to and expands upon previous research publications from this study using a different set of interviews (Toivonen; Toivonen & Caracciolo), where participants’ conversations around written nonhuman-centric narratives were analyzed. In a previous study (Toivonen and Caracciolo) it was found that nonhuman-centric narratives had the capacity to complicate and challenge traditional, simpler constructions of the nonhuman or “nature”. These traditional notions, prevalent in modern Western thinking and media discourse, represent nature as a vulnerable victim of human actions, as a potentially threatening force with which humans should not interfere, or as the harmonious provider of sublime experiences (Coscieme et al.; Evans; Hansen; Olausson and Ugglä; Wall; Williams). Each of these perceptions work to maintain a narrative where humans are separate from, and indeed above, the nonhuman environment (Marchand; Plumwood). In this paper, we aim to expand on the conversation about the potential of nonhuman-oriented fiction to illuminate distinct forms of nonhuman agency.

In this article, we analyze viewers’ responses to a video trailer of the documentary *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*, which tells the story of Okjökull (Ok glacier) and Ok mountain, a former volcano, where the glacier was situated.² The trailer, comprising the first three minutes of the

² The trailer to the full documentary is freely available on Vimeo and was shown to the participants of this study via this link: [Not Ok Trailer on Vimeo](#). The full movie *Not Ok* tells the story of Okjökull (Ok glacier), the first of Iceland’s major glaciers to be destroyed by climate change; the film uses a non-

documentary, opens with a foggy scene where large stones occupy the lower half of the screen. The camera pans across the rocks and low male voice begins narrating, with heavily accented English: “This is me. They call me Ok. I’m a mountain.” Wind can be heard across the soundscape. The next images depict footage near the top of Ok and neighboring mountains that are snow covered with rocky protrusions against a blue sky. Ok mountain expresses its position as a lesser mountain in what are called “human books” since Viking times and confirms that as a mountain, Ok has been here for a very long time. The video then cuts to a truck driving across a mountain road and Ok admits that it has issues with humans since they get worked up about strange things, lately about melting glaciers. The camera retreats to show two people, male and female, standing on a snowy landscape. The mountain narrator exhibits a touch of sarcasm when it describes that these two anthropologists have come to Iceland to talk to Icelanders about how they feel about losing their glaciers. Ok then announces, again with a slightly snarky tone, that that for humans “even when they are talking about glaciers, it’s still all about *them*...”.

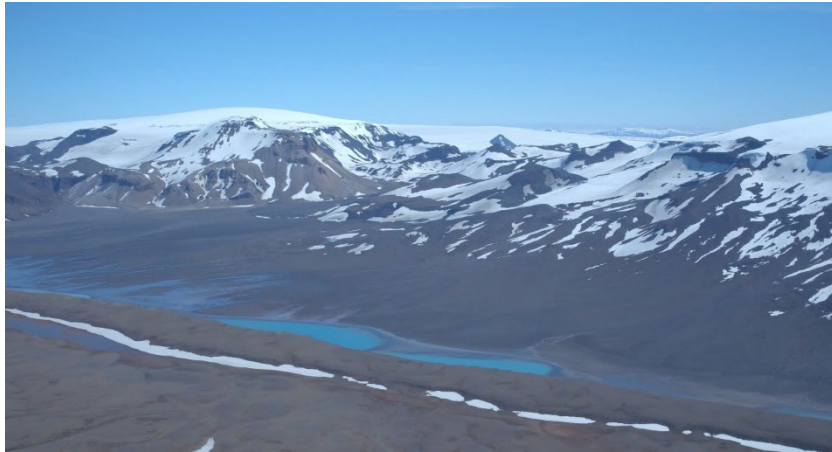


Caption The human protagonists, two anthropologists, in a snowy field near the top of Ok mountain, from the film, Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World.

Erin James’ (*Narrative*) Anthropocene narrative theory maps out innovative narratological structures through the components of worldbuilding, material, time, space, and narration. Similarly, the cli-fi trailer invites the viewer to mentally model a world of stone, ice, and snow—a world where a mountain is narrating its story from its own perspective. From the standpoints of material, space, and narration, the viewer is challenged from the beginning: the mountain landscape is not inert and voiceless, nor is it a stable setting for human characters to develop their drama, but an active narrator of its own story. The connection between space and narration is

human narrator as the voice of the mountain to offer commentary on the glacier’s status and how it has been perceived in Iceland over time. The movie is directed by anthropologists Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer and is part of their research in Iceland. More information can be found on the website [not ok movie](#).

complex: disrupting anthropocentric assumptions, the viewer is transported to an unfamiliar space and tasked with hearing a narrative seemingly spoken by the space itself. With only the foggy, snowy landscape of Iceland to visualize the viewer must combine the narrating voice with an unseen "speaker," off camera. In this way, the trailer works against the traditional idea that narration and voice only emerge from a speaking (human) subject.



Caption: The camera pans to landscapes surrounding Ok mountain, from the film, Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World.

With a few verbal gestures, Ok sketches its existence across a vast geological timescale. Even if climate change is never explicitly mentioned in the video, an alert viewer is cued to think about the slow processes of global warming that has led to the humans losing "their" glaciers. Erin James argues for the importance of narratives that task their readers with interpreting an event as both something that occurs within a narrative and a part of a longer chain of events beyond the timeline of the narrative. In this manner, the two anthropologists arriving at the mountain suggest a longer history of humans occupying nonhuman spaces, often with a colonialist, exploitative mindset hinted at by the nonhuman narrator. "The effect event" in James' theory illustrates the impacts of slow, detrimental processes that operate as signifiers of destruction due to their effects on objects and bodies. Ok mountain never mentions global warming as the culprit behind the loss of its ice cap; indeed, the mountain's concerns about humans go back more than a thousand years, with human selfishness and general disregard being one of the mountain narrator's primary critiques. Now, the glacier on top of Ok is gone -an example of a Jamesian effect event.



Caption: A truck appears on the volcanic gravel road near the base of Ok mountain, from the film, *Not Ok: A Little Movie about a Small Glacier at the End of the World*.

We understand the trailer as representative of climate fiction rather than a classic documentary—even as the full documentary and Ok’s story are firmly rooted in the ethnographic context of Iceland. Even taking the new materialist standpoint that all beings, elements, and processes—including mountains—exhibit some kind of agency, we find that anthropomorphism is, to some degree, inevitable when nonhumans are employed as narrative agents (Weik von Mossner, *Affective*). We align with James (*Narrative*) in her critique of narrativity and argue that even if a mountain is an agent in the sense that it is capable of many things, it cannot produce an actual narrative without a human intervention. Thus, it is the characterization of Ok that makes this piece climate *fiction* for the purposes of this study.

As the influence of climate fiction in popular culture as well as in academic conversations is ever increasing, it is important to understand the potential of nonhuman-narrated climate fiction to challenge human centeredness. Climate fiction’s potential is typically facilitated through conversations—in book clubs, classrooms, and other social settings. Similarly, in this study we inquire about how viewers attribute agency to the nonhuman figure, Ok mountain, as a narrator and subject that is established in the short trailer of the film. The larger goal of this project overall is to expand our understanding of real audience responses and conversations regarding climate fiction narrated from the perspective of a nonhuman agent.

Method

This study is a part of a larger project where participants’ discussions of short climate fiction were studied. The interviews analyzed here belong to a larger dataset of 28 interviews total. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author on Zoom videocalls, mostly in English, with a handful in Finnish. In 21 of the 28 interviews, the participants discussed a written nonhuman-oriented narrative. The results of the analysis of these interviews is presented in Toivonen and Toivonen and Caracciolo. For the portion of the study discussed in this paper, participants were

shown the trailer of the documentary rather than the entire film.³ Because the documentary focuses primarily on human narratives about the loss of Ok glacier, it was important that participants focused on the short trailer as a work of climate fiction that is designed around a nonhuman narrator with an emphasis upon the *fiction* of the mountain's voice. Having the participants engage with a smaller amount of material—in total a few minutes—also ensured that it was fresh in their memory; it was also a manageable amount of visual/audio material for viewers to engage in the context of an interview.

The participants were volunteers that represented 3 different nationalities (American, Canadian, and Finnish), with ages ranging from 31-83. Three of the interviewees identified as women and five as men. The backgrounds among the group were varied: one was a literary scholar, but the others were not professionals in the field of narrative or fiction in any manner. The professions of the participants included a youth worker, a self-employed artist, and a climate scientist. The educational level of the participants was high, as they all had at least a bachelor's degree.

Participants were recruited by various means including social media, emailing environmental and climate science organizations, as well as the snowball method through the first author's networks. Following the tradition of qualitative research and knowing that the data would likely be analyzed through discourse analysis, the sample was collected using a purposeful sampling method.⁴ Since this study is explorative and qualitative, the goal in forming the group of participants was to ensure that an array of different ways of discussing the agency of the nonhuman environment would be observable. All participants signed an informed consent form prior to the interviews and, if requested, were sent their anonymized interview transcript by email for commentary.⁵

The interview protocol consisted of questions related to a participant's thoughts about the nonhuman environment and climate change. The respondents were first asked two questions to introduce them to environmental issues; they then received a link to watch the trailer of *Not Ok* (duration approximately 2.5 minutes).⁶ After watching the eliciting material, the participants were asked about various aspects of their thinking with regards to the nonhuman environment. All interview questions concerning agency were carefully worded to ensure that participants

³ The trailer of the documentary represents climate fiction, while the full documentary is exactly that, a documentary, and thus not suitable for our purposes. In addition, the trailer was discussed as one part of a longer interview, and having participants devote more time than a few minutes to the trigger material would have warranted a whole different interview protocol and study design.

⁴ See e.g., Palinkas et al. The method is sometimes also called *purposive sampling*.

⁵ The project was ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Ghent University, the affiliation of the first author when conducting this research.

⁶ They were not given any background information about the documentary before or after watching it. If the participant had questions about the documentary, they had a chance to ask them at any point of the interview or after it, by emailing to the first author. As all the participants received the link to the trailer as a message in the Zoom videocall environment, they had the chance to copy the link and find out freely any information on the video after the interview.

would not simply reproduce anthropocentric interpretations. This paper focuses on participants' constructions of discursive agency in this conversational context; the same stories encountered in another context might be experienced in different ways, leading to different outcomes.⁷ The first author transcribed the interviews verbatim into English, anonymized them, and gave all participants a pseudonym. The interviews were then analyzed drawing from discourse analytical methodology (e.g. Nikander; Trappes-Lomax).

From the perspective of discourse analysis, a critical question pivots upon how people conceptualize nonhuman agency. Following a social constructionist position, discourse analysis is interested in how people produce meanings and build different versions of the world through language-mediated, situated social processes (Nikander; Potter and Hepburn; Ussher and Perz). As with constructionist positions more generally, this paper avoids attributing participants' interpretations to solely psychological or material phenomena (Nikander; Potter and Hepburn). At the same time, we do not suggest that (non)human agency exists only at the linguistic level because material phenomena and social contexts each condition the meanings created through human language and communication; there is a mutual dependency between material, discursive, and sociocultural understandings of nonhuman agency.

In the first phase of the analysis, the first author of this paper carefully read and re-read all 28 transcripts, paying attention to every word, expression, sentence, and metaphor related to nonhuman subjects. Special attention was paid to active verbs that can be interpreted as having agential qualities. The goal was to identify a variety of ascriptions given to the nonhuman in terms of abilities, actions, ways of existing, occurring, and influencing the world. Following initial readings, the first author constructed a preliminary list of nonhuman agencies and discussed these initial categorizations with Marco Caracciolo, the second author of Toivonen and Caracciolo. Next, the analysis focused on storytalk⁸—the explicit discussion of the narrative the participants read or watched and their constructions of nonhuman agency. The final stages of the analysis of participants' discussion on the written narratives vs. the filmic narrative were conducted separately. Finally, the categorizations presented here were reviewed by the second author of this paper. The results presented here thus carry similarities to those presented in Toivonen and Toivonen and Caracciolo, but expand on this previously published work, showing an independent set of findings.

⁷ The basic assumption in qualitative research is that the impact of the interviewer/researcher and the specificity of the interview situation are not problems of the research setting but acknowledged as the basis from which these specific research results arise. Moreover, we wish to make the point that it is the dialogic setting that allows nuanced responses to nonhuman narrators to be developed, making our results relevant for many conversational settings such as schools or discussion groups.

⁸ Elsewhere, Toivonen and Toivonen and Caracciolo have defined "storytalk" as explicit discussion on a narrative in an interview or some other interactional context (Toivonen; Toivonen and Caracciolo). I made unnecessary edits here, my apologies! It was good the way it was!

Results

The analysis revealed ten different kind of nonhuman agencies presented in Table 1.⁹

Agency category	How nonhuman agency is presented	Examples of participants' descriptions of nonhuman agency
1. Not transparent	Something that is partly beyond human perception and cognition.	"it felt like it could do a lot, but I can't know what it could do"
2. Sublime force	Powerful, ancient, mysterious, sacred.	"it is like old and somehow eternal"
3. Systems and interconnectivity	Part of a system; sometimes humans are explicitly mentioned as being one part of interconnectivity.	"there's some relationship that the humans nearby have to the glacier, to me that suggests that there's some dependence of the people on the glacier"
4. Producer and enabler	Maintaining life or producing something, such as oxygen or pleasant experiences.	"There is a very human-centric attitude toward everything, right, that involves the earth, right? What can the earth give us in terms of natural resources."
5. Threat	Power that challenges people with natural forces, weather events, etc.	"is there like something threatening in that mountain"
6. Personality	Having human characteristics	"it had like a personality and a character"
7. Cognizant and sentient	Cognitively and communicatively adept	"It was able to pattern a story, like come with not necessarily a plot but at least a logical sequence of events. It was able to communicate its emotions."
8. Living or existing	A living entity or active process; includes descriptions actions wherein the environment "exists" or has qualities of "being".	"it was mentioned that it is a volcano, so then people can think about what a volcano can do."
9. Victim and object	Observed, defined, used, and/or destroyed by people.	"humans are this incredibly potentially damaging agent to its being as a volcano"
10. Detached and separate	Detached from humans, dismissed and/or forgotten such that the nonhuman does not intersect with humans.	"these Vikings hardly ever even mentioned it, because it was not meaningful in that way either"

Some participants attempted to construct Ok mountain as an entity with its own independent existence and perspective, whereas others did not respond to the

⁹ Note that nonhuman agency characterizations presented elsewhere based on the same research project but on interviews where the participants were presented with written narratives (Toivonen; Toivonen and Caracciolo) are similar to this table but, most notably, lack the category 6, personality.

video as representative of Ok’s viewpoint at all. Whether and how the viewer attributed an independent viewpoint to Ok coincided with whether they granted Ok what we call here *complex nonhuman agencies*. Table 2 illustrates how a participant’s general orientation to a nonhuman perspective is related to the kind of agencies they attributed to Ok, the nonhuman narrator.

Table 2¹⁰

Participant	Orientation to the video/the nonhuman perspective	Nonhuman agency construction
Adam	Focus on the nonhuman perspective	Complex: Limited cognizant
Rosa		Complex: Limited cognizant
Isabella		Complex: Limited cognizant
Esteri		Complex: Nontransparent agent
Paul		Complex: Nontransparent agent
Åsa	Construction of a human-nonhuman relationship	-
Gloria		Simple: Living or existing being
Uri	Detached (the video is about “the problems of environmental change”)	Simple: Living or existing

Five participants (Adam, Rosa, Isabella, Esteri, and Paul) related to the video as an invitation for them to understand the viewpoint of Ok as an agent. Each of these five participants also ascribed a *complex agency* to Ok. With complex agency we refer to constructions of agency that consist of two or more of the agency construction types presented in Table 1. Adam, Isabella, and Rosa articulated a complex agency for Ok that we can call “Limited Cognizant”, while Esteri and Paul constructed a complex agency that falls within the classification of “Nontransparent Agent”.

Three participants (Gloria, Uri, and Åsa) did not attribute an independent perspective to Ok in their discussions of the video trailer. Åsa and Gloria focused on the video’s presumed message about human-nonhuman relationships, while Uri’s discussion was detached—he felt the video conveyed a relatively weak environmental point, “trying to show some of the problems of environmental change”. Gloria and Uri found Ok to have simple nonhuman agency (ascribing only one type of agency at a time), while Åsa did not attribute any kind of agency to it whatsoever.

In the next section, we provide a series of examples on the distinct categories of nonhuman agency in participants’ constructions.

Limited Cognizant: The Nonhuman Has Cognition but is Restrained

Ok was described as having some cognitive skills while it was, at the same time, limited by human agency. Rosa and Adam described Ok as reflective or understanding

¹⁰ All participant names in the table and elsewhere in the text are invented pseudonyms.

but stated that this disposition would conflict with Ok's real situation as the object of human actions. Either Ok thinks that it is powerful but actually is not, or it has not accepted that humans are a destructive and intrusive force in its world.

Interviewer: *What kind of an actor was this mountain in the text and what I mean by that is, what was it able to do? What was it presented as able to do in the video?*

Rosa: Yeah, I would say it was presented as... on one hand, knowledgeable and wise (7), and on the other hand, somewhat powerless (9). Right, it doesn't control who comes to the mountain, doesn't control how... how... what stories humans tell about his landscape (9). And it's very different from what he thinks of himself (7), so... You know, it didn't to me imply that he had a whole lot of agency for his future (9).¹¹

Rosa's description of Ok mountain, the former volcano, registers it as both cognizant (7) but also powerless, not because of the looming threat of climate change but because it is not in control of who comes to it and what stories humans tell about its landscape (9). In Rosa's analysis, Ok is not an agent in the sense that its real circumstances are distinct from how it thinks of itself (9)—note Rosa's use of the pronoun "he," possibly triggered by the male voice narrating the story. Thus, Ok is not only capable of thinking but is also able to make cognitive mistakes. Interestingly, the video does not show Ok as entertaining unrealistic ideas about itself, suggesting a strongly subjective element in Rosa's description.

Nontransparent Agent: The Nonhuman Agent is Not Immediately Understandable to the Human

Ok was described as an agent that in some way remains resistant to humans' attempts at understanding it. Esteri conveyed complex nonhuman agency in her description of Ok mountain which, for her, took up the qualities of a Nontransparent agent. In her account, she moved from stating that little was said about Ok's agency in the video to ultimately elaborating a more nuanced and complex account of Ok's agentive potential.

Interviewer: *So, what kind of an agent or actor this mountain was in that video, so in a way, what was it displayed as being able to do?*

Esteri: In my opinion, they didn't really much say what the mountain in itself could do. Of course, it was mentioned that it is a volcano, so then people can think about what a volcano can do (8). To my mind, they talked more about glaciers, and then to my mind came these kind of reportages that are related to glaciers, and now that the glaciers are melting... For example just recently there was this piece of news where it was stated that now that the glaciers are melting and all kinds of bacilli and bacteria and viruses get unleashed which haven't ever seen the modern world, so could there happen something like this type of pandemic or some other equivalent idea. In my mind they got connected, the powers of the mountain (2), also to this like recent news coverage and then when it came to me, about this Grump Mountain, the kind of grump

¹¹ The talking turns marked with italics are those of the interviewer, to separate them from the talk of the interview participants. The underlined parts show the central verbal expressions that were coded in a particular way during the analysis.

image, or the kind of a mental image of an old man (6), so for me, like what the mountain could do, for me perhaps this kind of a person, the kind of older man represents the kind of power that could do a lot of things (6). It has experience and wisdom (7), and something that perhaps humans or younger people don't have, so like for me, what it could do, for me it felt like it could do a lot, but I can't know what it could do (1). Except for the fact that it's a volcano and a volcano concretely erupts (8), but if we think that it is some other character, like a troll or some you know some like God character or something like that. Because it did speak after all (6).

Interviewer: *Yeah. So for you there was this thought that you can't know all the things it could do?*

Esteri: *Yeah, for me came perhaps a bit more the thought that, for me -I can't know all the things this this mountain could do, but for sure it can do a lot of things about which I can't know what they could be* (1).

This complex construction of nonhuman agency emerges from a negotiation between the categories of "volcano" and "human." Esteri starts her response with the statement that because Ok is a volcano, then "people"—not her per se but an imagined generic audience—will think about what members of this category (volcano) can do. This expression can be read as an attribution of "living or existing" agency that depicts nonhumans as merely "existing" or being alive (8). Attributions of personality (6) emerge when Esteri discusses Ok as an older (human) man with experience and wisdom, thus, with a degree of cognitive agency (7); additionally, this figure is attributed with the potential to do things that exceed her understanding (1). She continues by depicting a more-than-human character (that she dubs troll or God), with the reasoning that Ok "did speak after all." Esteri states several times that Ok can do a lot of things which she, as an observer and perhaps specifically as a *human* observer, cannot know; this formulation provides a very clear example of what we designate as "nontransparent agency" (1). Ok is, then, a subject with agency but whose nature is not immediately clear to the human viewer.

Esteri characterizes Ok as exhibiting a human-like personality, and drawing from a variety of sources and representations -from news stories to a popular Finnish fictional character, *Mielensäpahoittaja*¹² (literally, "a person that gets upset easily", in English translations, *The Grump*). Even after having quickly traversed various options for Ok's subject position -from an old man to a troll or God—she determines that while Ok is capable of many things, the precise nature of Ok's capacities remains unclear to her. Such depictions of nonhuman agency as complex but not entirely transparent illustrate how narrativized nonhuman agents may be able to resist humans' intellectual colonization. It is also worth noting that Esteri did not use Ok's narrative to access her personal memories, experiences, or knowledge about the environment—a common occurrence among the participants not granting Ok with complex agency—but instead jumped into the storyworld on Ok's terms.

¹² The main character of Tuomas Kyrö's book series, the first novel "*Mielensäpahoittaja*" published in 2010 (Helsinki: WSOY).

Simple: The Nonhuman as "Living or Existing"

In these constructions, Ok was not understood to be a character; instead, there was a generic volcano or a more generic landscape to which only limited agency was attributed. This minimal agency consisted of descriptions of simple actions typical of an entity that does not do much beyond "living or existing;" a volcano was described as doing what volcanoes do, erupt.

Gloria, a participant trained in an environmental field and living in a geographical location where she is very much involved with the consequences of climate change in her daily life, did not describe Ok itself as any kind of agent, but spoke about the general quality of volcanoes having the capacity to erupt. Despite characterizing Ok with so little agency, Gloria's experience of the video was not thin; she explained that she liked the video and that it made her feel as though she is not alone in being concerned about the environment. Gloria's sensemaking points to the importance of acknowledging that a viewer's interest in the environment, their educational background or involvement with environmental activities, as well as their affirmations about a particular narrative, do not necessarily predispose them to relate to the story or to take the viewpoint of the nonhuman subject.

Our example of simple agency in response to the video comes from Uri, who did not seem to relate to Ok's perspective or to the video narrative at all. Unlike Gloria and Åsa, he did not construct the video as conveying a metaphor about human-nonhuman relationships but instead related to it as a warning message about the melting of glaciers. He spent significant time wondering about the filmed footage and described the landscapes as an "uninhabitable place," having "no indication of wildlife."

Interviewer: *If you think about the mountain in this video—what kind of an actor or agent was it? Was it presented as able to do something, this mountain?*

Uri: The mountain itself was able to do something, as in produce something?

Interviewer: *Yeah, I wonder how you perceived it in the video?*

Uri: Actually, I didn't perceive it first of all as a mountain as such. The- I suppose if I looked at it again, I could look for that but-

Interviewer: *Okay, so for you it was ice, or glacier?*

Uri: Well, not even a glacier, I mean it may have it may have been glacier at one point but you know the obviously there was bare ground and I've been in glacial countries or in in glacial areas in Alaska for instance [talk about his travel experiences deleted for the purposes of preserving anonymity] and this was really not that kind of environment to me. I guess probably it does reflect the possibilities of... volcanic activity, although again, I'm thinking of that one great field of what appeared to be just small stones or small gravel, gravely type stones that that's not particularly glacial activity either. Anyway. Next question?

For Uri, the trailer for *Not Ok* was not a narrative at all, but a series of separate (and rather uninteresting) scenes that he tried to interpret based on what he knows about different kinds of landscapes. He likewise did not construct a specific nonhuman narrator with whom he could have interacted, and thus struggled to answer the

question about the agency of the volcano. He attributed simple agency to the landscape shown in the video, describing it as "reflecting the possibilities of volcanic activity". Uri tried to visually read the footage according to his own experiences, but, frustrated with the task, asked for the next question to be presented.

Discussion

We have shown a variety of responses and attributions of nonhuman agency that occurred as participants discussed a nonhuman-oriented climate fiction video. The participants differed a great deal in how they focused on the nonhuman narrator in terms of that narrator's perspective as well as what kind of agency Ok might have. The participants who acknowledged the presence of a nonhuman narrator as such, with its own specific perspective and story, also attributed more complex agencies to it; that is, they combined more than two of the ten different types of nonhuman agency in their accounts when describing Ok. Three participants did not relate to Ok's perspective at all, only attributing simple agency, if any agency at all, to it. The video seemed to primarily invite them to ponder their own knowledge and experiences of environmental issues and different landscapes. These participants also focused primary attention on the visuals of the video, that is, the drone-filmed snowy landscapes of Iceland, and tended to disregard the vocal narration component. Indeed, one challenge of the video narrative used in this study may reside in the fact that it visually combines filmic footage that is not in any direct way illustrating the simultaneous audio narration.

Participants identified the human characters in the video as scientists, and the descriptions of them were either neutral or negative. For Adam, the humans were an annoying disturbance, "pesky anthropologists" distracting him from learning more about Ok's perspective. Esteri described them as "stupid," and Isabella as just having come to "ogle" the mountain without being able to do anything about the disappearance of the glacier. Most participants mentioned that the videoclip illustrated how self-centered human beings are. In this respect, the audience responses resonate with Bernaerts et al, who have argued that nonhuman narration often reveals the problematic ways in which humans are in a relationship with their environment and other living beings.

This particular video did not always trigger nuanced descriptions of human-nonhuman relationships; instead, viewers were able to occupy a morally superior position condemning the silliness and selfishness of *other* humans (represented as the "ogling" anthropologists).¹³ Furthermore, even if the video invited the participants to produce complex constructions of nonhuman agency, these conceptualizations were still relatively human-centric, reminiscent of the results of a previous study on how people respond to written nonhuman-centric narratives

¹³ The ironic nature of the humor used in the video trailer may also not have translated well among non-native English speakers since there was a high degree of subtlety in the videoclip's dialogue (and nonhuman narration).

(Toivonen; Toivonen and Caracciolo). Inviting less human-centric reflections and discussions on human-nonhuman interconnectedness might call for a more experimental and less anthropomorphizing story, as is outlined in Caracciolo's call for alternative narrative strategies.

We have described how this video employed an anthropomorphized mountain as narrator. However, discussions around anthropomorphizing are complicated. In general, ecocriticism has tended to be cautious about discourses that anthropomorphize nonhuman nature (Iovino). However, many prominent scholars have discussed a strategic use of anthropomorphization to evoke empathy in human readers or viewers (Bennett; Iovino; Herman; Keen). Jane Bennett has argued that strategic anthropomorphization is useful in expanding the idea of nonhuman agency and in challenging the fundamental narcissism of humans. The film used in this study could be taken as such a strategic anthropomorphization. While some participants did expand nonhuman agency in their discussions about Ok, this did not always take place, and it was mostly the selfishness and stupidity of *other* humans that was criticized. Furthermore, anthropomorphization has been discussed as a continuum of narrative and visual techniques that can serve different functions. David Herman discusses the representation of nonhuman experiences in graphic narratives on a scale from animal allegory to texts that capture the distinctive phenomenology of nonhuman experiences. The anthropomorphization of Ok could be viewed as anthropomorphic projection on Herman's scale; audience responses to significantly less human-like anthropomorphizations of nonhuman landscapes warrant further research. In general, our study aligns with previous perspectives that have underlined anthropomorphization as a complex task that demands careful execution (Herman; Iovino; Keen).

In previous conversations about environmental narratives, the focus has been on nonhuman animals and occasionally, inanimate objects (see e.g. Bernaerts et al.; Herman; James; Weik von Mossner); little attention has been paid to attributing human characteristics to other dimensions of nonhuman nature. This is perhaps reflective of the possibility that animals hold a different place in the emotional repertoire of humans in comparison to landscapes and other non-sentient entities. This study presents an attempt to describe discursive responses to a relatively unusual nonhuman narrator, a mountain. It is possible that a key aspect preventing some viewers from getting deeper into Ok's perspective is that the video depicted a nonfamiliar, distant setting with a narrator that was anthropomorphized but still difficult to identify.¹⁴ This is an interesting challenge for the narrative form in climate change communications, because most endangered glaciers are in desolate and hard-to-reach places. It is also one reason why the often-repeated claim that innovative

¹⁴ In the interviews, Ok (Okjökull) was referred to by the interviewer and the participants as a mountain, a volcano, and a glacier; Ok is not an active volcano anymore, and Okjökull, which sat atop Ok mountain, also lost its status as a glacier. Ok is classified as a mountain, because its highest peak reaches 1,450 metres above the sea level; it remains designated as a mountain on Icelandic maps though the glacier is, in newer maps, no longer indicated.

narrative strategies can bring the vastness of climate change closer to human scale and help humans comprehend their own entanglement with it (e.g. Caracciolo) is less easily put into practice. While a nonhuman (yet anthropomorphized subject) telling its story invited complex constructions of nonhuman agency, it also illustrated the challenges of relating to such a narrator. This paper points to the possibility that climate change-related impacts on nonhuman beings that are spatially distant (or seen as far away from viewers) cannot be easily assimilated or "brought closer" to all audiences by simply including a nonhuman narrator and a recognizable story format.

One of the limitations of this study is that it is restricted to responses obtained in a very particular setting, that of a research interview. Weik von Mossner (*Franny*) reminds us of the importance of complex and contextual factors when we discuss the "impact" of cli-fi narratives: It makes a difference whether we watch a film on our own or in a setting that allows opportunity for discussion and contextualization. The effectiveness of any message depends in part on the ideological mindset that the individual brings with them to the viewing situation. A different kind of interview setting might have elicited different results. However, given these context-specific variables, we maintain that this study illustrates both the potential and the limitations of filmic climate fiction as a tool to offer more complexity to the traditional, simple constructions of nonhuman agency.

Another limitation of this study is that the video was in English, and the voice was slower than a normal rate of speech; this may have confused some viewers, especially if they do not listen to a lot of content in English. The heavy Icelandic accent probably caused additional challenges, even if it was only one Finnish participant, Paul, who explicitly stated that the accent caused him difficulties. It is possible that these qualities might have caused the viewers to misinterpret parts of Ok's narration.

Several participants related to the video trailer as a political or environmental message rather than a story. Is it possible that audiences have encountered so many persuasive environmental messages and calls-to-action embedded in narrative form that they can no longer experience a cli-fi story simply as a story, or as a way to interact with fictional characters and worlds? This leads us to the question of whether cli-fi can or should be approached as pure "entertainment" instead of instrumentalizing it as a tool to deliver information. While we know that persuasive or overtly didactic uses of narrative as a tool of climate science communication can easily backfire (Dahlstrom), the narrative form can also operate as a powerful tool to communicate the ramifications of the climate crisis and invite people to engage with it (Caracciolo; Goodbody and Johns-Putra; James; Schneider-Mayerson, Weik von Mossner, and Malecki; Trexler). This study suggests that it is perhaps not constructive to frame climate fiction as primarily didactic, since experiencing a story as an environmental message—a political encounter—might overshadow the ability to experience it as simply a *story*.

Illuminating the contingencies of climate change through nonhuman-centered video narratives seems both a promising as well as a difficult vehicle to explore the emotional and intellectual challenges presented by climate change. An

anthropomorphized subject of the nonhuman environment presents a puzzle to viewers as something betwixt and between the human and the nonhuman. In the context of a structured interview, such a video can trigger constructions of complex agency that exceed traditional, simpler representations of the nonhuman environment as either threatening natural force or sublime source of divine experiences. Truly problematizing human-centric conceptualizations of agency or exploring the complicated nature of human-nonhuman interrelatedness may require longer, more sophisticated, and less anthropomorphizing stories. Having a nonhuman narrator ventriloquize what are ultimately human thoughts and concerns is not an unproblematic narrative strategy, but as we hope to have shown, it can invite reflections on a more complex picture of nonhuman agency. The findings point to the possibility that narrative and fiction can convey an accessible account of the scale of climate change while provoking critical reflections (e.g. Caracciolo; Goodbody and Johns-Putra, Trexler).

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Appendix

Text from Trailer for *Not Ok: A Small Movie about a Little Glacier at the End of the World* (2018, Cymene Howe and Dominic Boyer, directors).

(Mountain Narrator)

This is me. They call me Ok. I'm a mountain. Well really, a volcano, or at least a former volcano. I've been around here as long as there's been here to be around. And for most of that time, I've had a glacier on my back. I am not handsome like Eiríksjökull or Thorisjökull, my neighbors over there. So, the first humans, the Vikings scarcely put me in their books. They decided that me and my fellow mountain Skjaldbreiður over there were parts of a dead troll, which is ridiculous. So, humans, yeah, I have issues with them. They get obsessed about strange things. Recently, they have been getting very worked-up about glaciers. So, these two foreigners came to visit last year to talk to Icelanders about how they felt about losing their glaciers. They called themselves *anthropologists*, which I find kind of hilarious, you know, with humans, even when they're talking about glaciers it's still ALL about them.

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