

Rumours and Realities: Employing Satire to Navigate the Blah Blah Blah of Neoliberal Environmental Politics

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Abstract

Examining the film *Rumours* (2024), this paper explores the affordances of satire in advancing systemic critique and navigating beyond apocalyptic narratives in environmental advocacy. *Rumours* employs satire to expose the ineptitude of world leaders and neoliberalism in addressing climate urgency, while concurrently examining the intersections of gender, capitalism, and environmental justice. The film critiques the superficiality and inefficacy of leadership, emphasizing the need to shift responsibility from individuals to broader systems. It challenges the misplaced reliance on ecomodernism and technofixes, which fail to address underlying socio-political issues. By highlighting persistent gender biases and socio-economic disparities, *Rumours* connects environmental concerns with social justice, urging audiences to reconsider traditional power dynamics and advocate for transformative change. However, it remains largely within the realm of criticism without offering alternative visions for collective action. Despite its entanglement within the market structures it critiques, *Rumours* surpasses apocalyptic narratives by invoking dis-hoping and ambivalence, offering a complicitous critique, and challenging audiences to reflect on the absurdity of fear-based narratives.

Keywords: Satire, neoliberalism, intersectionality, apocalyptic narratives, dis-hoping.

Resumen

Examinando la película *Rumores* (2024), este texto explora el potencial de la sátira para avanzar en la crítica sistémica y navegar más allá de las narrativas apocalípticas en la defensa del medioambiente. *Rumores* recurre a la sátira para poner al descubierto la ineptitud de los líderes mundiales y del neoliberalismo a la hora de abordar la emergencia climática, al tiempo que analiza las intersecciones entre género, capitalismo y justicia medioambiental. La película critica la superficialidad y la ineficacia del liderazgo, haciendo hincapié en la necesidad de trasladar la responsabilidad de los individuos a sistemas más amplios. Cuestiona la confianza errónea depositada en el ecomodernismo y las soluciones tecnológicas, que no abordan los problemas sociopolíticos subyacentes. Al poner de relieve los persistentes prejuicios de género y las disparidades socioeconómicas, *Rumores* vincula las preocupaciones medioambientales con la justicia social, instando al público a reconsiderar las dinámicas de poder tradicionales y a abogar por un cambio transformador. Sin embargo, se mantiene en gran medida en el ámbito de la crítica sin ofrecer visiones alternativas para la acción colectiva. A pesar de su enredo en las estructuras de mercado que critica, *Rumores* trasciende las narrativas apocalípticas al invocar la desesperanza y la ambivalencia, ofreciendo una crítica cómplice y desafiando al público a reflexionar sobre lo absurdo de las narrativas basadas en el miedo.

Palabras clave: Sátira, neoliberalismo, interseccionalidad, narrativas apocalípticas, des-esperanza.

Introduction

“Can we be environmentalists, and environmentalist writers, without a hemorrhage of irony, sense of humour, and sensitivity to the illusory play of language?” (204), asked Timothy Morton in 2009. Later, Michael Branch, Greg Garrard, Prashant Panda, and Katrina Schimmoeller Peiffer complained that not enough attention has been paid to environmental humour and comedy, despite their popularity. I agree that climate fiction and cinema remain by and large apocalyptic and climate comedy understudied. This is partly because apocalypse seems to be “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (L. Buell 285). In a way, “we create images of doom to avert doom” (295; see also F. Buell). While utilizing fear appeal in environmental discourse may initially capture attention, overreliance on fear can have significant drawbacks.

This paper, therefore, explores the cognitive and emotional affordances of multimodal satire as an alternative to the fear appeal. The predecessors of multimodal environmental satire in cinema date back to the 1960s (Traub; Zekavat *Leveraging*). In this paper, I analyse *Rumours* (2024) directed by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, and Galen Johnson to show how satire is employed to reprimand institutions rather than individuals, criticize ecomodernism, and foreground intersectionality. Through its satirical portrayal of world leaders at a fictional G7 summit, the movie further undermines any hope for addressing the urgency of climate change within the traditional power structures of neoliberalism. Despite its critique, the film falls short in several key areas, including envisioning an alternative socio-political system to neoliberal capitalism, emphasizing interspecies symbiosis, and advocating for multispecies environmental justice and emancipatory worlding. I argue that these limitations arise precisely because the film’s commodified satire critiques the very system within which it is embedded and from which it derives its platform. As a product of the culture industry, it monetizes and capitalizes on sustainability and crisis narratives, which ultimately compromise its ability to envision a more radical rupture with the status quo.

Blending elements of satire with surrealism, *Rumours* is a satirical drama that unfolds at the G7 summit in Dankerode, Germany amidst an unnamed but readily identifiable climate crisis. At a secluded castle in Germany, Hilda Ortmann (Cate Blanchett), the Chancellor of Germany; Maxime Laplace (Roy Dupuis), the Prime Minister of Canada; Sylvain Broulez (Denis Ménochet), the President of France; Cardosa Dewindt (Nikki Amuka-Bird), the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom; Edison Wolcott (Charles Dance), the President of the United States; Antonio Lamorte (Rolando Ravello), the Prime Minister of Italy; Tatsuro Iwasaki (Takehiro Hira), the Prime Minister of Japan; Jonas Glob (Zlatko Burić), the President of the European Council; and Celestine Sproul (Alicia Vikander), the President of the European Commission, gather as leaders of the world’s richest neoliberal democracies for a routine summit to draft a statement on an unspecified global crisis. As the evening

progresses, their aides vanish and the leaders find themselves alone, lost in a fog-laden forest. Surreal threats emerge—ancient bog-bodies, a giant disembodied brain, a malfunctioning AI—while the group, increasingly inept, attempt to keep up pretences and feign consensus. The leaders' empty gestures descend into sheer blah blah blah, to quote Greta Thunberg, only to expose their incompetence alongside the flaws of the system they represent and serve. The result is a genre-blending satire of political spectacle and institutional failure, exposing power as absurd, performative, and hollow.

The film deliberately leaves the nature of the crisis ambiguous, though critics have identified it as the climate crisis ("*Rumours* Is a Brilliant Satire"). This ambiguity is central to the film's thematic richness, allowing it to resonate with a range of contemporary anxieties—whether geopolitical, environmental, or societal. Rather than specifying the crisis, the film invites viewers to project their own interpretations, thereby creating a space for reflection on the interconnectedness of global challenges. This approach aligns with the broader tradition of films that use ambiguity to provoke ecological or socio-political thought. As Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann argue in their analysis of *Oil Wells of Baku* in *Ecology and Popular Film*, instead of explicit ecological messaging, films can rely on visual and narrative ambiguity to engage viewers in a more open-ended critique of human exploitation of natural resources. In a similar vein, *Rumours* leverages ambiguity to encourage viewers to consider how crises—whether environmental, political, or otherwise—are framed, experienced, and responded to in contemporary society.

Theory

Apocalyptic messages often assign blame and responsibility to end consumers, effectively shifting accountability down the value chain. This blame-shifting can overwhelm individuals, presenting them with urgencies so vast in scope that they feel powerless and inadequately equipped to address them. The constant exposure to doom-laden narratives risks inducing eco-anxiety and even eco-despair, which can lead to inertia and inaction rather than motivating change. Eco-anxiety is

a sociopsychological state characterized by fluctuating feelings of worry, distress, and apprehension in response to the observed and anticipated effects of climate change and environmental disruptions, as well as their impacts on people's way of life and the perceived inadequacy of societal responses and policies. As a sociopsychological state, eco-anxiety encompasses not only internal emotional responses, but also social factors such as inequalities and perceived deficiencies in governmental and societal measures. Rooted in feelings of uncertainty and uncontrollability, it embodies both a fear of environmental catastrophe and the ongoing challenges of grappling with the consequences. (Boivin, et al. 5-6; see also Boluda-Verdú et al.; Coffey et al.)

There is a strong socio-political aspect to eco-anxiety as an emotion. Affect refers to the instinctive and often unspoken reactions individuals have to their surroundings, while emotion is a more structured expression of affect, articulated through language and shaped by cultural and social norms. An emotion constitutes a subjective

experience, sociolinguistically codified as a quality attributed to the individual. It represents an intensified state that is conventionally and consensually integrated into semantically and semiotically structured sequences, narrative frameworks of action and reaction, and systems of function and meaning. Emotion, in this sense, is both possessed and recognized. While emotion is qualified and thus subject to ownership and critique, affect remains unqualified—elusive, unownable, and resistant to systematic analysis (Massumi 27).

Besides inciting ecoanxiety, another drawback of apocalyptic narratives is their propensity to reinforce colonial ecological perspectives. Malcolm Ferdinand and Ursula Heise (Ferdinand 125; see also Heise “Eco-Apocalypse” 277) argue that these narratives are frequently shaped by the perspectives of dominant groups, whose anxieties stem from the potential erosion of their privilege and control. The global catastrophes depicted in these stories primarily highlight threats to the privileged group’s way of life, including its ethnic, social, and economic structures. Apocalyptic narratives are often more concerned about Florida or New York than a third of Pakistan actually being submerged in 2022 due to floods. Such focus can marginalize or completely overlook the experiences and realities of marginalized communities, whose own environments and livelihoods may have been at risk long before the apocalypse projected to come.

These might be among the reasons behind “The Vanishing Power of Apocalyptic Narrative” (Heise, “Eco-Apocalypse” 275) and the imperative to seek alternatives. Several scholars have argued that satire, comedy, and humour could be effective strategies for environmental advocacy (Boykoff; Skiveren; Takach; Zekavat and Scheel; Zekavat, *Leveraging*; Zekavat, “Ecological Thought”). This is in line with what Nicole Seymour calls “bad environmentalism” understood as “environmental thought that employs dissident, often-denigrated affects and sensibilities to reflect critically on both our current moment and mainstream environmental art, activism, and discourse” (7).

Arguing that grotesque humour can help eschew emotional overwhelm, Donnie Secreast also argues that Rachel Carson uses humour in *Silent Spring* to facilitate “a more inclusive, and less anthropocentric, environmentalism” (453). Others contend that humour is more effective than fear as it incites hope. Rick van Noy, for instance, observes, “People are motivated to make wise choices more by hope and opportunity than by fear, cynicism, and despair” (4), and Aaron Sachs maintains, “we need more hope and determination and less anxiety and fear” (91). Although I agree that fear appeal is not the only or strongest motivator for change at individual and collective levels, I have certain reservations about the futurity that seems to be inherent in hope.

Clive Hamilton argues that unalterable hope is becoming increasingly delusional, hindering necessary action and underscoring the need for a more grounded approach to addressing climate change (128-133). In other words, hope can be a barrier to action. In *Facing Gaia*, Latour calls for “dis-hoping” (13) which is not synonymous with despair, but rather a rejection of hope as the primary means of

engaging with the passage of time. It is about not relying on hope alone to navigate our environmental challenges. Although this idea may initially seem counterintuitive, it invites a more grounded and perhaps more effective engagement with the pressing issues at hand. I will argue that such dis-hoping or what James Berger has called “undefeated despair” (606) is among the emotional affordances of satire for the environmental discourse.

Besides its emotional affordances, the imaginative power of satire can also transcend various media. It is not confined to a specific medium and can effectively manifest in textual, pictorial, auditory, and multimodal forms like in fiction, poetry, drama, news, movies, and on social media. This versatility allows satire to adapt to various platforms, enhancing its capacity to engage diverse audiences or to go viral. This multifaceted nature could be leveraged in engaging the public on complex issues such as climate change, as it complements discursive materials with visual appeals, aligning with the principles of effective environmental communication (Corner et al. 5, 20-28).

Despite these affordances, satire in a commercial film—such as *Rumours*, which grossed nearly \$700,000 at the box office (*Box Office Mojo*)—operates within the very system it seeks to critique. Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry reveals how capitalism commodifies dissent, repackaging critique as entertainment to neutralize its subversive edge (94-136). By transforming satire into a marketable product, the culture industry co-opts resistance, manufacturing and manipulating emotions to reinforce, rather than challenge, existing power structures. In this light, satire is not inherently emancipatory; it risks becoming complicit in the systems it purports to expose, ultimately serving as another mechanism of social control under the guise of amusement.

Satire, much like the postmodernist dynamics described by Hutcheon, operates within the dominant discourse of society, occupying a paradoxical position that is “both critical and complicitous, outside and inside” the structures it interrogates (Hutcheon 222). Analogous to Hutcheon’s observation about postmodernism’s relationship with capitalism, satire often finds itself “being totally complicitous with capitalism, while (implicitly) positioning itself safely outside it” (212). This tension underscores satire’s dual role: it challenges power while simultaneously relying on the very frameworks it seeks to expose (see also Giamario).

Nonetheless, *Rumours* manages to deploy satire not as a scattered arsenal of jabs but as a sustained dismantling of neoliberalism’s core myth: the illusion of competent, transformative leadership within a system that thrives on crisis. It zooms in on the absurdity of G7 leaders trapped in their own performative incompetence to expose how neoliberal governance reduces global emergencies to empty rhetoric, technofixes, and market-driven gestures. Each satirical target—whether the leaders’ hollow statements, their reliance on ecomodernist fantasies, or their trivialization of intersectional injustices—converges on a singular critique: neoliberalism’s inability to address the climate crisis is not a failure of individuals but of the system itself. By invoking dis-hoping the film refuses both apocalyptic despair and naive hope, instead

forcing audiences to confront the system's complicity in its own paralysis. This thread binds the analysis: satire here is not just a tool for mockery but a means to lay bare the structural absurdity of a politics that monetizes crisis, co-opts dissent, and perpetuates inequality, all while masquerading as the solution.

Individual Responsibility versus Systemic Issues

Satire can serve as a powerful tool for framing and priming, processes that shape how audiences perceive and interpret information (Zekavat and Scheel 65-66). Framing refers to the way issues are presented to influence public perception, while priming involves exposing audiences to specific ideas or emotions that affect their responses to subsequent information. By leveraging these mechanisms, satire can counteract the deflection of responsibility, redirecting attention from individual actions to the systemic issues such as roles of corporations and policymakers in environmental discourse. It also provides an accessible strategy for marginalized voices to contest power structures, functioning as a form of parrhesia or speaking truth to power. This dual ability to critique and empower makes satire invaluable in fostering critical engagement and accountability in environmental discourse.

Tending to operate on the fear appeal, sustainability discourse often constructs the crisis as an individual failing, a narrative strategically reinforced by politicians and corporations alike. This strategy is exemplified by the expectation that individual consumers must engage in recycling to facilitate corporations like Coca-Cola in continuing their production of disposable plastic bottles. The manipulation of fear appeal has been instrumental in reinforcing this blame-shifting dynamic. *Rumours* challenges this narrative by emphasizing institutional responsibility and impact. It specifically critiques how policymakers often prioritize trivial matters over implementing substantive sanctions, resort to ineffective processes in policymaking, and demonstrate a lack of competence in addressing critical sustainability.

Rumours wields satire to undermine the empty gestures of politicians to reframe the sustainability discourse. It censures G7 leaders for being preoccupied with trivialities instead of focusing their time and energy on proportionate and timely action. They spend most of their time on numerous photo opportunities, such as the absurd scene where they pose with shovels beside a bog body. The superficiality of their engagements alongside their empty statements are complemented by lavish feasts and gossiping about each other's personal affairs. These behaviours are not only incongruent to the surreal situation they are entangled in but also widely disproportionate to the scope and magnitude of the urgency they need to address.

Cardosa Dewindt, the British Prime Minister, is depicted as being obsessed with crafting a "draft outline of a provisional statement regarding the present crisis" (*Rumours*) instead of seeking actual solutions. This preoccupation causes her to lose sight of the gravity and urgency of the crisis altogether and descend into discursive play instead. The primary objective seems to be the production of the draft, rather than developing a concrete plan and taking decisive and timely measures to tackle the

crisis. Satire increasingly targets the leaders' incompetence, as despite their claims of providing clarity and assurance, they fail to show a coherent grasp of the crisis, exposing the disconnect between their rhetoric and reality.

The hollowness and inconsequential nature of their statements are no secret, even to the leaders themselves. This is exemplified by Edison, the U.S. President, who candidly remarks, "Well, I know these kinds of statements, and people pay no attention to them at all. What people want is concrete action [...] not vague promises or proposals and long, drawn-out strategies offer people the Earth and bought it over people." His admission highlights the leaders' awareness of the public's desire for tangible solutions rather than superficial rhetoric. Ironically, Edison descends into unintelligible words before nodding off mid-conversation, and his sleep-talking shifts to war terminology, revealing an obsession with military campaigns and wars. Policymakers are depicted as focused on issuing statements they themselves recognize as inconsequential, fully aware that these measures fall short of what their constituents expect and what the urgency of the crisis demands. Instead of addressing the issue meaningfully, they retreat into frantic discussions of war and power struggles.

The film foregrounds the absurdity to challenge narratives that manipulate the fear appeal to shift responsibility to individuals. This is further emphasized by the use of cinematic techniques, such as dark and hazy atmosphere, carefully curated visuals and *mise-en-scène*, to enhance the satirical intent, inviting the audience to critically reflect on the manipulation of fear in commodified environmental narratives.

Dis-hoping

The film's portrayal of ineffective policymaking, where meaningful action is supplanted by hollow statements and polemical games, extends into a broader critique of the political system as a whole. Subsequently, political satire morphs into dis-hoping for the capacity of neoliberalism to effectively address the climate crisis. The formulation of the provisional statement is notably devoid of public participation and expert input, with no scientists involved in the process. The leaders engage in a superficial exercise, akin to school activities, where they pair up to brainstorm ideas for the statement at the dinner table. Stemming from a workshop Cardoso attended after losing the general election in 2018, this method reduces policymaking to mere "word association game[s]" (*Rumours*). Its absurdity is underscored by their use of the history of the G7 as the starting point for this word game, which only serves to highlight how long they have delayed meaningful action and how consistently empty their words have been.

The film also uses the idiosyncrasies of heads of states to reflect on broader absurdities within the institutions they represent. In their pretensions and pettiness, they are depicted as being driven by sheer incompetence and stupidity. Edison emerges as a satirical representation of antiquated nationalism and the decline of imperial power. His donning of the U.S. flag as a napkin and his incongruous British

accent suggest a parallel between the waning American and British imperialisms. The film draws parallels with the global disorder, once centred on London as the metropole of the British Empire with its vast colonial reach, which declined in the twentieth century. The U.S. then assumed this role, driven by imperialist policies. The movie implies that, like the British Empire before it, American hegemony is also waning, suggesting that the current global disorder is unsustainable. Edison's trivial contribution to the leaders' statement—he suggests they start with the date—further highlights this dynamic, while Antonio's slavish transcription of Edison's dictates, regardless of their relevance, reflects the blind allegiance often afforded to U.S. leadership, particularly by Europe. Nonetheless, the film fails to envision an alternative, leaving the critique of the existing disorder without envisioning an alternative.

While assuming the role of the world police and imperial superpower, Edison repeatedly falls asleep in the midst of crises, only to wake up and ironically state, "I have to say I didn't expect to wake up to this kind of thing," before resuming leadership by invoking the forefathers who established the first colonies in Virginia. He is blind to the fact that the crisis is a result of his own making, and his reliance on historical colonial practices further emphasizes the irony of his leadership claim in the purportedly free and democratic world. His subsequent proposals are predictably outdated and irrelevant, illustrating his inadequacy in addressing modern challenges. Beyond critiquing U.S. politics, the film comments on contemporary U.S. American leadership, represented by elder leaders who metaphorically and literally nod off on official duty.

The leaders' awareness of their own incompetence is underscored by their immediate concern when Sylvain discusses bog bodies, noting that "in some cases, the bodies appear to be those of their chieftains or leaders, sacrificially murdered for failing to deliver the promise of a good harvest" (*Rumours*). This statement resonates with the leaders, as they silently recognize their failures in fulfilling their promises and responsibilities. The comparison to sacrificial leaders highlights their collective anxiety about being held accountable for their ineffectiveness and the potential consequences of their failure to address pressing issues. This moment underscores the film's critique of their leadership, emphasizing their self-awareness of inadequacy and the looming threat of repercussions for their inaction.

Sylvain's statement that the crisis "cannot be classified simply so we must keep our options open" (*Rumours*) is emblematic of the ambiguity and lack of decisive action often seen in large bureaucratic structures. This is immediately undermined when he fails to answer Antonio's straightforward question about the nature of the crisis. Concurrently, Hilda's distraction by an aide, leading her to ignore Sylvain, further illustrates the lack of cohesion and focus among leaders. These interactions serve as a microcosm of the inefficiencies and miscommunications prevalent in larger political and institutional frameworks, critiquing their inability to address complex issues effectively.

Despite their apparent awareness of their own ineptitude, world leaders frequently mask their incompetence through megalomania and an exaggerated sense of self-importance. They gather in Dankerode under the impression that they are uniquely capable of understanding and addressing global issues, as evidenced by Sylvain's assertion that there are matters "that only we can understand as world leaders" (*Rumours*). Hubris underlines their misguided belief in their exclusive ability to tackle complex challenges. However, Sylvain's subsequent complaint about being inundated with questions from the press, scientists, and activists reveals a disdain for scrutiny. This attitude reflects their view of the broader public as inferior or unworthy of participating in critical discussions. Sylvain's suspicion that the large brain is a stunt mocking the "brain trust of the west, of the world really" (*Rumours*), further illustrates their Eurocentric delusions of grandeur and critiques the insular and self-congratulatory nature of institutional leadership. Equating the desires of the west with those of the world is satirized to highlight their delusions rooted in their colonial and imperial mindsets, which inform their decisions and actions. This parallels the stewardship that humans assume over natural resources, akin to colonizers who claimed to know what was best for the colonized and undertook to impose their will through force. Similarly, humans assert stewardship to geoengineer the world to withstand the ecological changes they have caused in the first place, hinting at imperial and colonial attitudes while linking their dominance to stewardship over other species and vibrant matter.

The film dis-hopes in institutional and systemic drawbacks under neoliberalism. This is illustrated when Sylvain dramatically collapses in the forest, claiming his bone is dissolving and refusing to walk. Maxime's decision to carry him, until Antonio finds a wheelbarrow, underscores Sylvain's lack of courage, persistence, and resilience, manifesting as a psychosomatic response to stress. Sylvain's description of the group as "huddled, frightened men and women who have failed not only in the writing of the provisional statement, which it was their sole duty to complete, but in most of the fundamental categories of humanity and decency" (*Rumours*) serves as a critique of their collective ineptitude. While being carried, Sylvain reflects on the relief of being delivered from a crisis by a strong person, ironically appreciating the opportunity to relinquish his responsibilities. This moment underscores a central theme of the film: the leaders' abdication of responsibility. Sylvain's refusal to walk and his willingness to become a burden is symptomatic of the broader tendency of these leaders to shirk their duties, reflecting a desire to escape the very responsibilities they are expected to uphold. This abdication is portrayed as a fundamental failure of leadership, highlighting the disconnect between their roles and their actions.

In another attempt of dis-hoping, Sylvain draws upon the fable of The Scorpion and the Frog as Maxime and Tatsuro volunteer to swim across a swamp to retrieve the ferry from the opposite dock. The fable, in which the scorpion's nature leads to mutual destruction despite promises of cooperation, satirizes the inherent self-destructive tendencies in neoliberalism. Sylvain's invocation of this story suggests

that neoliberal capitalism, much like the scorpion, is bound by its nature to act in ways that ultimately dooms both itself and those reliant upon it. This reflection underscores the film's critique of current economic systems and the unsustainable practices they perpetuate. Sylvain's ironic telling of the fable as a leader highlights that the system under which he serves is ineffective and calls for systemic change. This irony suggests that true progress requires radical transformation, challenging both the leaders and the audience to reconsider the structures and ideologies that govern global interactions and decision-making. Satire is thus employed to emphasize that even leaders have lost faith in the current system. The film presents two options moving forward: mutual destruction or systemic change. The impetus for systemic change originates in disillusionment and is rooted in dis-hoping in the status quo.

Complicitous Critique and the Possibilities of Dissent

The film's satire therefore extends to dis-hoping and a scathing critique of the inefficacy of policymaking in neoliberal political systems. Vallier defines neoliberalism as "a politico-economic doctrine that embraces robust liberal capitalism, constitutional democracy, and a modest welfare state" (n.p.). The film appears to recognize that capitalism, a cornerstone of neoliberalism, thrives on and perpetuates crises, making it inherently reluctant to address them and instead actively creating crises to sustain itself (Klein; Saito, n.p.).

However, *Rumours* operates within the same system it critiques, raising questions about whether its satirical take on the political process can transcend mere rhetoric to inspire socio-political action. Its commodification within the culture industry inevitably dilutes its satire, risking reinforcement of the very system it aims to critique (see Zekavat, "The Paradox of Political Satire"). As a result, the film fails to move beyond capturing a pervasive disillusionment with the system toward envisioning alternative forms of collective action. Rather than advancing a sustained critique of neoliberalism itself, it tends to retreat to criticizing the ineffective leaders and policymaking mechanisms. This means that instead of advocating for radical redistribution or radical systemic transformation, the film partly calls for better representation, a critique that remains confined within the boundaries of the existing order (Bosch 1715-1723).

Such limiting politics of representation is evident in two major symbols in the movie: the bog people and the large brain. The bog people provide an opportunity to foreground the leaders' fear and misunderstanding of public dissent. At one point, the leaders flee the gazebo, believing they are being "attacked by dark shadowy figures" (*Rumours*), whom they mistake for protesters. This misinterpretation highlights their detachment from the genuine environmental concerns and grievances of the public, dismissing them as the absurd complaints of "nutcases" (*Rumours*). Serious concerns like "environmental protection" and the "modification of natural landscapes" (*Rumours*) are trivialized by the leaders, revealing their inability to engage seriously with important ecological issues.

Satire enables the movie to present a rather nuanced but oscillating perspective on protests. On one hand, it dismisses certain forms of protest as mere co-opted gestures lacking genuine impact. On the other, it glorifies genuine dissent, including militant and violent activism, by highlighting the influence such movements can have on political leaders. It underscores the value of activism by illustrating how protests can sway decision-making, with Edison expressing disdain for passive responses and stating a preference for more dramatic, even violent, actions over “ignominious sloughing away” (*Rumours*).

However, the film’s depiction of protest is subject to similar constraints in neoliberalism. The bog bodies seem to embody a potential for change that remains unrealized. In an instance, they showcase their power by extinguishing a fire through simultaneous ejaculation. Though seemingly an act of resistance, this appears to be an example of gendered absurdity rather than transformative socio-political power. Rather than organizing and developing a coherent agenda, they are easily swayed by the politician’s statements, driven by passion to engage in reactionary politics. They are often portrayed as merely reacting to the leaders’ nonsensical remarks with excitement and frenzy rather than strategizing for bringing about meaningful change. This ambivalence underscores the film’s critique of the limitations of both superficial and radical protests under neoliberalism. By reducing politics to games and activities, neoliberal democracy appropriates even those who seek to challenge it, trapping them in a cycle of co-opted resistance. The film thus illustrates how the system’s mechanisms undermine the potential for radical transformation, leaving activists complicit in the very dynamics they aim to overturn.

The bog bodies are further diminished in their power, reduced to mere scarecrows, as depicted by the Prime Minister of Canada Maxime Laplace’s interaction with them. A bog man is shown hanging from a tree with a rope around its neck. As Maxime pokes it with a stick and the leaders approach to inspect the figure as an object of gaze, it unexpectedly urinates. This moment serves as a satirical commentary on the leaders’ superficial engagement with dissent and activism in neoliberal systems. The grotesque scene illustrates the degradation of dissent and protest on the part of the bog body and the absurdity of the leaders’ attempts to confront or understand genuine activism. It underscores how the film critiques co-option of political dissent and its reduction to a farcical and powerless spectacle.

The film therefore exposes how dissent is co-opted under neoliberalism, but its dissent is not unlike that of the bog people. Like the hanging bog man, the movie is also an object of gaze that operates under the same system it censures and is subject to subsumption. *Rumours* criticizes the systemic architectures that perpetuate environmental degradation alongside exploitation, exclusion, violence, and dispossession, but it largely settles for criticizing inept leadership and ineffective policymaking mechanisms, a gesture that could effectively rebrand these structures rather than dismantle them.

Ecomodernism

The movie also critiques how neoliberalism manipulates techno-fixes to ameliorate the symptoms rather than mitigating the causes of the crisis. Ecomodernism advocates using technological innovation, urbanization, and intensified resource efficiency to decouple human development from ecological degradation. It is fundamentally anthropocentric and technocentric. This approach, however, is criticized for being self-contradictory, as it promotes further exploitation of nature under the guise of efficiency.

Edison's dismissal of the bog people's actions as mere phenomena explainable by the natural sciences underscores a lack of imagination and a narrow cognitive scope. "I saw nothing that can't be explained by the natural sciences [...] The trick of the moonlight playing on a grove of Spanish moss swaying in the wind or one of these ethnic dances they have at all of these summits. Lederhosen and castanets, and those fans they have in Japan. Tatsuro what are they called?—[Tatsuro] Fans—[Edison] Exactly there you are" (*Rumours*). Satire thus serves as a gateway to critique ecomodernism.

The film critiques the limitations of relying solely on scientific discourse and information provision by introducing a surreal encounter with a giant brain in the forest. In an interview with *That Shelf*, Guy Maddin, a co-director of the movie, explains that the brain stems from a fondness for pulp-fiction imagery: giant brains often loom over us as super-powerful alien presences. The film embraces the thrilling mystery of such imagery—what's exciting is not "what does it mean?" but rather "what are they going to do about it?" (n.p.) And the political leaders do absolutely nothing about it, and their response drives the satire. In another interview in *Filmhounds Magazine*, the directors insist symbolism was not their primary concern. Evan Johnson notes the irony: "it's a useless, wet hunk of organ meat [...] yet [it's] the source of all human-made beauty and meaning [...] and is the solution to all our problems" (n.p.). The contrast between the brain's uselessness and its perceived intellectual omnipotence is central to its presence in the film. It contrasts the emptiness of political language with the hallowed notion of intellect, yet becomes another piece of inexplicable spectacle within the satirical chaos.

While the directors of *Rumours* resist attaching a fixed meaning to the giant brain, it can be read as a potential game-changer—an emblem of science and knowledge with the power to inform timely and appropriate decisions and actions. In this reading, the brain heralds the fall of old political disorders and the rise of a new world order, though Celestine's reminder that the Maastricht Treaty remains unyielding gestures to the European Union's illusions of transformation while exempting itself from substantive change. In a dramatic turn, however, Celestine mounts the brain and sets it on fire in an act of self-immolation. This destruction of the brain mirrors how policymakers often treat scientific insights: initially celebrating them, only to ultimately disregard them when they conflict with the interests of powerful stakeholders such as corporations. The sequence thus functions

as a sharp critique of the superficial integration of scientific knowledge into policymaking, underscoring the tendency to prioritize vested interests over informed, evidence-based decisions, under neoliberalism.

In a different interpretation, the brain can be seen as the animating force of ecomodernism, a worldview that champions technological innovation as the solution to environmental and social crises. Its destruction, in this light, serves as a critique of ecomodernist optimism. This reading is reinforced by Celestine's trust in AI and the film's satire of such systems. Celestine, now speaking in Swedish—a language Maxime perceives as gibberish and Tatsuro and Sylvain mistake for ancient Iron Age tongues—warns of an impending black storm and prophesies a new dawn. Speaking for a consortium of global tech and finance sectors, she declares that only Astrid the Night Queen can bring peace. Astrid, however, is revealed to be the name of an AI system employed by the European Union to combat sex crimes, particularly targeting paedophiles. Using its predictive capabilities, it identifies likely predators, prompting Hilda to remark on the unsettling statistic that individuals in high positions of power—such as world leaders—are statistically more likely to be paedophiles. When Astrid sends a plea for help to Maxime who is obviously identified as a potential paedophile, the stranded group decides to convince Astrid that Maxime is indeed a sexual predator, hoping this will trigger an alert to authorities, who will then locate and rescue them.

Rather than a saviour, it later turns out that AI has actually been an existential threat all along: helicopters and search teams cannot be deployed because Astrid has jammed communication channels. When the group finally reaches the chateau, they encounter Jonas Glob, a representative of the European Council, who must beg Astrid to contact the missing leaders. Astrid has sent everyone away, and Jonas realizes he has been left behind precisely because of his position of power. The scenario positions the European Union as hostage to the very AI technologies it deploys, mirroring real-world dependencies on tech giants in the United States and China. This narrative thread deepens the film's critique of ceding control to AI without sufficient oversight or accountability.

Satire is what makes this richness of meaning possible. First, it dis-hopes ecomodernism, dismantling the belief that AI or technological fixes can simply resolve crises. Second, it fosters ambivalence for competing interpretations to coexist. Empirical studies in psychology and communication science show that ambivalence increases cognitive processing of a message, making it more likely to be internalized and acted upon (Strick 3-19). Thus, satire not only multiplies interpretive layers but also enhances audience engagement with the underlying critique, potentially increasing the likelihood of meaningful behavioural change.

Intersectionality

Another affordance of satire is its capacity to address intersectionality. As previously noted about imbrications of neoliberalism, colonialism, imperialism, and

environmental degradation in the film, the satirical discourse also opens space for a nuanced exploration of the interconnections between gender, capitalism, and environmental justice. This approach aligns with the calls from thinkers like Stefania Barca, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Malcom Ferdinand, Amitav Ghosh, Donna Haraway, and Ursula Heise, among others, who emphasize the interconnectedness of social and environmental issues. In *Imagining Extinction*, Heise calls for a cosmopolitanism that carefully constructs the human identity across cultures, acknowledging technological and political influences. Multispecies justice may help unify diverse cultural views on ethical interspecies relationships, acknowledging that cultural and biological distinctions vary across communities. Ferdinand offers a radical critique of environmentalism and advocates for a decolonial ecology that integrates anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist perspectives, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human life.

Rumours highlights the intersection of environmental issues with gender dynamics, emphasizing the persistent dominance of men in leadership roles. Despite the presence of two women among the G7 leaders, the setting remains heavily influenced by heteropatriarchal structures. This is evident during the dinner table scene, where male leaders are notably louder and often disrupt their female colleagues, displaying an overconfidence in their contributions. However, the outcome reveals the superficiality of their efforts: a mere collection of buzzwords and rudimentary steps, which they mistakenly perceive as significant contributions to the “global community” through their “visionary capacity” (*Rumours*). Later, when Cordosa is pushing Sylvain in a wheelbarrow, he requests to use her laptop to document his thoughts for the provisional statement. Immersed in thought, he types away, only to later reveal his proposal for constructing western Europe’s largest sundial, an empty gesture that underscores the ineffectiveness and triviality of his leadership. This portrayal critiques masculine leadership as loud and domineering yet ultimately unproductive. The film satirizes the boastful wisdom of these leaders, exposing it as naïve and fallible, thus calling into question the efficacy of traditional gendered power dynamics in addressing complex global challenges.

Rumours extends its critique of gender roles to corporeal and material dimensions, examining how gendered bodies are perceived and discussed. This is illustrated when the leaders learn that a bog man’s penis “was severed and hung around his neck,” prompting Edison to comment dismissively, “sounds like a man to me” (*Rumours*). This reaction trivializes the brutality of the act, reflecting phallogocentrism and a gendered insensitivity to corporeal violation.

Further highlighting gender biases, when Maxime shows Sylvain a picture of the brain, Sylvain initially offers an implausible explanation, suggesting it is a whale’s brain. When others point out its resemblance to a human brain, Sylvain shifts his stance, agreeing but adding, “More like a woman’s brain [...] from the size. It’s slightly smaller than a giant man’s brain would be” (*Rumours*). The absurdity of this statement is underscored by the fact that the brain is the size of a small car.

In addition to satirizing the entrenched and persisting gender stereotypes and biases, the film critiques the intersection of environmental issues with socio-economic status and capitalism. Nancy Fraser's *Cannibal Capitalism* and Barca's *Workers of the Earth* provide a framework for understanding how capitalist and industrial modernity is constructed upon inequalities of class, race, gender, and species. Far from being inherent, these master relations are the result of ongoing struggles contested by marginalized groups globally. Barca's perspective challenges the notion that capitalist modernity is the optimal way to organize social and ecological relations.

Subtle criticisms of capitalism surface in the depiction of the G7 as "the world's wealthiest liberal democracies" (*Rumours*), which have convened annually since 1974 to address global issues. The European Union began participating in G7 meetings following the Nikkei collapse in the early 1990s, and its involvement is driven by the logic of market capitalism, seeking new markets when existing ones falter, rather than a collective commitment to solidarity, intentional cooperation, or political will for meaningful action. The film critiques such a market-driven approach, suggesting that true progress requires more than just economic alignment; it demands genuine collaboration and shared purpose. Moreover, the leaders are portrayed as detached from the populace, as exemplified by Sylvain's pity for his father whom he scorned, for living a hard life "teaching at the Department of Sociology at de Sorbonne" (*Rumours*), a reflection of (his blindness to) class dynamics.

The gender critique is more prominent than the critique of capitalism in the film. This may be because the film is enmeshed in neoliberal markets, which inevitably tempers its critique of market economies. Satire operates within the dominant discourse of society, akin to complicitous critique. As Frédéric Lordon compellingly argues, the culture industry commodifies satire, turning amusement into a means of social control, and capitalism manipulates affects and desires to maintain subjugation and servitude. *Rumours* falls short of reflecting on its complicity which hinders its nuanced critique of capitalism.

Having explored the intersections of environmental degradation with gender and capitalism, it is important to also consider how *Rumours* addresses the imbrication of environmental urgency with social justice. Employing satire enables the film to highlight the social inequities that result from and exacerbate ecological crises. In one instance, Maxime's encounter with the bog people parodies land acknowledgments, which are prevalent in Canada. He acknowledges that, "Our Presence has disturbed you somehow. Maybe you think of this as your land. It's your ancestral home, after all. The traditional home of your people [...] we have [...] upset the balance of your sacred energies for which affront there can be no excuse. So that's why we come to you now and offer our profound apologies for the hurt and offense that we have [...]" (*Rumours*). He apologizes for disturbing their ancestral land, acknowledging the disruption of sacred energies, yet immediately undermines his apology by throwing a shovel at them and fleeing. This scene satirizes the often hollow nature of land acknowledgments, critiquing their lack of genuine reckoning

and reparative action in the framework of restorative justice. This mirrors the conversations between the French and Japanese leaders in drafting the statement in which they drop random buzzwords including IT, integration, framework agreement, global jurisdiction, supply-chain management, domestic violence, global warming, and bilateral management. They sound more like blah blah blah than genuine attempts at restitution and timely action.

In another telling moment, Hilda suggests that the statement should begin with a personal reflection or experience, choosing to recount a story from her youth as an actress. She recalls a play about immigration in which her character betrayed a villainous scientist. She delivered “racist diatribes, full of expletives and offensive terminology [...] and eugenical explications of racial intelligence and natural hierarchies” (*Rumours*). Despite its offensive nature, she proposes opening the statement with these lines. It is only belatedly that she realizes the embarrassment and inappropriateness of what she has suggested. This incident highlights ingrained racism and the disturbing reaction it prompts: rather than being reprimanded for the content of her thoughts, the criticism focuses solely on their inappropriateness *for the statement*. The inherent offensiveness and immorality of her remarks is not questioned, revealing entrenched racism and its troubling acceptance, underscoring the film’s critique of institutionalized prejudices and superficiality in addressing deep-seated issues.

Demystifying the Fear Appeal

Rumours also employs satire to critique fear-based and apocalyptic environmental narratives, illustrating how they can undermine genuine environmental efforts. Guy Maddin, a Canadian director known for his work in the thriller genre, co-directed the film. Leveraging Maddin’s experience in crafting thrilling narratives, the directors employ surreal events and a dark, mysterious atmosphere to mock the conventional use of fear in environmental films by using parody and satire. The film employs cinematic techniques, such as a shadowy, ambiguous atmosphere and meticulously crafted visuals and staging, to amplify its satirical edge, prompting viewers to critically examine how fear is exploited in the commodification of environmental discourse. As a satire, the movie not only critiques the exploitation of fear but also highlights the absurdity of fear tactics and emotional manipulation, encouraging viewers to engage more thoughtfully with the constellation of environmental issues.

Rumours channels fear through the conventions of the thriller genre, utilizing elements such as red lighting, mysterious music, and the ambient sounds of the forest to heighten tension. The world leaders are depicted as being afraid of loneliness, darkness, and the bog people, yet ironically remain unfazed by the looming (climate) crisis. Edison warns Antonio of an impending apocalypse, describing it as the “cold, dark ending our species rightly deserves. Come at last” (*Rumours*). This sense of impending doom is reminiscent of classic apocalyptic narratives like *The Day the*

Earth Caught Fire (1961) and *Lord of the Flies* (1954). In the end, the leaders are confronted with the revelation that no help is coming because “everything [is] on fire. Many dead” (*Rumours*), underscoring the severity of the crisis they have failed to mitigate. Even in this dire situation, Edison doses off, conveying the leaders’ persistent disengagement and inability to grasp the urgency and scale of the catastrophe, further critiquing their ineffectiveness and detachment from reality.

In the wake of speculating about an apocalyptic event, Edison decides to sit in the forest and succumb to inaction by abdicating all his responsibilities. In this portrayal, the movie offers a sharp critique of how apocalyptic narratives can lead to paralysis and inaction, satirizing their crippling effect on decision-making and accountability. Much like its parody of fear within the thriller genre, the film exposes the way these doomsday scenarios can immobilize rather than motivate, highlighting their power to deter meaningful action and engagement. Despite objections from Maxime and Antonio, Edison’s choice to “become one with the loamy ground” and his wish for his body to “be made into something useful for a change” (*Rumours*) might initially appear introspective, but ultimately indicates his failure to fulfil his duties, especially significant given his role as the President of the United States. This act can be seen as an allusion to the U.S. withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under Trump, underscoring the broader theme of political leaders evading their responsibilities amid global crises. Edison’s hyper-nationalism and unmerited sense of superiority further illustrate this point. As they journey through the forest, he boasts of leading the “world’s oldest democracy” (*Rumours*), belittling other democracies and demanding respect and dignity, highlighting his detachment and misplaced pride.

Other characters succumb to the horrors of the brave new world, exemplified by Jonas, who ultimately takes his own life. Jonas’s suicide leaves Hilda unaffected, as she turns to distributing tote bags and merchandise to the leaders, a gesture that underscores the trivialities and consumerism that persist even amid crisis. This scene highlights the leaders’ complicity in perpetuating a system sustained by unbridled consumption and empty gestures. Jonas is disposable because he has completed his mission in luring the leaders to the chateau; G7 leaders are next in line. The tote bags, ironically, contain potassium cyanide pills, yet Antonio’s ignorance remains unshaken as he inquires if they are vitamin pills.

In a final act of absurdity, Maxime, inspired by a newsletter article titled “Top Six Political Speeches” found in his tote bags, gathers everyone’s notes to create a meaningless pastiche. This amalgamation of hollow rhetoric represents the pinnacle of leadership they can muster, serving as a satirical commentary on the vacuousness and ineffectiveness of their collective efforts. Through these depictions, the film critiques the inability of world leaders to transcend triviality and engage meaningfully with the pressing challenges they face.

As Maxime steps onto the balcony, with the sky burning red, he reads the pastiche statement to a small group of bog people. The statement is filled with the same empty yet glittering language typical of political declarations, featuring signifiers without signifieds: buzzwords like global community, equitable world, rule

of law, shared values, multilateral order, and human rights appear as mere platitudes. Part of the statement commits to “eliminating, wherever possible, the procrastination pit stops that have interrupted our works over the years. And also cultivating opportunities for non-sexual physical affection [...] and ensuring [...] that everyone has access to slips for the sleep tank. Not to mention the importance of finding the appropriate venue for what will be when it’s completed western Europe’s largest sundial” (*Rumours*). As he reads, other leaders join him one by one, motivated by the safeguarding of their thoughts and interests in the statement.

Maxime solemnly notes, “The sky is on fire, water of the ocean is thick and black, and death is all around us,” but quickly follows with, “but I assure you, hand to heart, that if we nurture the sense of common purpose and vision [...] we have an opportunity, like none we ever had before” (*Rumours*). This juxtaposition is immediately undercut by a cut to a bog person masturbating to his words, with shots of the G7 flags burning, undermining the futile and performative nature of the leaders’ rhetoric. The statement continues to absurdly advocate for “fostering competition in the digital market place” and meeting “the death of our world and species head-on [...] with passion and friendship and unyielding we will carry ourselves fearlessly into the dreadful inferno that awaits us all. It’s better to burn out than to fade away” (*Rumours*). This culmination of absurdity is mirrored by the bog people’s ejaculation, as the credits roll, showcasing the ultimate futility and emptiness of the proclaimed leadership and their inability to confront the real crisis.

Conclusion

Rumours uses satire to critique the ineptitude of world leaders and the States they represent in confronting the climate crisis, while simultaneously delving into the intersections of gender, capitalism, and environmental justice. It systematically dismantles neoliberalism’s performative incompetence by exposing how the system’s reliance on hollow rhetoric, technofixes, and commodified dissent perpetuates the very crises it claims to solve, ultimately urging audiences to reject both blind hope and apocalyptic despair in favour of radical systemic critique. It exposes the superficiality and inefficacy of leadership in the global disorder, revealing a preoccupation with trivial matters over substantive policy-making and effective governance. Satiric portrayals of individual and institutional failures underscore the necessity of shifting responsibility from individuals to broader systems. And critiquing ecomodernism and overreliance on technofixes challenges misplaced faith in technological solutions that fail to address underlying socio-political issues. Satire further enables connecting environmental concerns with social justice like gender and racial prejudice, shedding light on the persistence and implications of traditional power dynamics. By satirizing leaders who are elected representatives of the collective, *Rumours* effectively exposes the limitations of neoliberalism.

While the film targets neoliberalism, it falls short of offering any alternative vision, which can be attributed, in part, to its entanglement and complicity within the

very market structures it satirizes. Operating under the same logic, it seeks profit, while monetizing and capitalizing on (climate) crisis. Its political critique unfolds within and utilizes the neoliberal discourse to satirize the same framework it employs. Though not radical enough, the film surpasses apocalyptic narratives by foregrounding three key elements. First, instead of relying on fear or hope, it aims to evoke dis-hoping, ambivalence, and indignation. Second, it manages to offer an intersectional political critique, though complicitous. Third, it critiques the absurdity and lack of self-reflexivity in apocalyptic and fear-based narratives.

Ultimately, the film is a satirical critique of the absurdity and inaction that pervade contemporary global politics. As Secreast argues, “The grotesque, abject, and satire have potential for intervening into hierarchical, violently anthropocentric worldviews, which govern how we interact with the lifeforms around us with whom we are inextricably enmeshed” (453). By employing satire, the film challenges these entrenched hierarchical perspectives in human societies, urging a re-evaluation of the roles and differentiated responsibilities of those in power, but fails to extend its critique to include the more-than-human. Despite its satirical edge, *Rumours* falls short in several other critical areas, particularly concerning multispecies environmental justice and anthropocentrism. Despite its critique of imperialism, it echoes the rhetoric of the European Union and maintains an anthropocentric perspective, suggesting that the planet will endure while humanity suffers, thereby neglecting the broader implications of biodiversity loss and failing to grant agency to nature and vibrant matter. The film’s echoing of discourses favoured by the European Union could be interpreted in two ways: either as an intentional critique that remains confined within the very frameworks it questions—thereby exposing their limitations without transcending or envisioning alternatives—or as an inadvertent reproduction of those policies, given its embeddedness in the culture industry shaped by the same imperial and anthropocentric worldviews that inform the discourse of the European Union. In either case, the film’s position reveals the challenges of critiquing systemic structures while operating within them.

While the film does not explicitly depict a flatter ontology of the world—an approach, often associated with new materialist thought, that seeks to dissolve the rigid boundaries between humans and more-than-humans in order to redistribute agency—its narrative and visual strategies ultimately reinforce anthropocentric perspectives. Proponents argue that a flat ontology can challenge anthropocentric hierarchies and open up more ecologically attuned ways of living (cf. Barad, Coole and Frost), while critics caution that ontological flattening may obscure power asymmetries under capitalism and risk depoliticizing struggles over material resources (cf. Malm, Chandler and Reid, McGregor). Jane Bennett suggests that a moderate use of anthropomorphism could help highlight the interconnectedness of all materialities, challenging the human-nonhuman divide (xvi, 98-100). However, the film does not sufficiently utilize this approach to foster a deeper appreciation for more-than-human agency or to encourage meaningful action against environmental degradation.

Moreover, the film's critique lacks a holistic understanding of multispecies justice. As Hamza Hamouchene argues, the climate crisis is not solely attributable to fossil fuels but to their exploitative use within a capitalist framework (29-48). A mere transition to renewable energy, without addressing the underlying capitalist commodification of nature, fails to tackle the root causes, potentially exacerbating existing problems concerning equity and resource ownership (cf. Riofrancos). Thus, while *Rumours* succeeds in satirizing political ineptitude and dis-hoping neoliberalism, it misses the opportunity to advance a more nuanced and inclusive dialogue on environmental and multispecies justice and emancipatory worlding.

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