

The Magnitude of All Things: Jennifer Abbott's Compassionate Look At Climate Change And Grief

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The opportunity to interview Jennifer Abbott, award-winning director of a sprawling documentary and meditation intertwining personal and climate grief, feels almost like a responsibility atop that honour.

Humans are united by little these days, but our struggle to reverse climate change is now a universal one, a battle hopefully to be aided by legislation at the COP26 conference, and the threat of our inexorable march towards permanent global damage. It is, though, a lived reality for some that Abbott realises for us, screening mournful shots of Australia's bushfire-ravaged forests, or floating the camera over bleached coral reefs, scenes grounded, humanised by the interwoven, candid interviews, intimate insights into scarcely shown personal stories amidst this spectacular tragedy.

Each experience is separated by immense physical distance, but Abbott gravitates the pieces towards a cohesive terminus through a Herculean effort of filmmaking. Her film is beautifully shot and acute meaning is entrenched within each frame.

"The grief of the world we're losing is so intense and difficult because we love the world so much, so I wanted the cinematography to reflect that love."

Abbott articulates a pledge that comes across in the reverential, often slow-motion, close-ups of nature's most elemental features, and is opposed by hellish depictions of industry, such as the New South Wales open-pit coal mines, which she recounts were, "like Mordor from *Lord of the Rings*."

Its intricate cinematography is thoroughly enriched by the edit, a process which took Abbott, who edits her own documentaries, a year to complete. She describes dealing with hundreds of hours of footage, divided into "thirty layers of audio and ten layers of video all on this extraordinarily complex timeline." But, from a myriad of possibilities, a near-perfect fusion is found.

Her tireless work across these diverse

facets allows the crucial motifs to stand tall on the documentary's sturdy foundations. Chiefly significant is the examination of grief, setting it apart from the bulk of climate-focused content, which isn't always pinpoint when balancing science and empathy. *The Magnitude of All Things* is thoroughly holistic in its account of catastrophic planetary damage but is grounded by Abbott's relationship with her sister, Saille, who died of cancer, and her beautifully written letters which narrate its ruminations on identity and acceptance.

Abbott explained to me the importance of viewing climate change through this unique prism:

"It is a narrative thread within climate discourse that was being largely ignored."

Her answer to my question on the importance of empathy within this data-orientated field becomes affectingly honest.

"If you tell the truth about the climate crisis, it's probably going to break your heart, right?"

she tells me, and the veracity of that statement on the evidence of the documentary is beyond doubt.

One segment features two bushfire survivors mentally reconstructing their vaporised home's layout, recounting happier memories in the now-empty space.

"It was just...bang! And it was gone,"

says Jan Harris of the night her house burnt down. Behind the stark reality of her experience is clear personal grief which unveils a hidden but frighteningly real emotional actuality. Life on our sheltered island distances us from these recurring events, but Abbott's principle of telling the truth cuts through the implied distance of climate change jargon, straight to the emotional core.

Her special perspective allows the spectrum of human nuances to transform climate discourse into both a thought-provoking collective and individual trial. She connects the theme of grief with another – hope, such a complicated idea when contextualised within the shadow of a potentially

apocalyptic event.

Popular conceptions of the idea centre around passivity, where it acts more like a desire for a better future than an emotion obsolete without action, the latter being more aligned with the view of the documentary's contributors, including Roger Hallam (founder of Extinction Rebellion) and Greta Thunberg.

Abbott is considered when discussing the notion:

"What I really want to do with this film was present a nuanced exploration of hope, not this sledgehammer imperative that this film must be hopeful."

It is a feat achieved through the balancing of each interviewee's views and her own, which categorise hope as important when driven by action, but augmented by her acceptance of grief.

"Some days I feel way more hopeful, some days hope is lost. From both places though, the imperative is to act."

The Magnitude of All Things' creation of this complex but ultimately, and perhaps necessarily, uplifting and inspiring tone is one of its resonant strengths. It was a perspective I was keen to learn more about from its director, especially in relation to the actions of Extinction Rebellion, who feature centrally in the documentary, and who have occasionally caused public resentment rather than support.

Abbott's expertise on the subject, in comparison to the opinions of hot-take vox pops, allowed me to engage with their views of non-violent direct action as she upheld them, explaining that purely passive protest has made little impact:

"Obviously that's not been effective, so we have to step it up [...] to force the leaders of power to do the right thing."

Her stance on COP26 is similar, and she expressed sympathy towards governments who are often beholden to corporations when signing the (voluntary) climate pledges.

Again, her message was one of realistic hope, not necessarily in the directives being orchestrated at the Glasgow Summit, but in people.

"I feel like, and I hope, of course, that there's just going to be an explosion of rage, really, of activism that's saying, 'Ok, you have failed us', and there's already people in the streets but there's going to be way more people joining them, and there's going to be way more non-violent direct action."

There was, though, a moment, halfway through our conversation, when she stopped to mention that, given this is a university publication, she wanted to recommend a book.

Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of Our World by Daniel Sherrell.

I haven't had the chance to read it yet, but I included it here because the title strikes me. Strikes me because it encompasses how I feel about her documentary.

As the stories of individuals from across the planet come together, distant strands tied by grief on differing scales, 'coming of age' is an apt term to describe the catharsis I feel when thinking about it now, a catharsis created by Jennifer Abbott's exploration into her own relationship with the themes so confidently charts in *The Magnitude of All Things*.

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