

Film

Sea change

For millions of years, human beings have been passengers on the good ship Earth alongside all other species. However, midway through the last century, humans shouldered up to the cockpit and took control, and as they did so, Earth transitioned into what many scientists have termed a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene. We are now the dominant force determining many of the biophysical conditions on Earth—the dynamics of our climate system, where forests, grasslands, and wetlands are present and where they are absent, the flow in our rivers, the status of our fisheries, the global cycling of nitrogen, phosphorous, and carbon, and even which species still exist. But we are like hijackers who have seized the controls but never learned to fly. Confronted by a dizzying array of buttons and flashing lights, we are flipping switches and turning dials with little understanding of the consequences and, in so doing, are rapidly changing the biophysical conditions that underpin global food production, our exposure to infectious disease, even the habitability of the places where we live.

This rapid transformation of Earth's life support systems is the terrain

of the emerging, multidisciplinary field of planetary health, and it is the setting for *A Plastic Ocean*. This documentary film is an impassioned, if occasionally meandering, exploration of the enormous mess we are making in the world's oceans as a result of the sheer volume of plastic waste that deliberately or accidentally makes its way into our seas. Stunning underwater footage of blue whales, turtles, seabirds, and every manner of marine life in all its variegated

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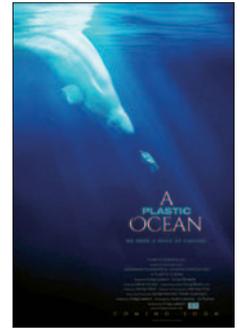
splendour are jarringly juxtaposed with floating or submerged rubbish and marine animals caught in plastic webs. And, lest viewers think that the footage has been cherry-picked to misrepresent the scale of the problem, facts flash across the screen like hammer blows. As we watch footage of a necropsy of a seabird showing a

stomach swollen with hundreds of small bits of multicoloured plastic, writing flashes across the screen: 92% of seabirds globally are estimated to have plastic in their bodies.

A strong sense that the scale of the human enterprise and the size of our planet have become, for the first time, fundamentally mismatched is pervasive throughout the film. The numbers shown in *A Plastic Ocean* are hard to take in: worldwide we will produce 300 million tons of plastic this year; 5 trillion pieces of plastic are afloat in our oceans and 70% of all plastic sinks; a quarter of fish caught in Indonesia and California contained plastic debris in their bodies; 2 million plastic bags are produced each minute.

And plastic pollution is only one among many examples of a human ecological footprint that is now exceeding the space available for it on the only habitable planet we know. The 40 billion tons of carbon dioxide flowing from our tail pipes and chimneys and power plants into the atmosphere each year are fundamentally altering our global climate system. We use nearly half the ice-free, desert-free, land area of the planet to feed ourselves; we have dammed over half the world's rivers and exploit 90% of global fisheries at or beyond maximum sustainable yields. Nor is there much sign of things turning around as human population increases and economic growth holds out the promise that more and more of us can consume like people in high-income countries. Clearly, we need a new trajectory.

A Plastic Ocean provides glimmers of that trajectory, which encompasses regulatory changes (banning plastic bags in more cities), systemic changes (circular economies in which plastic is recycled into useful new products), and new innovation (plasma furnaces that reduce plastic to elemental



A Plastic Ocean
Directed by Craig Leeson,
produced by Adam Leipzig and
Jo Ruxton.
<http://www.plasticoceans.org/film/>
Screening at the 2016 Global
Health Film Festival on
Nov 11–12, 2016 at the Barbican,
London, UK
<http://www.globalhealthfilm.org/ghff-2016>



constituents that can be formed into useful fuels or other products). These changes in policies, regulations, ways of doing business, and technological innovation are core to righting the ship and bringing us back in balance with Earth's life support systems. We need to ratchet them up quickly.

And for us to embrace such change at a scale commensurate with the challenges will require a level of global activism that can only be achieved by creating a new narrative of our role in the world—a narrative that films like *A Plastic Ocean* help us construct. We humans took over the plane.

We stand at the controls. It is time we learned to fly.

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I am Director of the Planetary Health Alliance (www.planetaryhealthalliance.org).

Hey ho, let's go



The Punk Syndrome

Directed by Jukka Kärkkäinen and

J-P Passi. 2016.

<http://www.pkn.rocks/film/>

Screening at the 2016 Global Health Film Festival on Nov 11–12, 2016 at the Barbican, London, UK

<http://www.globalhealthfilm.org/programme>

It's 40 years after the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK* and the Ramones' self-titled debut album. Earlier this year the British Library put on *Punk 1976–78*, a lovingly curated exhibition of punk memorabilia; and, in hindsight, Johnny Rotten and Joey Ramone were altogether more benign than certain more mainstream 1970s entertainers. Has "the filth and the fury" of punk become merely an object of nostalgia?

The Punk Syndrome, a Finnish documentary directed by Jukka Kärkkäinen and Jani-Petteri Passi, finds evidence of a pulse in punk's supposedly moribund body—and a strong pulse it is. The film covers the adventures of Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät (Pertti Kurikka's Name Day), a punk group with the classic drums–bass–guitar–vocals line-up. It contains many of the scenes that are *de rigeur* in rock documentaries—tension in the studio, life on the road, and the noise and sweat of a successful gig. However, there is one

difference: Pertti Kurikan Nimipäivät's four members all live with learning disabilities.

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The film does not provide the viewer with any captions or voiceover to provide background details. While this is frustrating at times (for example, we see the band's guitarist Pertti Kurikka attend a reception with the Finnish President, but have no context for this), it is, I think, a valid, and

possibly the best creative choice. If the film has a theme, it is about the band members' expression of their individuality through the unit of the group. So we get to see (and hear, at high volume) this expression in a raw, unfiltered form. Pertti, hunched over and painstakingly filling in his diary letter by letter, expresses explicit feelings of self-directed anger. Singer and lyricist Kari Aalto, unhappy at the lack of control in his life as he perceives himself moved from appointment to appointment, howls out a tirade against pedicurists to a background of thrashing guitar sounds ("Fuckin' pedicurists/They all suck big time/They just take care of your feet/They don't understand").

In between studio sessions and gigs, *The Punk Syndrome* gives the viewer access to aspects of the band members' lives that have not traditionally been seen in films—fictional or documentary—about individuals with learning disabilities. One aspect is the band members' expressions of their sexuality, still largely a taboo subject. Kari gets married during the course of the movie, necessitating the viewing of a facts-of-life educational video; when the band go on tour to Hamburg, their route to the Beatles memorial takes them along the Reeperbahn, and their comments on what they see are left uncensored. But with this frankness comes tenderness, which often packs an unexpected emotional punch. For example, the band's visit to see their manager's new baby is the cue for Pertti to reminisce about his own



Photo: J-P Passi