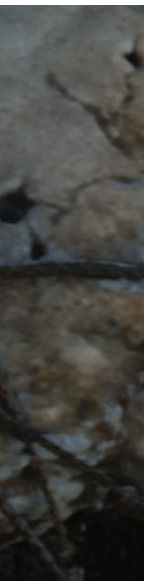
Cultural POWER

A Producer's Role in a Climate Changing World

AS SHAPERS OF NARRATIVES, PRODUCERS SPARK NEW THINKING, IMAGINATION AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT THAT CAN CREATE CHANGE ON A GLOBAL SCALE.

WRITTEN BY LYDIA DEAN PILCHER



Lydia Dean Pilcher is cochair of the PGA Sustainability Task Force and a two-time Emmy-winning, Oscar-nominated producer of over 40 feature films and series. Her New York-based production company, Cine Mosaic, works with partners in Europe, the U.S., India, Africa and the Middle East. Pilcher collaborates with studios, unions, and UN Climate Change to foster clean energy transitions and climate-themed storytelling. As an educator and cultural strategist, Pilcher cofounded Global Rise: Stories for the Future. She teaches an interdisciplinary graduate course at the Columbia Climate School to inspire and craft compelling climate solutions in profound stories for film, television and the arts.

Actor and UN Goodwill Ambassador Djimon Hounsou with former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at the 2011 Global Creative Forum in Los Angeles.

COURTESY OF UN PHOTO/MARK GARTEN

CATALYZING NARRATIVES FOR CHANGE

As producers, we are immersed in the power of film, television and media to shape culture. We've long known how stories can set agendas for what audiences think about and do. Narratives emerge and bring into focus what we care about, and they drive what we believe is possible. In this sense, I believe the most important skill for a producer to have is vision. It's about the future.

In 1983, more than 100 million Americans watched the dramatic television movie *The Day After*, a portrayal of what life would be like following nuclear war. The movie sparked a national debate and increased worldwide awareness of nuclear risk—overlapping with ongoing UN disarmament efforts. The film became a reference point in policy debates and contributed to treaties created under the United Nations, including the Chemical Weapons Convention of 1993 and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty of 1996.

The relationship between the entertainment industry and the United Nations became more intentional in the early 2000s, as an increasing number of movies highlighted humanitarian crises around the world. When key films like *Blood Diamond, The Constant Gardener* and *Hotel Rwanda* powerfully reshaped public understanding of critical issues, the UN recognized the role that storytelling can play in humanizing policymaking and action.

As climate change discourse entered mainstream politics, then-Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon traveled to Los Angeles in 2011 to hold panels and meetings with industry leaders. He urged Hollywood to help raise awareness about climate change as the defining challenge of our time. He asked writers, directors, producers and actors to use their talent and narrative influence to highlight climate change and related UN priorities.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines culture as the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. These cultural elements, along with symbols and metaphors, influence the ways audiences absorb the stories we tell.

Today's producing landscape involves deep collaboration with audiences as we seek to distinguish our work in a crowded marketplace of shifting values and a rapidly changing world. This holds particular relevance for an emerging industry-wide movement to acknowledge climate change in the stories we tell on screens. Climate touches everything. It affects our personal lives, systems and cultures on a global scale. Audience engagement around climate change can be more effective when scientific insight is delivered via narratives where ideas can be viscerally felt rather than just intellectually thought.

BLOCKBUSTER POWER AND POPULAR CULTURE

A current box office success, *Avatar: Fire and Ash*, belongs to a genre of mythic/blockbuster climate movies that can shift cultural imagination. In the *Avatar* world, industrial extraction by humans devastates ecosystems and Indigenous societies on Pandora—a reference to fossil fuel extraction, mining and colonial resource grabbing on Earth. The film is about values, worldviews and systems change, which is exactly where many climate communicators argue the biggest leverage lies. But as in many cases, where is the public conversation?

Work that moves beyond entertainment into spheres of cultural influence can often provoke audiences

COURTESY OF DISNEY

Avatar: Fire and Ash

to rethink social norms, power and responsibility. In its heyday, Norman Lear's TV show *All in the Family* was the most-watched show in America. A 1975 episode boosted early public awareness of the dangers of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), man-made chemicals depleting the ozone layer, about which scientists had only recently begun to sound the alarm.

Michael (aka "Meathead") grabs Gloria's hairspray: Right here. This is a killer.

Gloria: Oh, so now my hairspray's a killer!

Michael: Yeah, your hairspray, my deodorant, all spray cans. I read that there are gases inside these cans, Gloria, that shoot up into the air and can destroy the ozone.

Gloria: What's the ozone?

Michael: Ozone is a protective shield that surrounds the earth that protects us against ultraviolet rays. Do you know what they can do?

Gloria: Yeah, they protect us from sunburn.

Michael: Sure, when the ozone is there, but when it's gone, you can get skin cancer, and God knows what it will do to the plants and crops!

The episode created public discussion around the emerging environmental risk of greenhouse gases created by aerosols and refrigerants, leading to a significant decline in the sales of products like hair spray and deodorant, and prompting companies like DuPont and the aerosol industry to research alternative chemicals.

As part of his lifelong commitment to socially conscious storytelling and civic engagement, Lear helped normalize the idea that science belongs in popular culture, that ordinary citizens can debate planetary risk, and that comedy can carry moral weight.

The show's influence, alongside media attention, led to the U.S. ban on CFC-based aerosols in 1978. Public pressure created the political will needed for scientists and politicians to persuade leaders like Ronald Reagan (with concerns about the great outdoors and skin cancer) and Margaret Thatcher (a chemist and influential voice in policy and science) to take action leading to the international Montreal Protocol in 1987. This was the first treaty in UN history to achieve universal ratification by all countries.

The ozone hole over Antarctica is healing, and projections suggest a return to preindustrial levels by mid-century.

URGENCY RISES IN PUBLIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Public consciousness about global warming reached tentpole-movie level with Roland Emmerich's blockbuster, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), produced by Mark Gordon. Despite being a science fiction film, it generated public conversations and activity, compelling people to Google "extreme weather events" and newscasters to begin using the term "climate change" in weather reports.

The same year, HBO released producer/director Spike Lee's four-part documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*. The film examines the human, political and social consequences of Hurricane Katrina's devastation of New Orleans in 2005, particularly the government's response and the suffering of those displaced, with over 300,000 residents migrating out of the city.

Even now, the Louisiana coastline continues to erode into open water, at about 25 to 35 square miles each year. Some estimates equate this to a football field of wetlands lost every 100 minutes, primarily due to sea level rise, storms and land subsidence.

In 2006, as a young mother, I remember feeling my worldview shift as I watched *An Inconvenient Truth*, produced by Laurie David, Lawrence Bender, Scott Z. Burns and Lesley Chilcott. This American documentary film portrays former Vice President Al Gore's slide-show campaign to educate people about global warming.

These events and films were game changers. They conveyed the high stakes of global warming to the general public in a storytelling format easily understood by people without scientific training.

An Inconvenient Truth won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2007. Gore later received the Nobel Peace Prize alongside the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

Former PGA Executive Director Vance Van Petten (third from right) accepting an Environmental Media Association Award in 2011 with producers and founders of PGA Green Rachael Joy, Katie Carpenter, Mari Jo Winkler, Lydia Dean Pilcher, Amanda Scarano-Carter, and Fred Baron.

COURTESY OF LYDIA PILCHER

Beasts of the Southern Wild

COURTESY OF FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing's Ice Watch exhibit was on display during COP21 in Paris in 2015, featuring immense free-floating ice blocks harvested from glaciers from Greenland's melting ice sheet.

COURTESY OF MARTIN ARGYROGLO

(IPCC) "for their efforts to build up and disseminate greater knowledge about man-made climate change, and to lay the foundations for the measures needed to counteract such change." Climate change became a front-burner topic.

My PGA colleagues Mari Jo Winkler and Katie Carpenter and I began meeting over our common concerns that year. We flew to Tennessee to take part in Al Gore's Climate Reality leadership training held over a weekend in a Nashville dance hall. We were all in. We formed PGA Green and, encouraged by Gore's team, Katie's company Green Media Solutions calculated the first production carbon footprint on *Away We Go*, a Focus Features film that Mari Jo was producing. The visibility of our passion kicked off PGA's early work with studios, unions and guilds around sustainability on our sets, and rallied our responsibility as an industry to meet UNFCCC climate goals. (Read the PGA Clean Energy Call to Action at producersguild.org/sustainability.)

NEW VOICES EXPAND CINEMATIC LANGUAGE

A modest-budget independent film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild,* produced by Dan Janvey, Josh Penn and Michael Gottwald, was filmed in the post-Katrina landscape. Directed by Benh Zeitlin, the movie blends magical realism, myth and social realism with the science of global warming—and erupted on screen with a new sensorial visual grammar. The film pioneered climate storytelling through a child's perspective, following a sensorial logic where time collapses, and past, present and future coexist. Melting ice caps appear as aurochs—ancestral, imagined oxlike creatures—linking planetary systems to emotional memory.

The film was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, which brought awareness of racism and environmental justice forward in the public conversation. People who live near oil refineries and wetlands bear a higher risk of climate catastrophes, as safety regulations frequently don't pro-

tect these fenceline communities.

PGA AT THE 2015 PARIS AGREEMENT

The IPCC was established in 1988 to provide policymakers with regular scientific assessments on the current state of knowledge about climate change. Thousands of scientists worldwide serve as authors to synthesize peer-reviewed climate research to create a scientific consensus to guide the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Adopted in 1992, UNFCCC provided a forum for the Paris Agreement to build international cooperation around greenhouse gas mitigation, climate finance, resilience and adaptation.

In 2015, as PGA vice president of motion pictures and a cofounder of PGA Green, I represented our industry at the 21st convening of the annual UNFCCC Conference of Parties (COP21), alongside international film and TV groups. The Paris Agreement was adopted by 195 nation-states, agreeing to limit global warming to no more than 2 degrees Celsius (ideally 1.5 degrees Celsius) above preindustrial levels. The agreement mobilized a global response to climate change with "nationally determined contributions" (NDCs) supporting collective progress. At PGA, our focus was on sustainable production and decarbonizing our sets. We felt so hopeful.

Five years after the Paris Agreement was adopted, however, global warming continued to intensify. In 2020, the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project began to research what had become a veritable silence around climate on Hollywood's screens. *The Day After Tomorrow* was the last blockbuster studio action movie to mention global warming.

Between 2019 and 2023, U.S. Congressional investigations revealed troves of corporate communications indicating multidecade campaigns by the oil and gas industries to undermine public trust in climate science, to delay regulation and to exaggerate scientific uncertainty, while controlling the narrative of energy in American popular culture. *The White House Effect*, a 2024 documentary, charts the governmental shifts in environmental policy from a planetary consciousness in the '60s and '70s to a public narrative increasingly controlled by the petro nations and the fossil fuel industry.

In *The Simpsons*, Lisa joins the group Dirt First to save Springfield's oldest tree.

As audiences can drive storytelling, it's useful to pay attention to the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, which documents trends in American levels of concern and attitudes about climate change over time. In 2022, Yale reported the highest levels of concern ever recorded since they began the surveys in 2014, with 70% of Americans saying they were worried about climate change. But when asked what they *believed* that percentage to be, study participants estimated 30% percent.

We are a supermajority, but we don't know it.

THE EMERGENCE OF CLIMATE STORYTELLING

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our focus on sustainable production at the PGA expanded into the realm of climate storytelling. Amid a time of great turbulence in our country, PGA Green produced the webinar "New Climate Narratives in a World of Racial Injustice and a Global Pandemic," bringing a cultural lens to climate and storytelling from producers, cultural leaders, writers and critics.

Our industry began to rally, recognizing the narrative power imbalance and the importance of our cultural forums to educate and evoke response. Many of the groups converging then on the forefront of climate and storytelling continue to provide education and consultancies championing efforts in our industry, including the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Rewrite the Future, the Writers Guild of America, Good Energy, Rare, and the Hollywood Climate Summit.

At PGA and WGA, creatives interested in climate storytelling began to express a desire to dive deeper into the complexity of science and globalized systems. But support was hard to find. It also became apparent that we had no pipeline in our film and TV schools, or even a well-sourced knowledge base available to support popular storytelling about climate change on a larger systemic and cinematic scale.

INTERDISCIPLINARY STRATEGIES FOR CLIMATE NARRATIVES

Informed by teaching cultural strategy over five years in the Graduate Film program at NYU Tisch, I interviewed academics across the country who were

teaching climate storytelling in their own disciplines: English, engineering, humanities, science, history, architecture, narrative medicine, journalism and more. I designed a graduate course, Climatic Change: Storytelling Arts, Zeitgeist, and our Future, that brings together students from Columbia University's Climate School and the School of the Arts in an interdisciplinary classroom.

Whereas top-down, data-driven science communication rarely moves the needle of public understanding, young minds in the Climate School are eager to take on the challenge of creating stories that translate this scientific and epic existential dilemma. In lively discussions, we track zeitgeist elements in our shifting culture, parallel to the changing climate. We seek to overcome the prevalent psychological distancing from our future and focus on solutions that can positively chart where we are going.

I teach storytelling through popular culture films like *Dune* (based on the climate fiction novel by Frank Herbert) and *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler's original vision of a protopia), as well as independent films like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* and international films like Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, which was made during the erasure of a culture by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

We also draw from television. Since the 1990s, *The Simpsons* has used satire to take on climate change themes including air and water pollution, public apathy and lack of corporate responsibility. Lisa Simpson, as a passionate activist, represents the show's moral and scientific conscience on climate change. She organizes protests, petitions around issues of government inaction, supporting youth-led environmental concern.

Today's successful showrunners are increasingly able to assert their agency in driving climate content in TV series. We've begun to see a wide range of climate representation from settings to themes, across genres and audiences in series such as *The Handmaid's Tale, Grey's Anatomy (S21), Hacks (S3), Industry (S2), Ted Lasso (S2), Reservation Dogs, Borgen—Power & Glory (S4)* and *Families Like Ours*.

In the course I teach, we discuss our human relationship to the natural world in movies and shows like *Train Dreams, Nomadland* and *True Detective: Night Country*. We consider films about nonhuman species, such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*, which explore moral complexity and decenter humans, allowing animals, spirits, forests, wind and even machines their own agency and ecological consciousness. We debate shows like *Landman* in order to explore media integrity, cultural tropes and disinformation, particularly around clean energy.

THE SLOW VIOLENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

As current government priorities shift, aggressive special-interest disinformation and polarization in media narratives are fueling a detachment from our climate crisis. This exacerbates what Rob Nixon, professor in humanities and environment at Princeton, calls a "slow violence." The incremental destruction over time is not always perceptible, distancing us from the real effects of climate change. Climate stories can fail if recognition comes after the consequences are locked in. Do we want our stories to mobilize action or merely memorialize loss?

Many of the climate students at Columbia are looking at climate change as a structural force that is reshaping culture, geopolitics and personhood. When I realized the students were naturally thinking in systems, something clicked for me—especially as the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established in the Paris Agreement represent systems. We keenly explore the work of Donella Meadows, a pioneer at MIT who viewed sustainability through a systems-thinking lens, with an eye toward identifying leverage points—places in a system where small changes can lead to big shifts in behavior.

Research from FrameWorks Institute, which has been studying mindsets for 25 years, has found that "the system is rigged" mindset is among the most pervasive in American culture. This mindset can lead to an increased demand for change or result in fatalism—the conclusion that the problem is just too big to solve. Interestingly, research has also shown how stories that situate individual choices within their larger structural context (i.e., systems) can foster empathy, shift attitudes about who is responsible for solving societal problems, and build policy support.

STORMING THE APOCALYPSE

A Columbia faculty member who took a particular interest in my class is meteorologist Andrew Kruczkiewicz. He is a senior staff researcher for the National Center for Disaster Preparedness and works with the Red Cross and other humanitarian groups. His research interests include how to strengthen the role of perception and cognition in the communication of climate and weather risk, primarily in the context of early warning systems, vulnerability assessments, and humanitarian decision-making.

In the summer of 2025, Andrew and I partnered to create a research project: Storming the Apocalypse: Disasters, Culture & Risk Perception. We proposed to address how data-driven climate science has failed to increase the public's perception of risk. Without cultural translation, even the most effective solutions remain ignored.

Through multiphase, interdisciplinary collaborations with a range of communities, we are cocreating four city-based case studies (New York City, Kampala, Rio de Janeiro and Bangkok). We focus on the power of storytelling arts, popular culture, systems thinking and ecocriticism to engage the emotional, cognitive and psychological dimensions of how people perceive risk.

A still from *The Salt in Our Waters*, which screened at COP26 in 2021. The film focuses on a Bangladeshi village that vanished due to rising sea levels.

COURTESY OF REZWAN SHAHRIAR SUMIT

COP30—THE CULTURE COP

In the months preceding COP30, the Brazilian COP Presidency's Action Agenda strategy was developed as a catalytic pillar to support climate action across communities. Citizens and experts were invited to propose tangible solutions and positive examples, and to collaborate in a Call for Plans for Accelerated Solutions (PAS).

In my role with the UN Climate Change initiative, Entertainment and Culture for Climate Action (ECCA), I proposed a PAS based on the research that Andrew and I had begun for a new storytelling model in climate communication training. This was an exciting opportunity to forefront cultural infrastructure as a foundation to align our work with the need for policymakers and negotiators to understand how culture can best be integrated into their work.

In November 2025, the Brazilian COP Presidency accepted our proposal into Action Group 19: Culture, Cultural Heritage Protection and Climate Action. As I set off for COP30 in Brazil—on the 10-year anniversary of the Paris Agreement—I mulled the Brazilian spirit of collective effort, *mutirão*, and the ways culture and multilateral diplomacy can intersect.

At Belém, the gateway to the Amazon, 194 countries and 56,000 people came together. Representatives of national delegations, subnational governments, Indigenous people, businesses, media, scientists, academics and nongovernmental organizations were on the ground, committed to forging ahead on climate progress in high-level meetings as well as thematic events.

This was the largest Indigenous presence in the history of climate talks. Ultimately, countries made pledges to support land rights and finance for climate action for Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and local communities, acknowledging their role in protecting critical ecosystems.

ECCA Film & TV Steering Committee members Rezwan Shahriar Sumit (Bangladesh), Emily Wanja (Kenya), Solitaire Townsend (UK) and I attended on behalf of our network of over 900 members of the global film and television industry. In the face of reportedly 1 out of 25 participants at COP30 representing fossil fuel interests, we brought support for new perspectives that could highlight the power of popular culture to provide education and climate solutions in the world of engagement and policy. Participating in panels, workshops and roundtables, we met with many global culture and climate stakeholders working in different sectors.

We announced a new initiative, Earth Witness: Story to Policy, to mentor and support filmmakers telling their stories of climate vulnerability with a priority on the Global South. Our goal: to use storytelling to galvanize connections between ministers of culture and ministers of the environment to create impact through policy.

During the conference we screened the first Earth Witness films from Mexico (*La Mar*), Bangladesh (*A Flower in the Desert*) and India (*Under the Same Sun),* addressing topics of sea level rise and forced evacuation, equity and girls' education, and the largest national trade union in India for the women workers of informal economy (SEWA), who are supporting renewable energy and training women to repair solar panels.

ECCA also launched a Global Film & TV Survey in 15 languages to assess the level of work being done in the major screen industries around production decarbonization and climate-themed content. A scoping study for a development fund is underway.

THE SPIRIT OF MUTIRÃO

Climate-altered settings in storytelling need not be neutral backdrops. They can encode political choices, ethics and futures. Narratives expose how governance, media, and markets reflect the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Many of us are keen to see cultural infrastructure integrated into our governments and systems in ways that inspire a spirit of mutirão. The term, which originated in the Indigenous Tupi-Guarani language, became a clarion call for international cooperation at COP30.

I'm reminded of Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, produced by Nina Jacobson and Jon Kilik. Following a climate catastrophe, the Capitol fascist state in the former Rocky Mountains region of North America rules amid ecological collapse and resource scarcity. The Capitol relies on theatrical power—pageantry, costumes and televised violence—turning fire, drought, floods and predators into normalized entertainment.

When Katniss honors her fallen sister on national television and refuses to play the Hunger Games, she chooses compassion over cruelty. This destabilizes the spectacle and exposes the fragile and fabricated consent on which authoritarian power depends. Her defining act is her refusal to become the kind of person the system requires. The state falls because people stop consenting to its narrative reality.

Global culture has become a matrix of value systems that coexist with governments, from democratic to authoritarian. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2024/5, today less than 7% of the world's population lives in full democracies, while around 40% live under authoritarian rule. The remainder live in flawed democracies or hybrid regimes. This trend over time reflects an ongoing global democratic decline.

Simon Stiell, executive secretary of the UNFCCC, sums up the mission ahead: "Cities, states and regions have become critical drivers of implementation.... We must follow a just, orderly, and equitable transition away from fossil fuels by mid-century; a tripling of renewable energy; a doubling of energy efficiency; and supporting efforts to halt and reverse deforestation and forest degradation by 2030." As global temperatures continue to rise, cultural narratives that encourage new thinking, imagination and civic engagement in democracies are essential to solving the climate crisis.

As producers and storytellers, we have a vital role to play in shaping the world in which future generations will live. The stories we tell and who gets to tell them are critical. In my memory of COP30, I will always hold the spirit of mutirão as a broad, inclusive mobilization that goes beyond formal negotiations to emphasize a shared responsibility for climate solutions. It's about our future. ■

This spring, the Producers Guild will launch its Sustainability Tool Kit to provide additional ideas and guidance for incorporating climate into your storytelling. Visit producersguild.org/sustainability to learn more.

Team ECCA (Lydia Dean Pilcher, Emily Wanja, Rezwan Shahriar Sumit, Alexa Halpern and Alison Tickell) at COP30 in Brazil.

Sam Claflin, Liam Hemsworth, Evan Ross andJennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 2.*

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