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Greening the Silver Screen

As Canada's film festival season kicks off this week in Toronto, Zoe Cormier takes a look at how Canada's tinseltowns are leading the way to greener movie industry

Zoe Cormier

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Movies have always had a huge influence on how we think, act and feel, and so it's not surprising that filmmakers are turning their lenses on ecological issues in hopes of changing our ways. And they are having an impact, from Al Gore's Nobel Prize-netting *An Inconvenient Truth* to the new British climate change alarm call [The Age Of Stupid](http://www.ageofstupid.net/)

(<http://www.ageofstupid.net/>), which has spawned a United Kingdom-wide movement (which includes the entire cabinet) to cut personal carbon emissions by 10 percent in 2010. The film's director, Franny Armstrong, has [famously said](http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/sep/01/franny-armstrong-10-10)

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/sep/01/franny-armstrong-10-10>), "If you're not fighting climate change or improving the world, you're wasting your life."

"But for that to be an effective message, the industry has to make sure its own backyard is clean," says Ed McNamara, resource co-ordinator for [Green Screen Toronto](http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/) (<http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/>), an initiative that provides guidance for the film and television industries on how to shrink their environmental footprint. It hopes to establish Toronto as a world leader in green film production.

Organizations like this are popping up around the world—most notably, [Greening the Screen](http://www.greeningthescreen.co.nz/about/project/?MEF=b564b8bc067b20f50a8c83b89b3100a5) (<http://www.greeningthescreen.co.nz/about/project/?MEF=b564b8bc067b20f50a8c83b89b3100a5>), in New Zealand—and especially in Canadian cities: their film and television industries have exploded in the past two decades and are leading the trend to establish themselves as the green capitals of the silver screen.

"We're starting off by addressing the low hanging fruits: trying to change people's behaviours and address the impacts of everyday production habits," says Gordon Hardwick of [Reel Green BC](http://www.bcfilmcommission.com/community/reel_green_bc.html) (http://www.bcfilmcommission.com/community/reel_green_bc.html), a west coast initiative that, like Green Screen Toronto, aims to position Vancouver at the front of the global movement to change the way movies are made.

A star-sized footprint



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And there's a lot that needs changing. Film and television sets are notoriously wasteful environments: huge power-hungry lighting rigs made of old-fashioned incandescent lights that waste enormous amounts of energy as heat, massive catered lunch buffets that often wind up uneaten and thrown away (along with stacks of plastic plates and cutlery), stars that leave huge carbon footprints with their jet-setting, and entire sets built for just a few minutes of footage and then discarded.

Even the standard tools of the trade, used by even the lowest budget productions, come with environmental collateral: batteries made with nickel, lead and other heavy metals leach neurotoxic elements when discarded into landfill, developing solutions for film require hazardous chemicals, and transport of crew and equipment produce inevitable greenhouse gas emissions.

Method acting

But there are ways to leave a lighter footprint, and to that end Green Screen Toronto has commissioned studies on how to do it and have produced the [ultimate guide](http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/resource_guide/index/) (http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/resource_guide/index/), 145 pages long ([pdf](http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/data/green_practices/00000006.pdf) (http://www.greenscreentoronto.com/data/green_practices/00000006.pdf)), on how to green every corner of a Toronto-based production, from sound equipment to LEED-certified film sets, cleaning products and hair stylists—even florists and yoga studios.

They also provide advice for how to deal with new by-laws. In Toronto for example, as of January 2010, industry will have to report the volumes of 25 specific hazardous chemicals they use, so film companies will have to start learning how to track and report their usage, something they never have had to do before.

This, says McNamara, will be quite challenging. "Changing the way somebody has worked for 20 years is really hard, especially when you consider that simple things that might seem easy to do become difficult when you're dealing with big productions."

In Vancouver, Harwick says anti-idling laws had a big impact on an industry that was used to leaving the engines running. "Changing the way people behave is often the hardest part, and helping them to understand that the little things do count."

New phase of green

But, they say, there are definite signs of improvement right across the industry, from increased use of hybrid vehicles, to composting wasted food, to using cutlery made of biodegradable plastic (or, even better, ceramic). At a workshop Green Screen Toronto hosted this spring for lighting technicians, McNamara says, "It was fascinating to watch the old hands monkeying around with the rigs and figuring out how they could get the same effects with low energy lights."

"It was once the norm to construct huge sets from scratch, but now they are being used from show to show—even different studios are now sharing their," says Hardwick.

While a lot of the initiatives and changes have come from smaller production studios and indie filmmakers, big studios too are making big changes, he adds, singling out 20th Century Fox and Warner Brothers in particular for making improvements.

Which makes sense: they have the deep pockets to fund expensive changes, and the ability to set a highly visible example to influence the rest of the world.

For now the changes are largely voluntary and unregulated—but in time, the ultimate goal is to create a standardized certification program for production studios and for entire films, similar to the LEED program for buildings.

One such attempt to create an internationally recognized set of standards for film and media was launched in 2006 in Montreal: the [Greencode Project](http://greencodeproject.org) (<http://greencodeproject.org>). Founder and filmmaker Marie-France Côté was working on a documentary about opposition to dams in Quebec with [Rapide Blanc](http://www.rapideblanc.ca) (<http://www.rapideblanc.ca>), and she says, "I thought, we can't make this film and not think about our environmental footprint." Greencode is currently "in hibernation" says Côté, but she has plans to revive it soon.

Eco Film Fests

In the meantime, filmmakers continue to align the medium with their message, and film festivals

devoted to green ideas continue to spring up: Washington DC's [Environmental Film Festival](http://www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org/) (<http://www.dcenvironmentalfilmfest.org/>) is now in its 18th year, Los Angeles will host its first [Going Green Film Festival](http://www.goinggreenfilmfestival.com/) (<http://www.goinggreenfilmfestival.com/>) next year, and Canada's largest environmental film fest, Toronto's [Planet in Focus](http://www.planetinfoocus.org/) (<http://www.planetinfoocus.org/>) (where the Green Screen Toronto Resource Guide was launched last year), will celebrate its 10th anniversary at this year's festival, October 21-25th.

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