

An inconvenient movie: Al Gore revisited

AN Inconvenient Truth, the new Global Warming documentary starring Al Gore, promises to be more than a simple film – like it or not this debut of a retooled Al Gore seems destined to be one of those cultural moments – like the introduction of tailfins or Italian names for coffee. The online reviews started to amass before the film ever opened, and I suspect, before any of the supposed reviews ever laid eyes on it. Predictably, it usually earned either all or none of the available stars, with reviews essentially echoing the current “debate” on global warming.

I put the word “debate” in quotes since there really isn’t a debate. A debate requires two cogent views. In place of a debate, we have an argument, pitting damn near every reputable climatologist in the world on one side, and a rabid pack of screeching fire and brimstone whackos on the other side. Hence, before it’s debut, An Inconvenient Truth earned reviews such as this gem: “All science is bull crap and so is Al Gore. Only God and God himself knows when this world will end. Yes, he [Gore] has a very good point but its all just science. A hypothesis, an educated guess. Read your Bibles!”

It’s like, don’t worry about unsafe sex or illicit drug use – go wild, since only God knows when your life will end. And this is exactly what we’ve been doing since the middle of the 20th Century. We’ve been going wild like sex-crazed crackheads, mainlining petroleum and having unprotected road thrills with multiple SUVs.

The real argument at this point in our history is between sanity and insanity. Global

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warming is not a left-right issue. It's not about liberals and conservatives. It's about seeing the speeding train coming at you and getting off of the tracks.

An Inconvenient Truth is destined to leave its mark on American Culture. I'm careful in choosing the word "culture" over "politics." Even the inconvenient truths Gore so succinctly presents in the film may not be enough to deter Americans from their ecocidal orgy of carbon emission-based self gratification. So the jury is still out on whether or not we'll see a radical change in our political zeitgeist regarding global warming.

Reality Horror

On the cultural front, however, An Inconvenient Truth promises to be the torchbearer for the 21st Century's own new genre of film – the perfect marriage between the old box office stalwart of doom and destruction, and the insanely successful low budget world of "reality" TV. Now we have reality horror. Ultimately, our own destruction has become the most compelling form of entertainment.

Horror wiz Kathe Koja couldn't have given us a better script. Al Gore pulls a quick fuzzy Jerry Seinfeld on the audience before going stoic on us, playing the man who would have been president – the man who would have saved us from certain damnation. Instead, in this sequel to Coup 2000, somehow Satan steals the presidency and damns the planet to the literal fires of hell, which we as consumers unleash upon ourselves, as a punishment for letting Bush happen.

The biggest problem with the film, as expected, is Al Gore. Sure, he's brilliant as he leads us through a maze of charts, images of serenity and contrasting pictures of mass destruction. And his argument is compelling. That's the problem. Twenty minutes into the film you can't help but ask, why can't someone like this run for president. Ultimately, this is the trillion dollar question. Why couldn't this Al Gore run for president instead of the spineless micromanaged shadow of a man who chose neo-con Joe Lieberman as his running mate? Why couldn't we get an Al Gore we could feel good about in 2000? Maybe it's that horror thing again. Ghouls possessed Gore for the 2000 campaign, leaving his lifeless hypnotized body sleepwalking through speeches and debates sounding like a Republican on Quaaludes.

But then there was his tenure as Vice President. Was that an eight-year Night of the Living Dead as well? Did ghouls make him demand the Endangered Species Act be waived and gutted so dams could be built? Did they make him support expanding logging in endangered Pacific Northwest forests? Did they possess his soul when he supported building nuclear test facilities at Hanford or the breeder reactor on the Clinch River? Did they make him support an environmentally devastating version of NAFTA, the building of

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a hazardous waste incinerator in Ohio, and the concept of pollution credits built into the Kyoto Accords? And were Ghouls responsible for keeping "Ozone Man" silent throughout the Clinton presidency as US greenhouse gas production soared while fuel efficiency standards stalled?

Another Jimmy Carter

It's the Jimmy Carter thing all over again. Carter, an outspoken champion for human rights, is no doubt the best ex-president our nation ever produced. But I recall a media interview made when Carter was fresh out of office and working on a Habitat for Humanity house in the South Bronx. The reporter asked a neighbor what he thought of the hammer-wielding ex-president working down the block. The neighbor replied with indignation that that man was the president of the United States. He had more power than any person on earth. And he did nothing for us. Now that he's nobody, he wants to help?

This long lost voice echoed in my head as I sat at the press screening for An Inconvenient Truth, watching an Al Gore I could respect – an Al Gore I could have voted for – play the role of an indignant outsider. None of this, however, takes away from Gore's message.

Since allowing the presidency to be stolen from the American people in 2000, Gore seems to have gone through a bit of a metamorphosis. He grew a beard, sulked around a bit, and became a college professor. After lightening up, he cut his beard and took his down home Al persona on the road as the Paul Revere of global warming.

One MF of a PowerPoint

This is where An Inconvenient Truth fits in. Director Davis Guggenheim brought his cameras to one of Gore's more than 1,000 speeches about global warming. And that's essentially the movie. But it's better than it sounds. Sure, it's a 90 minute shot of Gore delivering a PowerPoint presentation. But it's one motherfucker of a PowerPoint presentation. I'd like to make the film required viewing for every dullard college professor who ever stood frozen behind a podium projecting their lecture notes via PowerPoint. Gore's show, by contrast, incorporates animation and video clips into a larger than life widescreen multimedia presentation which he expertly interfaces with, at one point using a hydraulic scissor jack bucket loader to precariously lift himself to the top of an off-the-chart graph line.

If nothing else, Gore can teach – but people seldom ante up for tickets to watch a film of someone teaching. This is where Guggenheim, who has experience directing popular TV shows such as 24 and Alias, takes over, peppering the film with shots of Gore visiting his

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old homestead or wandering through airports as he plays prophet of doom, trotting across our warming globe.

For dramatic effect, Guggenheim edits in post-apocalyptic scenes from last year's New Orleans flood. Sure, these images push buttons, showing ecological catastrophe coming home to America. But the film is less than honest here. Yes, Katrina might have been intensified by global warming, but Katrina didn't hit New Orleans with Category 5 winds. It brushed New Orleans with Category 2 winds. New Orleans was decimated not by nature or even global warming, but by political and economic decisions. Independent and government investigations both agree that the damage Guggenheim shows was caused by a combination of poor levee maintenance and design, and irresponsible land use and development patterns that decimated protective wetlands while building canals that allowed tidal surges to drive right into New Orleans. And yes, these conditions worsened while an acquiescing Al Gore sat in the White House.

Gore Unplugged

Gore does explain himself in the film, however. America, he argues, isn't politically ready for a politician who promises to take the radical action that is necessary to abate some of the worst predicted effects of global warming. We have the technology to cut greenhouse gas production, but we don't have the political will. For a politician to suggest making the sacrifices necessary to curtail carbon dioxide production would be political suicide. To not take these steps, however, is collective societal suicide. Gore's argument is that he is now trying to create the political environment where politicians can talk about global warming. But Gore is still all about talking about global warming as a politician would, at one point equating the defeat of global warming with the defeat of communism, as if was the Bolsheviks in Havana and not the Yuppies in South Florida who were air conditioning their McMansions, mowing their golf courses and speeding around in their dick boats.

An Inconvenient Truth is ultimately as much about Al Gore as it is about global warming. Was Gore's whole political career about being a sleeper for the environmental movement? Was it all about making whatever compromises were necessary to get him into the White House so he could then save the world? This idea brings me back to 1995 when High Times magazine sent me on assignment to Summertown, Tennessee to write a feature piece on the 25th anniversary of the quintessential hippie commune, The Farm. Old timers there spoke fondly of an Al Gore they considered an old friend – an Al Gore who as a young reporter for the Nashville Tennessean would regularly visit The Farm and write friendly articles. And they trusted this Al Gore. They trusted that one day his

strange role-playing odyssey would lead him to the White House where he would do the right thing.

If this is the case, then politics killed the politician, with Al Gore spending his life at least as much a part of the problem as he is a part of the solution. And that self-serving Al Gore is still visible in *An Inconvenient Truth*. In countless scenes, for example, Guggenheim's crew unnecessarily shoots Gore tapping away on his Apple computer with its glowing corporate logo. Gore is on the Board of Directors of Apple. Or there's the end of the film where after almost ninety minutes of laying out our certain doom, it gives us a short five minute wrap-up of things we can do to save the planet. One suggestion – "encourage everyone you know to see this movie."

OK. My shrill snarky self says end this column with the above paragraph. But that would be as irresponsible as Al Gore supporting NAFTA. The film is important. And whatever his motives, it's Al Gore that makes the film. He gives it the star power and controversy that promise to put it on our cultural map. And Guggenheim goes a good job making the film watchable. The end result is a movie that's much better crafted than, for example, the last blockbuster documentary, *Fahrenheit 911*. Though, like *F911*, the cultural moment incited by *An Inconvenient Truth* promises to dwarf the actual film itself. And that's what is ultimately important about this film. This summer, as hurricanes sweep up the Atlantic coast and pound the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, Americans will be talking about global warming. *An Inconvenient Truth* will be both inciting and profiting from this discussion. The real question, however, is, by summer's end, will we as Americans be willing to change our ecocidal ways?

Dr. Michael I. Niman is a professor of journalism and media studies at Buffalo State College and Vice President of Niagara Independent Media (AM 1270).