

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE APOCALYPSE:

DEBATING THE MERITS OF AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH AND THE GREAT GLOBAL WARMING SWINDLE

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THE credits roll and the lights come up. One of the most hard-to-please Year 9 students says, completely earnestly, 'That is the most terrifying thing I've ever seen.' The film in question isn't the latest in the *Saw* series, nor *The Ring* (Gore Verbinski, 2002), nor *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973). This film, shown during a Geography class, is a documentary from the BBC's *Horizon* series. *Global Dimming* (2005) tells the story of scientists discovering that the effects of global warming have hitherto been dampened by the quantity of visible pollution in the atmosphere. The most striking – and terrifying – sequence comes towards the conclusion, where the possible consequences of unhindered global warming are visualised.

The success of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006)

has demonstrated the commercial power of factual fear pieces, earning almost US\$50 million worldwide at the box office.¹ One of many such documentaries to be commissioned in recent years, it is possible to see a parallel with the popularity of disaster films during the tumultuous 1970s and the pre-millennial 1990s. While Hollywood has attempted a fantasy take on the perils of climate change with *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), it seems that filmmakers no longer need to conjure apocalyptic scenarios when ninety minutes of talking heads can paint a far more frightening picture.

However, not all of these films are painting the same picture. While the scientific community is reaching consensus on the issue of climate change, some filmmakers are suggesting that films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* are little more than media doom-mongering. Martin

Durkin's *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (2007) argues that the entire issue of global warming is one cynically inflated by the media in order to sell papers, raise viewing figures and, as with the aforementioned disaster films, ensure bums on seats.

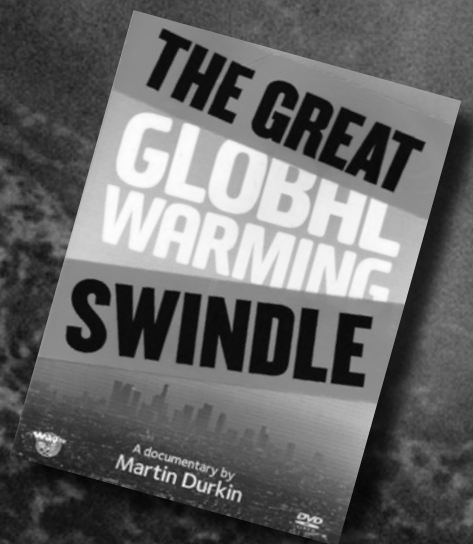
Durkin's documentary has proved highly controversial, prompting an Office of Communications (Ofcom) investigation in the UK, as well as a rebranding as 'polemic' by its broadcaster, Channel 4.² When shown in Australia, the ABC ensured Tony Jones was there to bookend the program, reminding us that the opinion of the filmmaker in no way reflected that of Aunty. Nonetheless, the documentary has brought much comfort to environmental naysayers such as the *Herald Sun*'s Andrew Bolt, a columnist who appears to write about climate change more often than many of the bodies created to deal with it.³

HOLLYWOOD

For media teachers, the study of two diametrically opposed documentaries presents an exciting opportunity to examine the construction of representations of reality. Both documentaries carefully select the available evidence and use powerful imagery, evocative music and loaded language. Given the apparent uncertainty still surrounding the issue of global warming, students are able to examine and critique the production decisions by which an audience can be manoeuvred toward two contradictory stances.

An Inconvenient Truth: the personal approach

While *An Inconvenient Truth* lacks the startling visualisations used very successfully by films such as *Global Dimming* or David Attenborough's *The Truth About Climate Change* (2006), it takes an affecting, personal approach to the topic. It is the story of former US vice-president Gore as much as it is of impending climatic catastrophe. The film opens with an idyllic vision of a riverbank, lush and green about sparkling waters, while Gore gently reminds us of the beauty of nature. Having done so, he



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is essentially asking the audience the rhetorical question: Shouldn't we be doing something to protect this? Elsewhere, he shares a touching anecdote about the near-death of his young son, explaining how he was spurred into action by a father's instinct to protect his children. Gore is portrayed as likeable – joking about his controversial loss to George W. Bush in the 2000 US presidential election – and doggedly passionate; we see him leading a panel in which he appears to uncover clear political deception on the part of a government keen to suppress the truth about global warming.

The visuals chosen to illustrate this warming are familiar but effective. Collapsing ice shelves and retreating glaciers are powerful reminders of our changing climate, though alone they do little to support the central tenet that increased temperatures are anthropogenic, rather than the result of natural, cyclical changes. Gore tackles this argument through the use of graphs comparing the current warming trend with famous historical examples such as the Medieval Warm Period, cleverly using a cherry-picker to show that current and


forecast warming is, quite literally, off the scale. At one stage, a clip from animated series *Futurama* is used to illustrate the mechanism of global warming in an accessible, winning manner. Elsewhere, there are amusing animations of a frog in a slowly boiling pot and the tragic image of a polar bear swimming desperately in a sea increasingly devoid of ice. Such populist touches contribute to an informal, personal take on the issue that, as with every other blockbuster, demands an emotional rather than critical response from its audience.

Gore's everyman charm is as crucial to the documentary's success as his seemingly strong grasp on the science. While dissenting voices are noticeably absent, the evidence presented appears conclusive. However, Gore fails to acknowledge that critics have cast doubt on the validity of his film's single most important piece of evidence, known as 'The Hockey Stick', a graph charted by scientist Michael Mann that correlates global temperatures with carbon dioxide levels throughout the past millennium. Some scientists believe that the statistics on which the graph is based are unrelia-

ble.⁴ To answer these critics, Mann released an updated version in September 2008, which takes a far greater range of evidence into account while still illustrating that current warming is greater than that of the last two millennia. In other words, as Gore claims, natural cyclic changes in climate alone cannot explain current warming.⁵

Gore's narrative effectively mirrors that of a conspiracy thriller. In Gore's case, he believes the US Government has been deliberately and directly suppressing evidence that would make the public aware of the extent to which man-made global warming presents a threat. We see him on the phone to a researcher who has uncovered another link between a government panel and the oil industry. This point is elaborated on in another BBC *Panorama* documentary, *Climate Chaos: Bush's Climate of Fear* (2006), in which a whistleblower reveals how the Bush administration has 'censored and gagged' leading climate scientists.⁶ Such a narrative is likely to appeal to the same disenfranchised, distrustful public who flock to see Michael Moore films. However, some scientists have ex-





pressed displeasure over Gore's implication that any global warming deniers are likely to be secretly employed by the oil industry. Unchallenged within the film, such a suggestion makes for a compelling tale of the righteous versus the corrupt.⁷

With a title such as *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, it should be no surprise that Durkin's narrative is also based around conspiracy. The twist is that he believes the conspiracy runs in the other direction. Should the two narratives ever be bolted together by an adept scriptwriter, this twist would likely go down in cinematic annals alongside those of *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) and *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992) in terms of shocking genius. Durkin agrees that there is a political conspiracy regarding global warming, only he believes that the politicians, far from suppressing reports, are actually exaggerating them for their own benefit. The two central villains are not the Bush administration and the oil companies but rather former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and environmental activists. Outlandish claims when viewed in isolation, but within the context of the documentary both are strangely compelling.

The appeal of a conspiracy narrative is chiefly that it seems to empower the audience by aligning them with a precious truth, one that the majority are either blinded to or actively suppress. The viewer of such a narrative is cast as

hero, peeling back the lies and resisting the dogma with which the more powerful seek to oppress the downtrodden. Both *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Great Global Warming Swindle* send the viewer on a quest and, strangely, both documentaries seem to have the same enemies in their sights: big money, politics and the media.

Durkin's quest is, understandably, aimed at a British market, where politicians have been warning of the perils of global warming for the last twenty years. As such, his warnings that 'they' have been lying to 'us' are likely to resonate with his audience. Gore, however, is chiefly addressing an American populace whose governments have spent a great deal of the last twenty years denying that man-made climate change exists. Ronald Reagan blamed rotting trees and vegetables for rising CO₂ levels while George Bush Snr warned that electing the environmentalist Gore would lead to Americans being 'up to our necks in owls'.⁸ More recently, following the film's release, the US Senate issued a statement suggesting the media had been over-enthusiastic in claiming that scientists agreed with its content.⁹ Recent polls suggest awareness of the issue is increasing among the American public,¹⁰ but some sceptics have interpreted these polls as suggesting only twenty-five per cent of people are actually seriously concerned about the threat global warming poses to them. Some studies suggest in turn that this apparent lack of concern is linked to the American

ABOVE: AL GORE'S *AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH*

Government's systematic undermining of science for political gain.¹¹ Conspiracies are everywhere, it seems, no matter what your political colouring.

The Great Global Warming Swindle: who has been telling lies?

In many ways, Durkin's film is the richer text to study, in the same way that Bolt's columns provide ideal fodder for students wishing to acquaint themselves with the use of emotional language techniques. 'You are being told lies,' Durkin tells us at the beginning of the film, outlining a 'global warming orthodoxy' driven by government money while posing a potentially devastating threat to the developing world by demanding they abandon carbon-fuelled technology. The global warming swindle is a 'media scare', tantamount to a new 'religion' that will 'kill the African dream'. Rich pickings indeed.

This suggestion of environmentally driven racism is a familiar one from Durkin, whose earlier film *Against Nature* (1997) suggested that environmental activists were determined to derail human

progress, presenting a threat to personal freedom and, in some respects, paralleling the Nazi movement. As with *Swindle*, Ofcom received a number of complaints and found that Durkin had edited interviews given by environmentalists and had 'distorted or misrepresented their known views'. A prime-time apology was issued by Channel 4.¹²

Durkin's style superficially – and disingenuously – appears to be less personal than Gore's. Durkin never appears on-screen and remaining an authoritative, apparently detached voice clearly stating facts that no one else has been willing to reveal. To further underline this distinction, he describes *An Inconvenient Truth* as an 'emotional film' seen as the 'definitive popular presentation'. Such dismissive summaries aside, Durkin then features a carefully edited snippet of Gore that appears to portray him as a sneering, closed-minded figure. The editing prevents the viewer from realising that, in the extract, Gore is in fact mimicking a grade school teacher who once dismissed an insightful fellow pupil. A minor detail, but nonetheless an exemplar of Durkin's brazen use of editing and omission to represent reality as he feels we should see it.

His use of production techniques is no less blatant. When criticising the 'global warming orthodoxy', the screen is awash with dark images of doom (generally attributed to the BBC), accompanied by music melodramatic enough to make them appear ridiculous. On the other hand, while Durkin assures us that there's no such thing as anthropogenic global warming, jolly pop plays over images of glittering beaches and clear blue skies. The choice as presented is simple: live your life in fear or come with me and everything will be fine.

As such, *Swindle* is the antithesis of fear pieces such as *An Inconvenient Truth*. Gore might seek to inspire or worry the masses into action but Durkin argues that such films are typical of media seeking to make money from generating concern. He seeks to reassure and placate, telling the viewer that if they believe the doom-mongers they will spend their life miserably making needless sacrifices. Believe him and we can all be happy and stop worrying. Besides, he reminds us, we all love heat – the warmest periods in human history have also been the happiest and wealthiest.





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Reception and rulings

A much longer article than this could enjoy critiquing the errors and omissions in Durkin's film. Many already have. It is, essentially, a reactionary piece in which a director rails against a perceived ideology and then attempts to find evidence to support his claims. Two omissions are worth highlighting, such is their prominence, although they may be easily missed on first viewing. Durkin presents us with two graphs, one representing temperatures from the last thousand years and another comparing solar activity and temperature since 1860. At a glance, both are convincing. The first is intended to disprove that current warming is unprecedented, suggesting that the much-touted Medieval Warm Period was far hotter than anything we've experienced since. The second suggests that global warming is caused not by CO₂ but by sunspots, showing that as sunspot activity increases, so does the temperature. Both feature notable omissions on which the strength of Durkin's argument rests.

The first graph omits all post-1980s temperature records, which show a marked increase in global temperatures that easily exceed earlier records. A bold label reading 'Now' cleverly disguises this omission. The second graph similarly features an axis taking measurements through to the twenty-first century, while the actual data ceases at 1975. Again, this omission is to prevent the viewer realising that, after 1975, solar activity

levelled off while temperatures soared. Most damningly, the report on which this graph appears to be based ultimately concluded that 'this most recent warming episode must have another source'.¹³

Neither of these omissions prove the anthropogenic warming hypothesis correct but they do reveal a willingness on Durkin's behalf to deliberately withhold evidence that might be damaging to his narrative. His willingness to misrepresent is also evident. For example, students may enjoy spotting the alternating titles granted some of his experts, the more studious perhaps proceeding to identify how many of these titles refer to positions that are misleading at best, utterly fictitious at worst.¹⁴

Gore's film has also been held up to scrutiny over omissions and misrepresentations. A UK High Court judge ruled that *An Inconvenient Truth* was only 'broadly accurate' and that should it be shown in classrooms, teachers should attempt to balance Gore's 'one-sided views'.¹⁵ The 'Useful Links' section at the end of this article provides a reference to the pack provided to assist teachers. The judge did acknowledge, however, that the majority of Gore's claims were supported by scientific evidence; indeed, his main objections to the film appear to be less about science and more that it was 'powerful, dramatically presented' while being centred on Gore's 'charismatic presence'. Gore himself was clearly on a 'crusade ... to persuade the world of the dangers of climate change'.¹⁶

The errors outlined by the judge have been refuted by members of the scientific community, who suggest that, at worst, Gore 'oversimplified claims'.¹⁷ Nonetheless, the implication seems to be that a well-crafted and effective documentary is somehow necessarily a dishonest representation, from which young minds need protecting.

The Ofcom investigation ultimately ruled that *The Great Global Warming Swindle* had misrepresented the views of scientists interviewed and that it had been 'unfair' to United Nations body the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) but stated that, while it had reservations on the use of graphs and distortion of climate change science, Channel 4 had the right to show the program, as there was no legal requirement to do so with 'due accuracy'. While naysayers such as Bolt claimed this as a victory for Durkin,¹⁸ the Ofcom ruling instead underlines the fact that although news programs are obliged to tell the truth, there is no such requirement for documentaries, providing they don't cause 'harm or offence'.¹⁹ As such, some complaints were upheld, some were dismissed and others – concerned with crucial scientific evidence – were seen as being outside the body's frame of reference.

This is a salient point for students wishing to be media-savvy. By these criteria, while the US version of *The Office* might warrant some criticism should its producers seek to promote it as a documentary, there is no legal impediment to them doing so. Brushing



By comparing Durkin's film with Gore's, students will be able to critique the techniques by which the same debate can be given two compellingly effective and contradictory representations, before proceeding to examine the issue of media bias. When there is no onus on documentarians to be truthful: who can we trust and why should we do so?

aside claims of factual errors in subsequent interviews, Durkin claims he wants to stimulate debate as he feels that there are increasingly few voices arguing against the theory of man-made climate change. Some studies appear to support him, while others claim that, given the apparent consensus in the scientific community, there is still too much debate and that media outlets are too balanced in their coverage of the issue.²⁰ Indeed, some believe this balance to be a form of media bias against the global warming theory.²¹

By comparing Durkin's film with Gore's, students will be able to critique the techniques by which the same debate can be given two compellingly effective and contradictory representations, before proceeding to examine the issue of media bias. Continuing in the conspiracy-laced vein these films have inspired, when there is no onus on documentarians to be truthful: who can we trust and why should we do so? If nothing else, students will be encouraged to check the facts before believing anything they see on television.

Teachers wishing to select a documentary that examines the global warming debate in more detail might find Iain Stewart's *The Climate Wars* (2008) to be more insightful than either Gore's or Durkin's. Students are also likely to respond more keenly to the imaginative visualisations offered by this and the aforementioned Attenborough documentary. *An Inconvenient Truth* is essentially

a ninety-minute lecture, while the chief entertainment in Durkin's film comes from hearing a voice argue against the dominant scientific consensus. Although it ultimately supports this consensus, Stewart carefully examines a number of alternate arguments in a manner that appears refreshingly open-minded. In terms of technique, however, media teachers may find less to analyse when compared to the more polemical alternatives.

Resources

'Ten Facts About Global Warming They Don't Want You to Know', <http://www.numberwatch.co.uk/ten_facts_about_global_warming.htm>, accessed 26 January 2009.

'How to Talk to a Climate Sceptic', A Few Things Illconsidered, 6 July 2008 <http://scienceblogs.com/illconsidered/2008/07/how_to_talk_to_a_sceptic.php>, accessed 26 January 2009.

The Great Global Warming Swindle, ABC Television, <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/swindle/>>, accessed 26 January 2009.

Guidance pack for UK teachers to accompany *An Inconvenient Truth*, <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/sustainable/schools/news/news_detail.cfm?id=172>, accessed 26 January 2009.

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Endnotes

- ¹ *An Inconvenient Truth*, Box Office Mojo, <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=inconvenienttruth.htm>>, accessed 5 January 2009.
- ² 'Broadcast Bulletin Issue 114', Ofcom, <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/obb/prog_cb/obb114/>, accessed 12 January 2009.
- ³ A quick tally of Bolt's opinion pieces for the latter half of 2008 show an average of more than one anti-global warming article per week.
- ⁴ Michael Le Page, 'Climate Myths: The Hockey Stick Graph has been Proved Wrong', *New Scientist*, 12 November 2008, <<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn11646>>, accessed 11 January 2009.
- ⁵ Michael E. Mann et al., 'Proxy-based Reconstructions of Hemispheric and Global Surface Temperature Variations Over the Past Two Millennia', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 2 September 2008, <<http://www.pnas.org/content/105/36/13252>>, accessed January 12 2009.
- ⁶ 'Climate Chaos: Bush's Climate of Fear', BBC Online, 1 June 2006, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/panorama/5005994>>.



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- ¹⁸ Andrew Bolt, 'Great Global Warming Swindle Cleared', *Herald Sun* Andrew Bolt Blog, 23 July 2008, <http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/great_global_warming_swindle_cleared>, accessed 15 January 2009.
- ¹⁹ Owen Gibson and David Adam, 'Watchdog's Verdict on Channel 4 Climate Film Angers Scientists', *The Guardian*, 22 July 2008, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/jul/22/channel4.ofcom>>, accessed 15 January 2009.
- ²⁰ Julia A. Seymour and Dan Gainor, 'Global Warming Censored: How the Major Networks Silence the Debate on Climate Change', Business and Media Institute, <http://www.businessandmedia.org/specialreports/2008/GlobalWarmingCensored/GlobalWarmingCensored_execsum.asp>, accessed 15 January 2009.
- ²¹ Jules Boykoff and Maxwell Boykoff, 'Journalistic Balance as Global Warming Bias', FAIR, November 2004, <<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1978>>, accessed 15 January 2009.

accessed 14 January 2009.

¹² 'Programme Complaints & Interventions Report', Ofcom, <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/itc/itc_publications/complaints_reports/programme_complaints/show_complaint.asp-prog_complaint_id=40.html>, accessed 14 January 2009.

¹³ 'Solar Activity & Climate: Is the Sun Causing Global Warming?', Skeptical Science, <<http://www.skepticalscience.com/solar-activity-sunspots-global-warming.htm>>, accessed 15 January 2009.

¹⁴ Kevin Grandia, 'A Global Warming Swindle Play-by-play', DeSmogBlog.com, 12 March 2007, <<http://www.desmogblog.com/a-global-warming-swindle-play-by-play>>, accessed 15 January 2009.

¹⁵ This ruling was made in 2007, when global warming sceptics sought an injunction to prevent the planned distribution of *An Inconvenient Truth* DVDs to all secondary schools in England, Wales and Scotland.

¹⁶ David Adam, 'Gore's Film Has Scientific Errors – Judge', *The Guardian*, 11 October 2007, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/oct/11/climatechange?gusrc=rss&feed=networkfront>>, accessed 16 January 2009.

¹⁷ Catherine Brahic, 'Al Gore's *An*

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⁷ William J. Broad, 'From a Rapt Audience, a Call to Cool the Hype', *The New York Times*, 12 March 2007, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/13/science/13gore.html?pagewanted=2&ei=5070&en=d615dc2ef256727f&ex=1175832000>>, accessed 13 January 2009.

⁸ Both quotes are featured in *An Inconvenient Truth*.

⁹ 'AP Incorrectly Claims Scientists Praise Gore's Movie', U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, 27 June 2006 <<http://www.epw.senate.gov/pressitem.cfm?party=rep&id=257909>>, accessed 12 January 2009.

¹⁰ 'Poll: Americans See a Climate Problem', *Time*, 26 March 2006, <<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1176967,00.html>>, accessed 15 January 2009.

¹¹ Naomi Oreskes, 'Beyond The Ivory Tower: The Scientific Consensus on Climate Change', *Science*, 3 December 2004, <<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/306/5702/1686>>,