

An Inconvenient Truth:

A Documentary Film Where the Ethos, Logos, and Pathos All Depend on One Man

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An Inconvenient Truth, 2006's Oscar-winning documentary on global warming, is arguably one of the most popular films of its kind in the last decade. Among the highest grossing documentaries of all time, the movie centers on former Vice President Al Gore traveling around America and giving a slideshow on climate change, with arguments surrounding its causes, how it's not a myth (as some politicians would claim it is), and what can be done to try to stop it before it's too late. Subtitled *A Global Warning*, the documentary's main and most obvious goal is to arouse its audience with enough alarming information in order to get them to take action as soon as the end credits roll. But while many documentaries of this sort would center themselves around talking heads in order to make their points, *An Inconvenient Truth* has no outside interviews, instead placing almost everything on the shoulders of Gore. "Just like the orator or public speaker who uses his entire body to give voice to a particular perspective," Bill Nichols writes in his textbook *Introduction to Documentary*, "documentaries speak with all the means at their disposal." (67) In the case of this film, however, the speaker *is* the documentary, mostly consisting of Gore giving an extended speech that he claims he's given hundreds of times. In this sense, the movie bases the use of the so-called "Rhetorical Triangle" entirely on its central figure, using ethos, pathos and logos in order to make Gore into a figure that we as an audience can trust on the film's subject matter.

From the beginning, though, the biggest obstacle both Gore and the film has to overcome may be Gore himself. Gore, of course, is a man who nearly became President of the United States during what was almost unquestionably the most controversial election of its kind in the country's history. Fairly or not, when a candidate loses a presidential election, that person becomes a punch line in the eyes of the press and pop culture by default. In Gore's case, though, it's even more extreme. After the month-long "drama" of the 2000 election, Gore's defeat became something that almost defined him, an inescapable "title" that everyone would associate him with no matter what. And with that association comes the risk—especially to his non-supporters—that the movie comes across as a bitter political stunt.

In this regard, in order to give himself credible appeal to his audience, Gore must seek to reinvent himself, but at the same time, he can't completely ignore the elephant in the room that is his political past, either. The film gets this out of way almost immediately, with Gore cracking a joke in which he introduces himself as the "former next President of the United States," which both acknowledges what happened and also, in a way, brushes it aside. With that taken care of, the movie can then quickly get to work in setting up Gore's ethos, although it's hard to pinpoint whether it's the film itself that's doing this or the strength of his presentation. Giving a speech at what appears to be a university's auditorium, Gore is well-dressed but not overly so, notably shown without a tie, perhaps to make him seem more like an educated speaker instead of a former politician. The sight of an audience of young people—almost certainly college students—listening to him intently and clearly taking him seriously both encourages and justifies the film's audience to do the same. Gore openly walks about the stage, not behind a podium as though he were giving a campaign speech, but instead as a man—a "teacher," if you will—trying to engage with and educate those watching. Although Gore frequently refers to global warming as a

“political issue,” his discussion feels relaxed and informed, as though to emphasize that this is a topic that both Republicans and Democrats should be concerning themselves with.

All of this wouldn't matter, however, if Gore weren't making logical sense when producing his claims, and while the film doesn't include any extended interviews with scientists, he makes an effort to frequently quote them. Gore is constantly referencing scientific journals and other similar publications, but he's perhaps most effective as a speaker when he is discussing the melting of arctic glaciers. Here, Gore's entire case rests on a series of photographs that are displayed on a giant screen behind him, showing pictures of glaciers from only a few decades ago. By presenting his information in a compare and contrast method, the sight of the melted ice and snow becomes more frightening than fascinating, especially when he gives projections of the potential flooding that could take place if more glaciers were to melt in the future.

Given that the movie is clearly a “call to action” piece, though, it's somewhat surprising that the movie doesn't play to pathos more. Indeed, so much of the film is expository—with Gore providing statistic after statistic in order to make his case—that there isn't much time for it to get “personal.” Apparently aware of this, the movie is careful to make its few broad uses of emotional content count. By using the story of Gore's late sister, the documentary ensures that it's going to pack a punch when it does so. Here, the film cuts away from Gore on his stage and instead goes back to archival photographs from his childhood, on a farm where his father used to grow tobacco. Right away, the audience can tell that this portion of the movie will not have a happy ending, as Gore's sister is pictured smiling almost ethereally, standing over the young man (a boy at the time) as though she were a guardian angel. We are told, despite being aware of the medical dangers that come from smoking, that Gore's father continued to make a living off of it anyway, but shut down the business once his daughter died of lung cancer. The film displays no

actual images of her being sick, yet the intercutting of photographs of her holding a cigarette combined with modern footage of an empty hospital bed makes the audience feel as though they have. Even without narration clarifying what happened, the sight of the lonely, almost deserted medical room is enough to let the viewer know that she died. Gore then uses this tragedy to go in for the kill, so to speak, arguing that if global warming is like tobacco, then we as a people cannot sit idly and allow for the planet to go on smoking it. Otherwise the earth, like Gore's sister, will fade away.

Somewhat more controversially, the movie's other primary use of pathos is a brief recap of the events of the 2000 election, but as with the joke Gore made at the start of the film, the documentary is conceding, in a sense, to the subject matter's inevitable inclusion. In this case, a short montage of archival news clips recounts Gore's untimely "victory" and inevitable defeat as ominous music plays on the film's soundtrack, which could inadvertently play into the "sore loser" category that many of his opponents were so eager to accuse him of at the time. On the other hand, the sequence helps set up another chance to give Gore pathos, in that the film's narration suggests that he decided to make global warming his priority again following his loss. As though aware of potential arguments that he is only doing this as some form of revenge against George W. Bush for taking the White House from him, footage of a much younger Gore—before he even became Vice President—is shown of him making a case to politicians about the issue. If the scene begins by attempting to stir "outrage" in the audience over the doomed election recounts, it at least ends by helping to solidify Gore's credibility on the issue by showing that it has been a concern of his for a very long time.

For the most part, *An Inconvenient Truth* was very well-received upon its release, with even Fox News—which is quoted on the DVD's box cover—giving the film an excellent review.

By showing Gore as a credible source on the subject matter rather than a former politician looking for some attention, and by using ethos and especially expository mode in order to make its argument, the movie was at least somewhat successful as a bi-partisan effort to bring attention to an important environmental issue—at least, when it came out in 2006. In the years following *An Inconvenient Truth*, more politicians on the left have made a stand to do something about the issue, but ironically, several politicians on the right have taken stronger stands *against* doing anything about it as a result. It's inconvenient, but unfortunately, it's also true.

Work Cited

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary*. 2nd Ed. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010. Print.