

Would it be inconvenient to ask: 'What if ... '?

JOHANN TEMPELHOFF

North-West University

Film:

An inconvenient truth. Directed by Davis Guggenheim (2006).

Contemplating history from a counterfactual perspective does have a number of advantages. It is possible to glimpse at the past in the manner that Derrida deconstructed reality. By taking note of what happened and what did in fact not happen, it is possible to form a picture of what could have been.

Had Al Gore been elected as President of the United States of America in 2000 the USA, almost certainly, would have signed the Kyoto Protocol. The world's leading capitalist society would most certainly have been more environmentally conscious. The USA's Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), one of the first governmental institutions of its kind in the world, would have played a far more significant role than it does at present. Perhaps there might also have been a different route (away) from conflict in the Middle East.

Instead we have today in Al Gore a former US vice-president who travels all over the world with an impressive slide show explaining the intricacies of global warming and the environmental change. It is true that we have been faced with similar crises in the past. There was a time when we were concerned about the earth's ozone layer that was being depleted. There was also the famous outburst in Europe in the 1970s of acid rain and its implications on forests. Fear, it seems, is something that drives humanity to become aware of what we are doing to the environment.

An inconvenient truth is Gore's take on making us aware of the implications of greenhouse gases on the environment. He is not a

newcomer to environmental politics. Neither is he inclined to put a fear of God into all and sundry. Instead, he argues from a very convincing perspective, scientific findings, on one of the major climatic issues that we currently face. Most of all, he is sincere in expressing his concerns over the climate change that is currently evident. It is no longer a political issue, he argues. We have a moral responsibility to address the issue.

Opponents of climate change tend to argue that the climatic history of the world tells us that we did have extreme climatic conditions in the distant past. They then also argue that we should simply accept what is happening. Although this is true, we have to bear in mind that it is primarily humans who are responsible for the current process of climate change. Generating electricity from coal, using more fuel-hungry vehicles and releasing toxic gases into the atmosphere are some of the most notable examples of the way in which humankind is currently changing the climate. In South Africa, the major culprit of carbon emissions in Africa, annually some 700 000 new cars take to the road. Manufacturers are now focussing on hitting a million new vehicles per annum. Our cities are becoming atmospheric danger zones as single passenger vehicles daily find their way between suburbia and the corporate zone of activity in the country's cities.

Although the South African government is committed to the Kyoto Protocol and accepts that we need to take steps against climate change, the issue has not yet reached society at the grassroots level. For middle class South Africa, *An inconvenient truth* could just be a very good introduction to a complex problem. Gore effectively outlines the primary issues in a simple eloquent way. It's a lot easier and more immediate than reading one of the mountains of books on climate change that currently fill bookshop shelves.

What makes the movie a milestone is the fact that it has been a hit with audiences that traditionally are more accustomed to discursive masterpieces of fiction? Gore, on the other hand, offers us charts and convincing arguments from the realm of natural science. Maybe it is not after all a strange world we are living in. Maybe, we are now approaching a point in time when the environment – after the events of Hurricane Katrina in the USA, last year, and this year's floods in the Southern Cape – have dropped a penny, making us sit up and take note of what is happening.