

Comparing and Contrasting the Film and the Book

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Some colleagues have asked me what the purpose is of teaching the book version of *An Inconvenient Truth* when there is a perfectly good film version that provides the same message. It seems to me that to view the book and the film as alternatives to each other is to miss the point. In fact, I believe they work best together, since watching *An Inconvenient Truth* and reading *An Inconvenient Truth* are two amazingly different experiences. Thus, exploring the similarities and differences between the texts in our classrooms may lead us to a better understanding of how the medium works to relay a message and how the message changes depending on the medium.

The Film

Though Director Davis Guggenheim spends an important amount of time showcasing Gore's slideshow to convey the seriousness and urgency of global warming, he also relies heavily on showmanship and hero worship to convey Gore's message.

For starters, the filmmakers built the stage with the giant screen that showcases Gore's slideshow and brought in a studio audience with the intention of creating a terrific performance out of what is, basically, a PowerPoint lecture. The giant screen helps convey the slideshow's striking images better, but its sheer size also builds up the importance of the speaker and his message. Since size also equals money, we, as the film's real target audience, immediately recognize that Gore's message *must* be important.

Beyond the giant slide show, the film uses diverse methods to make Gore's lecture fun and striking. For example, a clip from the cartoon comedy *Futurama* explains global warming (and makes fun of poor political decisions on how to handle it), and, later in the film, an animated happy frog illustrates humanity's complacency about global warming. Also, one of the most dramatic moments of the documentary is a built-in gag: Gore needs to get on a man-lift to point out where CO₂ levels are at present (that part of the graph is well above his head), and then moves the man-lift above the top of the massive screen, to "reveal" the projected CO₂ levels which had been hidden from the audience's gaze by a black curtain that raises as Gore ascends.

As this last example shows, the documentary also depends on Gore's ability as a speaker/performer. Indeed, many reviews of *An Inconvenient Truth* make a point of describing Gore's persona as witty, relaxed, passionate, and appealing (in apparent contrast to his persona while campaigning for the 2000 election). Since the film's message also relies on Gore's standing as a public and civic figure, Guggenheim includes vignettes of Gore's civil service and private life, and he films these moments in a variety of formats and using different types of cameras to provoke a wide range of moods in the audience. In one sequence at the Gore farm, for example, old black and white photos of Gore and his family are juxtaposed with present images of the farm shot in 8 millimeter Kodachrome film so as to make us feel, in Guggenheim's words, "[Al Gore's] memory of

this beautiful place.” In other sequences, Guggenheim chooses to dispense with the film crew so he can shoot in small spaces such as Gore’s car, thus making us feel that we’re going along with Gore on his journey.

In his outstanding audio commentary for the film, Guggenheim openly acknowledges his admiration for Gore, so it is not surprising that the documentary presents Gore in the tradition of the lone hero who battles against great odds. Scenes of Gore working on his trusty Apple laptop day and night, of Gore traveling to Minneapolis, Beijing, New York, and a myriad other cities, of Gore taking off his jacket to go through airport security, of Gore walking through service corridors to where he will make yet another presentation on global warming, are all intended to build up our admiration at his devotion to his message and his persistence in dispersing it.

Considering Gore’s lifelong pursuit of the truth about global warming, Guggenheim’s choice to portray him as a hero makes sense. Still, his choice may turn some of his audience off, as *The New Yorker*’s David Denby notes in his review of the film: “[Gore] mentions family tragedies, which were moving to me, but which strike some viewers as maudlin notes from a campaign biography.” ([Click here for a link to the whole review.](#))

Overall, the documentary takes us on a journey into Gore’s head and heart, so that by the end we are entirely convinced of his honesty, his integrity, and of the urgency and importance of his message.

[For a profile of the film, reviews, interviews, and a breakdown of scenes from the DVD, click here.](#)

The Book

Though the book is purportedly based on the happenings of the film, its presentation of the material is quite different.

For starters, watching the film means generally following the linear argument of Gore’s carefully-built slideshow, while reading the book means, well, almost anything. The reader can flip through it to get its gist, focus on one area (such as Gore’s suggested solutions to global warming), read it backwards, skip sections, etc. Our manipulation of the book also means that we interact with it in ways that we cannot with the film: we touch it, we take it with us, we pass it around, we show it to others, etc. In comparison, the film is transient—it is easy to forget particular details of the film once viewed.

The book does not offer dramatic or fun moments. The cute cartoons and animations are not included, and all that is left of Gore’s compelling performance is his voice expressed by different fonts and in different backgrounds throughout the book. Also in opposition to the film, the book offers Gore’s voice mainly as narrator of a chronicle that encompasses many, many other scholars who have been tirelessly working for decades to understand and communicate the planetary crisis. We can even choose to skip the autobiographical

light yellow sections if we want, to delete Gore's personal stake in the environment, and still get the core message.

The book's unusual design makes the reader think. For example, to see the projected CO₂ increase that Gore presents so theatrically in the film, we have to open an internal flap, and then make sense of the "transformed" graph we see under it. In addition, the variety of writing styles it contains may appeal differently to different readers. I, for instance, wasn't particularly bowled over the autobiographical sections, but loved reading the slideshow. Also, since the book is not a comfortable read because it is not quite what we expect from a book, we must figure out on our own how we want to experience it and how we feel about it. In comparison, the film's design (its music, lighting, camera work, the familiarity of its plot, Gore's voice over, etc.) directs the audiences' feelings more firmly; it even has a built-in audience that cues the viewers on how to react to Gore's presentation of the material.

Overall, the book is a more flexible educational tool than the film. For one, teaching the film requires we have "extra" equipment such a TV and DVD player. Also, even though the film's convincing power has been well documented in several movie reviews, the film does not have enough staying power to be used for deep inquiry. Watching footage of the consequences of Hurricane Katrina for fifty-five seconds in a film that lasts ninety-six minutes is not the same as examining the images of the same devastation on pages 96-99 of the book. This is why the book was published alongside the film; so that necessarily passive audiences could become active readers, thinkers, researchers, writers, and activists for environmental change.

Quick Comparison of the Film and the Book

The Film

Uses of a variety of formats and cameras to create a variety of visual tones and moods

Includes moments of light-heartedness. Ex: global warming cartoon from *Futurama*

Has a linear argument

Focuses on Gore's journey to deliver the message

Gives images the illusion of movement and three-dimensionality

Keeps us moving from one subject to the next

The Book

Uses a variety of writing styles and layouts to appeal to different audiences

Is relentlessly serious

Requires that the reader put together the argument

Connects Gore's narrative to other environmental narratives

Is three-dimensional, solid, and portable but its images are two-dimensional and static

Encourages reflection

Some Suggestions for Using the Film

Beyond showing the entire documentary before, during, or after examining the book, we may want to showcase scenes from the DVD that “speak” in ways the book cannot and discuss their impact with our students as we analyze the book. Possible examples of such scenes are

1. The opening scene at the Gore farm, entitled “The River” (0:00-0:6:28). Gore’s voice-over for this sequence reads:

You look at that river gently flowing by. You notice the leaves rustling with the wind. You hear the birds. You hear the tree frogs. In the distance, you hear a cow. You feel the grass. The mud gives a little bit on the river bank. It’s quiet. It’s peaceful. And all of a sudden, it’s a gear shift inside you. And it’s like taking a deep breath and going, “Oh yeah, I forgot about this.”

(Note: The book has some similar sentiments on page 160; however, they are not the opening thoughts of the text, but are rather buried in its midst). You may want to discuss the effectiveness of such an opening, and how the scene relates to the film’s themes.

2. After the river sequence, Gore is shown presenting his slideshow on global warming to diverse audiences around the world. At one point, he jokes: “I am Al Gore. I used to be the next president of the United States of America.” This joke serves as an explanation or bridge in the documentary between Gore as a politician and Gore as an environmental activist, and so it is a great opportunity for debate: do your students buy into such division of roles? Where does Gore the politician end and where does Gore the activist begin?

3. The scene “Global Warming Cartoon” (0:9:53-0:11:47) provides us with a wonderful opportunity to teach irony by examining the language of the Man Who Explains Global Warming. Ask students to explain lines such as “You’re probably wondering why your ice-cream went away. Well, Susie, the culprit isn’t foreigners. It’s global warming” or “Fortunately, our handsomest politicians came up with a cheap, last-minute way to combat global warming. Ever since 2063, we simply drop a giant ice-cube into the ocean every now and then.” My personal favorite line reveals the lack of logic behind the Man’s statements: “Of course, since the greenhouse gases are still building up, it takes more and more ice each time. Thus, solving the problem once and for all.”

4. Sometimes a moving picture is worth a thousand words (or several still pictures). In the scene “Antarctica” (0:54:14-0:57:15), Gore explains why land-based ice contributes to raising sea levels by using two glasses: one with an ice cube floating in water, another with the ice cube sitting atop a stack of other ice cubes. You may want to discuss with your students how the pictures help them understand the concept, and speculate as to why these pictures were not included in the book. You may even ask them to illustrate a concept using (moving) pictures.

5. “Balancing the Economy and the Environment” (1:16:59-1:18:30) contains a brilliant sequence that teachers of oral communication would love. The content basically follows the text in pages 270-271 of the book, but the way that Gore uses humor and pacing to drive his point is worth examining and discussing in class.