

## Film 1, *Before the Flood* and *An Inconvenient Sequel*

“If you could know the truth about the threat of climate change — would you want to know?”

This is the question posed by the National Geographic film *Before the Flood*, which features Leonardo DiCaprio.

It is a great question that throws down the gauntlet to potential viewers, as hitting the pause button would obviously answer with a decided “No” – although, presumably, you would not have even purchased or clicked on the film if you did to what to know the truth.

But what is the truth and, as a filmmaker, how do you present it in about an hour and a half?

Keep in mind that we are not taking up how to present one aspect of the climate crisis, such as wildfires or climate migration, but the whole shebang, from the fact that Miami is now flooding on sunny days to the disturbing fact that fossil fuel interests are spending millions of dollars trying to convince the public that the climate isn’t even changing.

The approach that the film takes is interesting and arguably effective: You introduce the audience to a protagonist, DiCaprio, who wants to know the truth about the climate crisis and sets out to find it – in this case, by traveling the world in search of answers.

Along the way, he talks with people as diverse as Barack Obama, Pope Francis, Elon Musk, and Dr Sunita Narain.

Incidentally, Narain, who really takes the US. to task in the film for failing to lead in the crisis, is the Director of India’s Centre for Science and Environment.

In a sense, DiCaprio acts as a surrogate for the viewer, who also wants to know the answer to the question with which I opened: “If you could know the truth about the threat of climate change — would you want to know?”

If you answer “Yes” by not hitting pause, then buckle in, as you and DiCaprio are embarking on an epic, whirlwind journey.

Incidentally, the climate footprint for all this travel and production was, according to the filmmaker, “offset through a voluntary carbon tax.”

This general approach is, incidentally, used by a range of environmental films, from *Gasland* to *Cowspiracy*. In *Gasland*, Josh Fox’s family receives a letter from a gas company wanting to lease their property to set up a fracking operation on it. Knowing little or nothing about hydraulic fracturing, Fox then sets out on a journey for answers, with you, the viewer, along for the ride.

Similarly, in *Cowspiracy* you and Kip Andersen embark on a quest to learn about the environmental impact of eating animal products. (A little trivia: DiCaprio, who has long been a committed climate activist, was an executive producer of *Cowspiracy*.)

In *Before the Flood* the approach is somewhat different. Unlike Josh Fox in *Gasland*, DiCaprio's online persona is not professing ignorance of the situation.

He hardly can, as early in the film he draws attention to the fact that in 2014 he was appointed as the UN climate ambassador. Still, he acknowledges that, since he is hardly an expert in the climate crisis, he still has much to learn. He then sets out to learn it, with viewer in tow.

Is DiCaprio really as uninformed as his onscreen personas appear? Probably not. Still, what do you think, is this an effective rhetorical device?

There are, of course, other strategies that DiCaprio could have used. We will see directly with Al Gore.

In both of his "Inconvenient" films, Al Gore takes an entirely different approach.

Gore's 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* was a phenomenon. Although it is not in the top-ten highest grossing documentaries of all time, it is number eleven.

Partly on the merit of the film, Gore was awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize along with 1500 scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Gore received half, the scientists split the other half).

A good deal of *An Inconvenient Truth* was given to establishing Gore's credibility. No, he is not a scientist, but he has been working on the climate crisis since the 1970s. He also works with a range of climate scientists.

In short, the film hopes to make clear that you should listen to Gore, as he is presented as an expert: the right person to deliver this message. Note that Gore is radically different from Leonardo DiCaprio in this regard, as he is hardly a surrogate for the viewer.

In Gore's 2017 follow-up to *An Inconvenient Truth*, aptly named *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, the filmmaker takes largely the same approach by working to establish Gore as an internationally recognized expert.

In contrast, early on in *Before the Flood*, DiCaprio wonders if the UN did the right thing in appointing him as their climate ambassador. As he baldly puts it, "I mean to be honest they may have picked the wrong guy." If you have watched *Before the Flood* and *An Inconvenient Sequel*, I am curious to hear what you think about these different approaches.

Incidentally, one of the reasons that the iconic *An Inconvenient Truth* it's not one of our options is because a great deal has changed in the years since its 2006 release.

For example, while Gore was correct in asserting in the film that climate change played a role in exasperating Hurricane Katrina, the 2005 storm that devastated Florida and Louisiana, killing 1,200 people, scientists now have a much clearer understanding of how this works. And, sadly, there have been a rage of horrifying storms since Katrina, like Superstorm Sandy and hurricanes Mathew, Harvey, Irma, Michael, Maria, and Dorian.

*An Inconvenient Sequel* also takes on the job of introducing viewers to the politics lurking behind all this.

Gore, a former vice president for two terms, is obviously in a position to know a good deal about the politics of the situation. And the politics is not always as clear-cut as we might imagine, as Gore visits a Texas city with a Republican mayor who firmly believes in renewable energy.

The film also introduces the viewer to the COP 21, where the Paris Agreement was signed, by taking us there with Gore.

Another little piece of trivia: after its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, an *An Inconvenient Sequel* was edited to include Donald Trump's announcement that he would withdraw the US. from the Paris Agreement – along with Gore's response.

*Before the Flood* and *An Inconvenient Sequel* are different films with very different approaches. Nonetheless, they both take up the formidable job of communicating the breadth of the climate crisis to viewers in about an hour and a half.

No Comment!

#### Class discussion of *Before the Flood* and *An Inconvenient Sequel*

If you have not already made your weekly comment, I am curious to hear your thoughts.

The following observations have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, sometimes just part of the comment is reproduced here.

No Comment!

“[On the first day of class,] Ken stated that the first few weeks of the class are undeniably depressing, and this could not be any more true...after watching the film “Before the Flood” my shock and fear have been cemented due to visuals that the documentary provided on the devastation already happening. I find it completely devastating and corrupt how the individuals

and countries who contribute the least to the problem are the ones who are suffering the worst. As the world leader it claims to be, the United States needs to take charge in addressing the issue and investing in solutions.”

*Before the Flood* does, indeed, contain something incredibly powerful about images.

A few decades ago, all that we had to go on were projections and mathematical models from scientists. Now, however, the climate crisis is here. Consequently, if you travel across the earth, you will see its impact, in one way or another, nearly everywhere. Which is, of course, exactly what Leonardo DiCaprio does in *Before the Flood*.

And if you travel across the earth, one thing that will be immediately clear is that the suffering brought about by the climate crisis is already unevenly - and unjustly - felt. This ranges from all sorts of plants and animals, who obviously had no role in the crisis, yet are already suffering, and in some cases, going extinct.

And then there are all sorts of people on earth who did virtually nothing to contribute to the climate crisis. It's one thing to mention this as a fact, that the poorest 3 billion people on the planet only contributed 5% of the greenhouse gases that human beings have put into the atmosphere, but it's another thing to see a farmer in India point to his field, which is entirely underwater, having been destroyed by a flood.

Finally, we come to the cause of the climate crisis, the relatively small number of wealthy countries and individuals who are bringing it about, but are ironically suffering the least. Which, of course, brings us to the United States and this student's suggestion that we need to “take charge in addressing the issue and investing in solutions.”

After all, how did the United States get to be so wealthy and powerful? Sometimes Americans seem to think that this is just a natural occurrence, as we are imagined as being just that special. However, our success, power, and wealth came from 200 years of unchecked burning of fossil fuels, from our fossil fuel economy.

Hence, the only just thing to do is to use our power and wealth to do what we can to correct this problem. In other words, because we are, more than any other country on earth, responsible for bringing about this crisis, we now need to take the lead in solving it.

“[The climate crisis is] a topic that has a tendency to make me feel like I'm face down in the dirt with my hands tied behind my back. Through this, I mean that it feels like no matter how much I want to fix the issue of climate change, I feel like my personal actions won't amount to enough to make a significant difference.”

Lying face down in the dirt, hands tied behind your back.

That's such a strong image. I want to address this feeling: being completely and utterly helpless in the face of something unimaginably huge and seemingly inevitable. And not

just as a response to our weekly documentary, but as a response to the climate crisis itself.

I completely understand this response to what is bearing down on us.

However, the goal of Climate Crisis 101 is to, in a manner of speaking, untie your hands and get you up – and hopefully mobilized.

It is true that our “personal actions won’t amount to enough to make a significant difference” in the sense that if all of us gave up beef and driving cars it would not be enough. It’s not that it wouldn’t be good to do these things – it absolutely, positively would - it’s just that there are other sorts of actions that we can and should be taking.

Bigger actions, political actions. However, because the required actions are so big, what could one person possibly do? This brings us back to that feeling of helplessness.

But there is the possibility that one seemingly insignificant person can, in fact, do a great deal. Consider Greta Thunberg or AOC. Moreover, if you get enough people together, they can do amazing things. Consider the Sunrise Movement.

The important thing is to try to do something. Aside from the fact that you may be successful – let’s hope that you are - doing so is important because it can help reduce that feeling of helplessness. Seriously, it can.

“In particular, I really enjoyed the section with Sunita Narain. I believe that it gives a completely different perspective on the use of renewable energy than those that are traditionally portrayed in mainstream media. While India as a country is the third biggest polluter, behind China and the United States, it is important to note that per capita, one US citizen is equivalent to 34 India citizens when it comes to their carbon footprint. I believe that Narain makes an extremely good point that the US should be the leader when it comes to using renewable resources. Our country certainly has more financial means to do so, so it is unfair to blame developing countries like India when looking at carbon emissions.”

Such a good point that is squarely on the mark.

Having shown *Before the Flood* to a number of students, nearly everyone’s favorite part is not, as you might imagine, the interview with Elon Musk in his car factory, but rather the interview with Dr. Sunita Narain, the Director of India’s Centre for Science and Environment. Narain really takes DiCaprio, and the U.S, to task for not leading during the climate crisis.

If you stand back and think about it, which Narain is in essence prompting us to do, it is rather absurd that the largest contributor to the climate crisis, the United States, is critical of the way that a poor country like India is approaching the situation. How, indeed, can we ask India to take action, when we are not doing so ourselves, especially when we have

the wealth and power to, for example, shift to renewables, which India simply cannot afford to do?

Consequently, Narain and this student's comment are squarely on the mark: "Our country certainly has more financial means to do so, so it is unfair to blame developing countries like India when looking at carbon emissions."

"Watching the Fox news anchors roast Leonardo DiCaprio so viciously just for trying to bring attention to the scientifically proven phenomenon of science change was extremely disheartening. The way the largest news corporation in America just constantly denies the existence of climate change in the first place sets the tone for how difficult advocating for structural change is in the United States. Elected officials purposely mislead their constituents to believe this is a made-up phenomenon, and continue to make it the problem of future generations."

It is a sad state of affairs in America today that if you attempt to pop your head up and call for action on the climate crisis, you present yourself as a target to smack down. Given his wealth and celebrity, Leonardo DiCaprio is an easy target. However, it really doesn't seem to much matter who you are, as speaking out about the climate crisis can open you up to ridicule and attack.

When Greta Thunberg gave a moving, impassioned talk at the U.N. Climate Action Summit in 2019, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, tweeted that her speech was "So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashion movie with a friend! Chill Greta, chill!"

OK, aside from the fact that the most powerful person on the planet openly attacked and ridiculed a 16-year-old, Thunberg came under fire simply for being angry about the climate crisis. For being angry about the fact that Donald Trump and his generation of wealthy individuals, which brought about the climate crisis, were not doing anything about it.

In other words, more than anyone else at the Summit, an angry Thunberg was speaking to Trump, imploring him to do something about the crisis. His response was to ridicule her and to tell her to "chill."

This is, all the more reason, as far as I'm concerned, to respect and admire people like Thunberg and DiCaprio for having the courage to speak out.

"'Before the Flood' truly put into perspective the depth and scope of the climate crisis. It also added to things I learned taking ENV5 1, which I found insightful. I think that everyone should see this, as it comes from a relatively neutral perspective, aside from being against oil companies. Overall a 10/10 watch, and a harsh reality check for the inhabitants of Earth."

There are two important points here.

First, even if you are familiar with the climate crisis (for example, if you've already taken a course like ENVS 1 at UCSB), there is always still more to learn. This includes nearly everyone, including me. And this is especially the case because the climate crisis, along with our understanding of it, is evolving so quickly.

Second, the observation that *Before the Flood* takes a "relatively neutral" position strikes me as both correct and perhaps intentional on the part of the filmmakers. As to why the filmmakers took this approach, I suspect that it has to do with their imagined audience.

*Before the Flood* was released in theaters on October 21, 2016. It was also made available for free "between October 30 and November 6, 2016" on the National Geographic Channel. Given that November 6th was election day, when Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, we can conjecture (and I'm just guessing here, as I don't know this for a fact) that the filmmakers were hoping to influence at least some people, who may have still been undecided, to vote with the climate crisis in mind.

If your imagined audience are people who are not yet convinced of the validity or severity of the climate crisis, and who may, in fact, have already been influenced by arguments put forward by fossil fuel affiliates, taking a "relatively neutral" position makes a great deal of sense. In other words, if you just lay out the facts in as neutral a way as possible, given that the facts here are so compelling, it will allow someone who may be a little skeptical to make up their minds without feel like they influenced by partisan interests.

Since some people are immediately skeptical of Al Gore because he is a liberal politician, it makes sense to have a relatively neutral spokesperson like Leonardo DiCaprio discovering a range of disturbing facts about our changing climate.

"For this week's film, 'Before the Flood,' I was expecting to learn a lot of new information about the climate crisis but I never imagined I would have been this enlightened. It felt like I had personally joined Leonardo DiCaprio on his journey across the world to discover ways to make the changes we need. There were many statistics and visuals that I found very interesting. Speaking as someone who enjoys a good burger, when DiCaprio addressed the agriculture aspect of climate change, I was fascinated but disheartened."

Whenever I speak to the public about the cultural changes that will be necessary to mitigate the climate crisis, I have noticed that sooner or later, for one reason or another, most people in the audience will (to use this person's words) go from being "fascinated" to "disheartened."

The issue here doesn't involve concern over impacts of the climate crisis like sea level rise or wildfires, but rather what mitigating this crisis will require of each of us, personally.

In my response to the previous comment, I noted that technology alone will not solve this problem. Rather, we need to engineer significant cultural changes. This may sound fine in theory, but what does this mean in practice?

For example, what if you are, as this person noted, “someone who enjoys a good burger”? Or someone who enjoys air travel to exciting locales? Or someone who really loves cars or clothes?

When I talk about these particular issues to live audiences, when I get to the climate impact of air travel, some people in the room become visibly uncomfortable. The same happens for other people when I shift to talking about automobile use or fast fashion. Still other people become uncomfortable when I take up burgers.

Unfortunately, as I noted in response to the previous comment, it is not the case that technology alone will solve this problem. One way or another, it will eventually hit home for each of us.

Although this may seem that will need to give up thing that gives value to our lives, it’s useful to think about the downsides here. Experts argue that eating beef is not just unhealthy, but eating enough of it can take a year or more off of your life. Automobiles injure or kill over 50 million people annually. And is having a full closet really make you happy?

“When watching ‘Before the Flood’, I went through a range of emotions. The film was overwhelming. It was infuriatingly frustrating and sad. I drew from the film that what really needs to be addressed are big corporations and government. While I’m not trying to scapegoat them and only blame them because we as consumers fuel their interests, corporations and government have a much bigger weight on climate change than myself. The actions of big companies, lobbyist, and spineless politicians are criminal.”

This comment wonderfully and aptly cycles through a range of emotions and their cause.

First, the climate crisis is “overwhelming,” as it is causing one major problem after another. However, shifting to the next emotions, what is “infuriatingly frustrating” is that “big corporations and government[s]” are not addressing the problem.

The United States government has known about the dangers of the climate crisis ever since the 1960s when the President, Lyndon Johnson, addressed Congress about the issue. Since then, virtually nothing has been done about the problem.

Regarding corporations, although it will be easy to just focus on the fossil fuel industry and its affiliates, all sorts of corporations are now powerful entities in the world. If Apple Computer were a country, “it would be the 8th richest country in the world,” surpassing Russia, Canada, Italy, and nearly every other country on earth. Other companies, such as Amazon and Microsoft, are not far behind. Although this began at the close of the 19th

century with fossil fuel providers, such as oil companies, and heavy industry, like steel production, all sorts of corporations benefited during the era of the fossil fuel economy.

To put it simply, wealthy countries and wealthy corporations amassed enormous wealth during the era of the fossil fuel economy. Because carbon pricing (such as a carbon tax) was not in effect during this time, none of these countries or corporations were taxed or penalized for carbon emissions into the atmosphere. Moreover, it could be argued that during the last 40 years especially, corporations of all sorts have not been paying nearly enough in taxes in wealthy countries like the United States.

Consequently, as this comment noted, what is “infuriatingly frustrating” is that “big corporations and government[s]” are not addressing the problem.

Our next comment concisely explains this frustration:

“The capitalistic greed for short term profits will continue to hurt our future, if policies are not made to crackdown on corruption and enforce better actions like with a carbon tax.”

We’re going to talk more about this issue throughout Climate Crisis 101, but it’s worth noting something now, even though we will expand on this later.

When people draw attention to problems with capitalism, as does this comment, it does not at all follow that they are suggesting that we throw it out the window.

Fossil fuel affiliates and climate change deniers will sometimes argue that calling for reform to our current system is really a secret attempt to resurrect the failed communist experiments (i.e. Soviet Russia and Mao’s China) of the 20th century.

However, what we are really talking about here is that unchecked consumerism and capitalism are playing a significant role in hastening climate change. In order to reel this in, we need a strong government (i.e. a strong democracy) to enact legislation to protect people and the planet from, to use this person’s words, “greed for short-term profits.”

Simply put, we need to put people and the planet first, not corporations or their profits.

“I believe the film [Before the Flood] was a great intro to the issue, however more in-depth environmental films could also be useful in adjunct.”

I too wish that we had time for more films that took up a range environmental and climate issues. However, I tried to just show films that in some way seem essential.

That said, there are a number of terrific documentaries that consider specific issues that are worth watching, such as Gasland, which is about hydraulic fracturing (a.k.a. fracking), Racing Extinction, about species loss, A Plastic Ocean, the polluting of our oceans with plastic, Chasing Ice, the loss of our planet’s glaciers and ice, and Chasing Coral, the death of our planet coral.

“‘Before the Flood’ is a captivating documentary that I could barely take my eyes off of once I began watching. I am not the type of person who cares a great deal about what celebrities are up to, what products they’re using, who they’re dating, etc., which is why I was pleasantly surprised at how Leonardo DiCaprio presents himself in a humble and approachable way and learns and grows with the audience rather than coming off as pretentious.”

Americans have an undeniable fascination with celebrities: “what products they’re using, who they’re dating, etc.”

Some celebrities capitalize on this by attempting to sell you the products that they are using, either directly through their own brand, or by advertising for a brand.

Consequently, I too was “pleasantly surprised at how Leonardo DiCaprio presents himself in a humble and approachable way and learns and grows with the audience rather than coming off as pretentious.” DiCaprio’s celebrity may have been what drew people to this documentary, but he and the filmmakers do a great job of presenting him as just another person who will be impacted by the climate crisis.

Of course, given what we know about climate justice, he will be impacted less than most people on the planet. Still, his concern is heartening. Given the enormity of the climate crisis, it is altogether surprising that more celebrities or not speaking out about it.

This is, I think, a very disheartening thought. In other words, once a person achieves celebrity, most use their platforms to sell some sort of a product or another, rather than leveraging it to do good in the world. Sure, many have Pet causes, but it is rare to find someone with DiCaprio’s commitment, as has been actively working to educate the public about the climate crisis for two decades now.

“While I agree that DiCaprio worked hard to travel the world for this film, we should be reminded that this travel adds to DiCaprio’s carbon footprint.”

While I definitely take the point here, especially regarding air travel, it is worth thinking about this sort of critique for a moment.

In response to a previous comment, I noted that if, like Leonardo DiCaprio and Greta Thunberg, you “pop your head up and call for action on the climate crisis, you present yourself as a target to smack down.” Although there are various ways that people are smacked down, there is one that is particularly effective: drawing attention to an action of theirs that is in conflict with the message. In short, calling them a hypocrite. For example, a climate activist flying on a plane or having a burger.

In so doing, not only is the attacked made personal, but the focus shifts from the message, which is often then completely forgotten, to the messenger.

In terms of the climate crisis, as activist Naomi Klein succinctly noted, “[i]f you can't be an activist unless you have already somehow purged your whole life of fossil fuels then you'll have a movement of three people.”

In terms of the previous comment about celebrity, it is doubtful that there are many celebrities living especially sustainable lives. Hence, as Klein further notes, calling people hypocrites is “an incredibly effective way to repel” potential activists.

This form of attack is, incidentally, widespread. For example, the New York Post ran a story that “Gas-guzzling car rides expose AOC’s hypocrisy amid Green New Deal pledge.” As the article noted, “even though a subway station was just 138 feet from her Elmhurst campaign office,” AOC chose not to use mass transit, but instead used “Uber, Lyft, Juno and other car services.”

If you look hard enough, I suspect that you will find that nearly every climate activist is in some sense a “hypocrite.”

Shifting from the message to the messenger is a doubly effective strategy: it keeps potentially important messengers out of the game. And if they are brave enough (perhaps we should say foolish enough?) to use their platform to help with the climate crisis, their hypocrisy will become the news story, rather than the climate crisis.

As we shall see throughout the Climate Crisis 101, fossil fuel affiliates and climate change deniers have developed a number of highly effective, and often vicious, ways of shutting down the climate crisis conversation.

The following comment was made in response to another student who felt that *Before the Flood* was too much of an oversimplification of the climate crisis.

“I agree that the movie oversimplifies the Climate Crisis...However, I think what makes this documentary great is that it is made to draw people in to environmentalism. My 57-year-old Grandpa, who barely believes climate change is real, doesn’t want the same in-depth six hour movie describing all the socio-political intricacies of climate change and the science behind it. He would immediately turn off a documentary that started with “the earth is its own autonomous being and we have disrespected it for too long. But he sat through the whole hour and a half with me, and by the end he had so many questions. We literally talked about this movie and the climate crisis for hours...Without a movie such as this one, which eases the viewer into the situation, he would have never listened to me.”

What a wonderful endorsement of *Before the Flood* and its approach.

Since this is the first documentary for Climate Crisis 101, it is worth noting that many people have observed that watching with friends or family not only makes watching more fun, but often leads to, as this comment notes, interesting and thought-provoking discussion.

Because, as this comment also notes, our documentaries were generally designed “to draw people in to environmentalism,” they are, relatively speaking, easy to watch - even for someone’s grandfather – as they are neither too las they are neither too long or too esoteric.

“Al Gore’s ‘An Inconvenient Sequel’ was very interesting to me because I really resonated with many of the speeches that he gave (especially the final speech in which he compared the movement to curb climate change to the women’s rights movement and similar movements)...A quote which especially stuck with me was “no other country can play the role the US. can play [in the movement to curb climate change]”. I think that America, a developed country with a lot of resources and power, should be doing a lot more to lead the “green” movement than it’s doing right now... While America is not stepping up to the plate in this “green movement”, other countries and their leaders are. One such example is Justin Trudeau, the prime minister of Canada, who stated that: “...our [Canada’s] government is making climate change a top priority.”

Other countries are already well on their way to combating the climate crisis, While not without problems, “Germany has been called ‘the world’s first major renewable energy economy.’” Similarly, “Renewable energy in Costa Rica supplied about 98.1% of the electrical energy output for the entire nation” back in 2016. In terms of wealth (GDP per capita), Costa Rica ranks pretty low among other nations: it is #50 – and yet it has already achieved this level of renewable saturation. Incidentally, the GDP per capita in the US is more than four times greater than Costa Rica.]