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Confronting the Horrors of the Bush-Cheney Era
From Documentary to Allegory

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It is hardly an exaggeration to claim that the administrations of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney have been the most rightwing, extremist, ultra-conservative, and contested in recent history.[1] In retrospect, the 2000 election that pitted Bush against Al Gore was one of the most fateful in history and its outcome shocking and consequential. In particular, the presidential campaign of November 2000 displayed an astonishing conclusion, as on election night, it appeared that Al Gore was on his way to triumph as the big Eastern states of New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Florida were called for him. However, suddenly, Florida flipped over to Bush, who had swept the South and was accumulating enough electoral votes in the Middle West and West to be named the winner when Florida was called for Bush. Yet, in another reversal that a Hollywood drama writer would be hard pressed to imagine, Florida was deemed too close to call, and a recount was ordered, a process that would go on for 36 days and generate a media spectacle that would seriously divide the country (see Kellner 2001).

Following a series of Florida court decisions that more recounts were necessary, the Bush team, led by family consigliore James Baker, fought to stop the recount and freeze a Bush lead by a few hundred votes. The US Supreme Court then jumped in and ruled by a slim 5 to 4 margin that the state-wide recount of Florida's votes, ordered by the Florida Supreme Court, should stop and Bush should be declared the victor. The obviously partisan vote was certainly the most controversial in US history and was damned by its critics as a misuse of the Supreme Court that violated the Constitution (see Bugliosi 2001; Dershowitz 2001), generating what I call "Grand Theft 2000" (Kellner 2001).

After taking a hard-right course for the first nine months of 2001, and losing a Senate majority when a Republican senator jumped ship to caucus with the Democrats, Bush regained the initiative after the terrorist

attacks of 9/11, discussed in the next chapter. He continued to push through an extreme rightwing agenda and to rush to war, first against Afghanistan and then Iraq – with momentous consequences.

In this chapter, I first highlight how documentary cinema portrayed the Bush-Cheney years, beginning with discussion of some provocative works that dealt with the 2000 election and the first years of the Bush-Cheney presidency. Then I examine how documentary and Hollywood fictional films portrayed environmental crisis and dealt with the issue of global warming and climate change, which had been initially denied and suppressed by the Bush-Cheney administration. I discuss how Davis Guggenheim's 2006 Academy Award winning documentary about Al Gore's crusade against global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and a steady flow of environmental documentaries address these issues. I next show how a series of fiction and animated films allegorically present environmental crisis, and conclude with a discussion of how Hollywood genre films can be read as commentaries on the socioeconomic crises and fears of the present moment.

This chapter combines analysis of documentary and fiction film because both together provide critical insight into events and problems of the present age. For instance, allegories like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) warn about environmental catastrophe, while mutant monster and various horror, fantasy, and science fiction films point to the dangers of social horrors and even apocalypse. Documentaries at their best provide cogent contextualization and advance knowledge. However, I want to question the line between fiction and non-fiction films, as the former can provide experience and access to issues that may penetrate deeper, or awaken individuals more dramatically, than documentary, and thus may help cultivate insight and vision into contemporary issues, as well as deal generally with the human condition. On the other hand, documentaries may also have resonant images and characters that impress themselves deeply on audiences and change their perceptions and perhaps even behavior, as well as providing historical-contextual understanding and factual information. Yet documentaries themselves are constructs and have their biases and entertainment and fictive components, as I will emphasize.

The Golden Age of Documentary

The contours of the key events of the Bush-Cheney years and the struggles over their policies are visible in the US cinematic visions of the era. Enabled

by the revolution in documentary production and distribution during the early 2000s (discussed below), and due to the number of fictional films that chose to allegorically criticize the Bush-Cheney administration, the regime of Bush-Cheney and their Republican Party allies was one of the most documented and critically portrayed in US cinematic history.

The Golden Age of Documentary was fueled in part by the bankruptcy of corporate news and information in the United States, in which a small number of corporations controlled the major television networks, as well as important newspapers and Internet sites, and failed to be adequately critical of the state and major corporations.[2] Corporate news media never adequately informed the country concerning the right-wing radicalism of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney in the 2000 election, treated Bush as a savior after 9/11 (see chapter 2), and served as propaganda machines for Bush-Cheney disinformation concerning alleged Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" and ties to al Qaeda that provided legitimation for the invasion and occupation of Iraq (see chapter 5). The corporate media failed as well to cover the magnitude of environmental crisis intensified by Bush-Cheney policies, the dangers to the economy of a growing federal deficit and consumer debt, and the deregulation of financial institutions and other sectors of the economy. The magnitude of social problems generated by the Bush-Cheney administration propelled documentary filmmakers to fill the gap provided by the conformity and complicity of corporate news media and to take advantage of new digital technologies and modes of distribution which helped fuel the documentary explosion.

Hence, a variety of documentaries present critical visions of the Bush-Cheney administration, ranging from the films of Michael Moore to a series of docs produced and organized by Robert Greenwald which criticized various aspects of Bush-Cheney policy and dealt with the social problems that intensified during their reign of error. The proliferation of quality documentary films is due in part to a revolution in the production and distribution of documentary film in the last decade, resulting from the widespread use of inexpensive digital video cameras, computers, and other multimedia technologies that have made the production of films and videos more accessible and much cheaper. In addition, political groups on both the left and the right have created distribution networks to circulate material promoting their causes, and general audiences can buy documentaries and other films at a discounted price from a number of sources, including Amazon, or can rent them by mail from companies

like Netflix or Blockbuster, or in video/DVD rental stores and websites. Finally, as we shall see in this and following chapters, the success of films by Michael Moore, Robert Greenwald, and other documentary filmmakers, in conjunction with pressing social problems and political scandals, inspired perhaps the most prolific and hard-hitting wave of documentaries in US, and perhaps world, cinema history.

Grand Theft 2000

Unprecedented (2001), directed by Richard Ray Perez and Joan Sekler,[3] presents a fast-moving and well-documented examination of the Florida fiasco, beginning with the efforts of Florida Governor Jeb Bush and his Secretary of State Katherine Harris to purge voting lists of so-called "felons" who turned out to be predominantly African-American and working-class voters, in largely Democratic Party strongholds, who were illicitly forbidden to vote because their names resembled those on the felon list. This dastardly deed perhaps blocked over 50,000 votes and is illustrative of the dirty tricks and illegal maneuvers whereby the Florida Bush machine allegedly stole the election with the complicity of the US Supreme Court (see Palast 2003; Kellner 2001).

Unprecedented unfolds the variety of dirty deeds whereby Al Gore lost votes in the Florida election. The film addresses the infamous "Butterfly Ballot" in which Gore supporters voted accidentally for Pat Buchanan, showing on screen the absurdly designed ballot that misled thousands of voters, mostly liberal senior citizens, in Palm County, Florida. Various other confusing ballots around the state, dysfunctional voting machines, irregular procedures, and obstacles to counting and recounting the vote, all of which tainted the Florida vote count and set the country into constitutional crisis, are critically interrogated in the film, which culminates in showing the Supreme Court pull off what many saw as a coup d'état for the Bush-Cheney Gang.

Narrated by Peter Coyote, *Unprecedented* is rich with documentary footage and insightful interviews with observers and experts like Allan Dershowitz and Vincent Bugliosi, who criticize the Supreme Court decision. The documentary footage shows that three of the Supreme Court Justices had conflicts of interest in that they had direct links to the Bush-Cheney administration, including Clarence Thomas's wife, who worked directly for the Bush campaign, and one of Justice Scalia's sons, who received a job in the legal division of the administration.

Unprecedented reveals how Republicans sent down operatives to attempt to stop the vote count through demonstrations and a sit-in in a Miami-Dade government office, where a vote recount was being attempted. Footage documented their attempts to disrupt the recounts, and photos identified that they worked for Republicans like Tom DeLay and were not local demonstrators. The film also shows how the media spectacle of the struggles around the recount was orchestrated for the television cameras and how the Bush team was able to manipulate the media, creating the impression that Bush had already won and that the Gore team were "sore losers" delaying the inevitable. Eventual counting of the votes of the entire state, as was occurring when the Supreme Court intervened, showed that Al Gore would have been elected had a fair recount been allowed, although the right wing circulated the mythology and Big Lie that the recount demonstrated Bush actually won.[4]

Both *Unprecedented* and Danny Schechter and Faye Anderson's *Counting on Democracy* (2001) examine the dangers of computerized voting, how Republican firms received most of the contracts, and how there was a clear racial and class gap in access to reliable voting machines that strongly benefited Republicans. *Counting on Democracy* uses the Florida example to make the case for reliable voting machines and accountable voting procedures, a problem that would continue to plague elections in the United States, as I suggest below.[5]

Another 2000 election film, *Journeys with George* (2001), made by Alexandra Pelosi, a former NBC News producer and Nancy Pelosi's daughter, puts on display the superficial, smug, and nasty side of George W. Bush while on the campaign trail, with his trademark smirk, simplistic slogans, and insulting comments to aides and the media. Yet while the film presents critical images for viewers inclined to view Bush negatively, the documentary also humanizes him, as he banters with the documentary crew and reporters, presenting his likeable and affable side as well. The fact that Bush allowed intimate access to his campaign to the daughter of a California congresswoman, Nancy Pelosi, who would eventually rise to be the first woman Speaker of the House, shows the interconnection between elite political families who often exaggerate differences and are part of the same "political club" (although political polarization would rise significantly during the Bush-Cheney era).

While *Journeys with George* focuses on the Bush campaign, *The Party's Over* (2001, released 2003 and originally titled *Last Party 2000*) provides documentary investigation of key issues and events on the 2000

campaign trail, examining both parties and focusing on youth and other protests against the two major political parties' conventions and platforms. *The Party's Over* is a follow-up to Marc Benjamin and Mark Levin's documentary *Last Party 1992*, which featured the inimitable Robert Downey on an excursion exploring the US political scene during the 1992 presidential election campaign. *The Party's Over* centers on Academy Award winning actor Philip Seymour Hoffman as a politically uninformed and alienated Gen-Xer who seeks to learn about American politics through filming the Republican and Democratic Party conventions and attempting to interview key figures. Hoffman questions why young people are so apathetic politically and are not more involved in the system. Discussing this with both famous and ordinary younger people, as well as politicians and pundits, the film documents widespread dissatisfaction with the current political system.

Much of *The Party's Over* appears to take the Ralph Nader line, endorsed by Michael Moore in 2000, that there is no real difference between the two political parties, both of which are dominated by corporations and money. Yet the interview footage (and subsequent results of the election) show clear differences. Moreover, in retrospect, the documentary makes Al Gore and the Democrats look very good, and, in view of their disastrous record, the Republicans and their figurehead Bush appear quite negatively, raising the question, how could this guy and this bunch ever capture the presidency?

Against party politics, *The Party's Over* champions social movements and struggles, opening with a montage of the civil rights, anti-war, gay and lesbian, and environmental movements. There is also sustained focus on contemporary youth movements like the Ruckus Society, as well as youth demonstrating at both the Republican and Democratic Party conventions. The message, highlighted in interviews with Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam, John Sellers of the Ruckus Society, and other demonstrators, is that many young people are fed up with politics as usual, want to get involved, and are seeking to develop their own autonomous political movements and political culture – which dispels dominant media stereotypes of apathetic youth. There is also sustained focus on Cherie Homulka and the homeless movement, providing access to voices rarely heard in the mainstream media. The film reveals an amorphous range of activist groups in strong opposition to the conservative hegemony that would dominate during the Bush-Cheney years, and suggests that many individuals and groups were ready for activism and change, as in the 1960s and 1970s.

Just after the 2000 election, the Hollywood Director's Guild had a program honoring Michael Moore's television work. A highly upset Moore came out on stage and said he needed to talk about the 2000 election before anything else. Moore acknowledged that he had campaigned hard for Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader in 2000, but saw that the contest between Gore and Bush was a cliffhanger with the election probably going to whoever prevailed in Florida and New Hampshire. Moore claimed he went to Nader to discuss this problem and proposed that Nader tell voters in Florida and New Hampshire to accept the lesser evil so that the country would be spared the likely disaster of a Bush administration. According to Moore, Nader resisted the argument and Moore claims he himself went to Florida and New Hampshire to plead the case that Nader supporters should vote for Gore in this instance. Moore's arguments did not prevail and the election was close enough to allow the Bush-Cheney Gang to steal it (see Moore 2003). Ralph Nader thus appeared to be a spoiler and was viewed critically by many of his previous supporters.

The documentary *An Unreasonable Man* (2007) by Henriette Mantel and Steve Skrovan addresses Nader's entire life history. The film makes both the most positive and critical cases for and against Nader, documenting his unquestioned record of public service and achievements, as well as what now appears as his gross misjudgments in the 2000 and 2004 elections. Nader's refrain that there wasn't "a dime's bit of difference" between Bush and Gore now appears monumentally misguided, and the film makes clear that for many this blunder seals Nader's legacy. The film, however, is very fair, showing Nader's long list of anti-corporate campaigns and legislative achievements, ranging from car safety laws to OSHA and workers' safety regulations, the Clean Air Act, the Freedom of Information Act, and many other laudable achievements.

An Unreasonable Man probes Nader's personal life and finds no scandals, indicating that Nader is ascetic and almost monk-like in his dedication to causes, although many former associates find grounds to criticize him. The film suggests that Nader veered to the left during the Reagan years that undid much of the progressive legislation of the previous decades and was alienated during the Clinton years because he was not called upon to promote reform and found the Clinton administration too cozy with corporations. Yet the man and his motivations ultimately remain a mystery and his role in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections continues to generate endless controversy, while his quixotic effort to run yet

again for president in 2008 poses further questions about Nader's motivations (he appeared to have had little effect on this election).

The wave of progressive political documentaries during the Bush-Cheney era included homages to stalwarts of the left such as Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, and there is a fascinating documentary called *Senator Obama Goes to Africa* (2007) which made it appear to me that Barack Obama was the real deal, although the film could have been used against him to document that he's a flaming liberal and even radical. Another documentary, *Giuliani Time* (2006), takes on New York Senator Rudy Giuliani by exposing his family connections to organized crime, the covering up of his problematic family background while he was a New York and federal prosecutor, and the countless scandals and conflicts he was involved with in New York.

As the 2008 presidential primaries heated up, with Barack Obama engaged in a fierce competition with Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, and then facing Republican presidential candidate John McCain in the general election, once again the country faced the specter of a stolen election through the high-profile presentation of an HBO docudrama on the Florida election struggle titled *Recount*. Directed by Jay Roach of the *Austin Powers* movies and starring Kevin Spacey as Gore stalwart Ron Clain and Tom Wilkinson as Bush family consigliore James Baker, the docudrama focused on the two sides' behind-the-scenes maneuvering with the courts and media to push the election tally toward their candidate.

While *Recount* made it clear that it was a stolen election, with references to the erratic loss of Gore votes in certain precincts, the scrubbing of tens of thousands of "felons" from the voting account, and the unconscionable halting of vote tabulation by the US Supreme Court, it did not centrally focus on the mechanics of the election theft, barely scratching the surface of the greatest crime in US political history. To be sure, it put on display the hardball machinations of the Bush-Cheney team, the partisan antics of Katherine Harris (deliciously played by Laura Dern), and the failure of the Gore team to fight as fiercely as the Bush-Cheney Gang, signaling out video clips of Joe Lieberman, Gore's vice-presidential running mate, saying that suspicious votes coming from "military" voters should be counted, even if there was no postmark and they arrived days after the election. Yet *Recount* did not deal with how votes were systematically pilfered from all over the state, the statistical anomalies between previous voting records, polling, and the actual count in precincts where

Bush performed much better than he should have and Gore much worse. Nor did it dwell on the scandal of the Supreme Court intervening to stop the hand count of ballots throughout Florida, and the media consortium tabulation of hand-counted ballots that suggested that Gore really won if "intent of the voter" was used as a criterion.[6]

The Bush-Cheney Gang thus seized the presidency with the help of Jeb Bush and their Republican Party allies in Florida and five partisans on the Supreme Court. The result was the most scandalous, corrupt, and ultra-conservative regime in history, which provided payloads of fodder for documentary and other films on the reign of outrage.

Bush-Cheney and Co.: Scandals and Critique

A series of acclaimed and popular documentaries provided critical visions of the Bush-Cheney presidency, including hard-hitting films by Robert Greenwald and associates (discussed below) and Michael Moore (discussed in chapter 3). During this golden age of documentary an astounding number of filmmakers thoroughly dissected and critiqued the Bush-Cheney years. Documentary filmmakers became the muckrakers of the time, exposing multiple injustices and social problems and speaking truth to power.

Some documentary films focused on George W. Bush himself, such as Michael Galinsky and Suki Hawley's *Horns and Halos* (2002), an exposé of Bush's seedy personal life and business deals. Based on J. H. Hatfield's biography *Fortunate Son* (2000), it documents the initial blocking of the publication of this hard-hitting investigative biography. The narrative traces the book's publication by an independent press, Soft Skull, and harassment of the author and publisher Sander Hicks by members of the Bush entourage during the time Bush was running for president, and how Hatfield was eventually driven to commit suicide. The film focuses on Hatfield and Hicks' conflicted relations and their attempt to promote the book, killed by St. Martin's Press when it came out that Hatfield was an ex-con convicted of attempted murder. By focusing on the Hatfield-Hicks stories, however, and the sensationalized claim that Bush had been about to be convicted of cocaine use in 1974, but his family negotiated to get the charges dropped, attention was diverted from the book's detailed account of Bush's shady past, including business scams and failures bailed out by family friends, insider trading allegations, and years of drug and alcohol abuse.

Joseph Mealey and Michael Shoob's documentary *Bush's Brain* (2004), based on the book by James C. Moore and Wayne Slater (2003), tells the unsettling history of Bush's primary political adviser and alter ego, Karl Rove. The film exposes in detail the dirty tricks that were central to Rove's campaigns and his symbiotic relationship with George W. Bush. Rove's "ends justify the means" and "do anything to win" down and dirty politics go back to his days in college with Young Republicans and include tutelage with the legendary gutter politics adviser Lee Atwater, who ran Bush Senior's campaigns, and apologized on his death bed for his nasty tactics. The highlights of Rove's smears and dirty tricks in Texas state politics and the 2000 election are documented, and the film shows how once in office Rove continued to use hardball tactics to attempt to destroy enemies, including former ambassador Joe Wilson. Wilson's critique of the Bush-Cheney Gang's Iraq lies drove the White House crazy, leading Rove and Dick Cheney's assistant "Scooter" Libby to expose the CIA connections of Wilson's wife Valerie Plame, bringing up felony charges for Libby but allowing the sleazy Rove to slither away.[7]

In the same muckraker vein, *Bush Family Fortunes* (2004), based on Greg Palast's book *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* (2003), explores the debacle of the 2000 Florida election. A British-based American journalist, Palast uncovered the story of the scrubbed "felon" list that deprived tens of thousands of citizens of their votes, as well as Bush family connections to the Bin Laden family and Saudis, and the hidden agendas of the Bush-Cheney Iraq invasion.

The revolution in documentary production and distribution which helped to produce a golden age of documentary is visible in the work of Robert Greenwald. Former network TV producer Greenwald assembled crews and financing for the production and distribution of a wide range of documentaries. This series includes one of the first widely seen documentaries on Iraq, *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* (2003 and 2004), that systematically exposed the lies and deceptions which the Bush-Cheney administration constructed to legitimate its failed invasion and occupation. Wanting to get out a quick documentary exposing the mendacity behind the Iraq invasion, Greenwald's first cut of his documentary, titled *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War*, was conceived in June 2003 and released in November 2003 in a 56-minute version.[8] It opened with 25 witnesses, mostly ex-CIA and government intelligence or diplomatic specialists, introducing themselves and their credentials. On trial

were Bush-Cheney administration claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).[9] After a clip of a speech by Bush emphatically asserting "Saddam has weapons of mass destruction" and dramatizing the threat, Greenwald presents government experts who point-by-point criticize Bush's claims and related WMD assertions by other members of the administration. In a devastating segment, the film presents clips from Colin Powell's February 5, 2003 UN speech that claimed to present overwhelming evidence of Iraqi WMD programs, interspersed with critiques by a series of former CIA, State Department, and Iraq experts who took apart Powell's presentation, uncovering the utter mendacity behind the ill-fated Iraq incursion. Concluding segments contain Bush-Cheney administration spokesmen spin concerning why no Iraq WMDs had been found, followed by analyses of how the venture had strengthened terrorist recruitment and endangered the US. In retrospect, the administration spokesmen are totally discredited by the fact that no WMDs were ever found, nor were links between Iraq and al Qaeda. Watching Greenwald's rigorous display of mendacious claims by members of the Bush-Cheney administration and their critique by honorable experts in the field, makes clear how a clique of utterly dishonorable men and women seized control of the government and were opposed by individuals prepared to speak truth to power, demonstrating that US democracy had not yet been destroyed.

A later Greenwald-produced documentary, *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006), exposed how corporations allied to the Bush-Cheney administration were profiteering from the war, often with no-bid contracts, inflated prices, and services paid for but not delivered. Of course, one of the major war profiteers was Dick Cheney's former company Halliburton, which received lucrative no-bid contracts. The film opens by interviewing members of families of Halliburton employees killed in Iraq and who blame the company for inadequate protection and risking the lives of their loved ones.[10] Subsequent episodes document major corporations like Blackwater, closely tied to the Bush-Cheney administration, profiteering from the war, with scandalous examples of no-bid contracts and excessive charges for services. A three-minute sequence in voice-over and images over the closing credits documents Greenwald and his associates' attempts to telephone Halliburton and the other companies to get them to respond to their criticisms, but the calls went unanswered.

Greenwald helped assemble different teams to make these documentaries, worked with groups like Move-On to get financing and distribution,



A Robert Greenwald-produced documentary *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* exposes corporate profiteering.

and established his own production and distribution company, Brave New Films, selling hundreds of thousands of politically enlightened documentaries that were quickly made, using existing TV and media footage, interviewing qualified spokespersons, and constructing narratives and an accessible structure for the documentaries that made them effective tools of political education and organization.[11]

Greenwald's strategy involved getting groups like Buzz-Flash, Bush-Watch, Move-On and other blogs, websites, and political groups to distribute his films. Move-On's impresario Eli Pariser came up with an idea that Greenwald and his associates enthusiastically promoted: having house parties to show their DVDs to provide collective discussion and attempt to organize viewers around the issues in the films. The strategy also involved partnering with groups concerned with the issues, churches, and other institutions that could help distribute the films, thus broadening documentary audiences significantly and helping to connect films and their audiences to ongoing struggles and movements.[12]

Greenwald's documentary teams also helped produce and distribute Nonny de la Pena's *Unconstitutional: The War on Civil Liberties* (2004), which dissected the Bush administration's so-called "USA Patriot Act" and its assault on civil liberties and the US Constitution. *The Big Buy: Tom DeLay's Stolen Congress* (2006) exposed the extent to which lobbies

and rightwing corporations were shaping Bush administration policy (just as the Greenwald group was concluding the documentary, DeLay was accused of felonious crimes and forced to resign his House leadership position). In addition, Greenwald directed and produced *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* (2004), a powerful exposé of the Fox TV News network as a tool of the Bush-Cheney administration and Republican right. The film shows how talking points were circulated from the Republican Party to the Fox News network that dutifully reproduced the Bush-Cheney line of the day, a complicity confirmed in interviews with former Fox employees. *Outfoxed* helped disclose that Fox is basically a propaganda organization for the Republican Party and is in no way "fair and balanced" as they laughably claim.[13]

Greenwald's *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005) documented how the immensely wealthy corporation bought cheaply from China, denying US workers jobs in manufacturing, and paid their own workers a barely minimum wage, often without health benefits, as the corporate owners amassed multi-billion dollar profits. The documentary also showed growing opposition to Wal-Mart and the organization of efforts to preserve local communities from its intrusion.

Greenwald was not alone in documenting the abuses of the Bush-Cheney regime. In *Orwell Rolls in His Grave* (2004), Robert Kane Pappas presents a powerful critical vision that the United States under Bush-Cheney was becoming an Orwellian police state, with the rise to power of the radical rightwing of the Republican Party and compliant corporate media that advance its ultraconservative agenda. The documentary indicates how deregulation and privatization resulted in a few mega-corporations controlling broadcasting and serving as lapdogs for the Bush-Cheney administration and corporate elite, thus failing to perform their role as watchdogs essential to democracy.

A very powerful critique of US corporate broadcast media is found in Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's *Manufacturing Consent* (1992), which elaborates Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's thesis of corporate media as propaganda instruments for the existing system. Achbar and Jennifer Abbott's documentary on *The Corporation* (2004) dissects the history and effects of the key capitalist institution of the corporation, which was systematically unleashed during the Bush-Cheney administration when it eliminated scores of important state regulations. Based on a book by Canadian law professor Joel Bakan, *The Corporation* explores the history of corporations being interpreted as legal persons with a range of

constitutional rights and asks what kind of a person is the corporation anyway? Based on criteria delineated in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the filmmakers suggest that the corporation is immoral, selfish, irresponsible, manipulative, unable to empathize or feel remorse, and even psychopathological. Using a diversity of voices ranging from CEOs and corporate flack to Noam Chomsky, the film dissects the history and institution of the corporation, as well as providing manifold examples of corporate malfeasance.

Another film in the muckraker documentary tradition, Alex Gibney's *The Smartest Guys in the Room: Enron* (2005), attacks one of the major corporations behind Bush-Cheney's rise to power, and a poster-child for corporate greed and corruption. The highly acclaimed film investigates the flim-flam whereby Enron sold "derivatives" and "futures," covering over its fraud with hype about how much money its investment scams were making, showing the media to be complicit in advancing Enron's shady business dealings as the latest in advanced corporate finance. The film highlights the corporate con games and Enron criminals who perpetuated them, but also the devastating consequences of their crimes on scores of workers and investors. The close connections between Enron's president Ken Lay and the Bush family are documented, exploding George W. Bush's lie that he really did not have personal or political connections with Lay. Lay himself comes off as a rah-rah salesman, while his associates Jeffrey Skilling and Andrew Fastow come off as the criminal masterminds.[14] A revealing segment shows how the Enron "traders" engineered the California energy crisis in the early 2000s, which led to skyrocketing prices and rolling blackouts, with chilling audiotapes featuring Skilling and other Enron executives joking about the scam.

Also pursuing corporate malfeascence, Chris Paine's *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (2006) tells the story of how after the California Air Resources Board (CARB) passed a law in 1990 mandating that automobiles sold in the state should conform to increasingly rigorous pollution laws aiming at zero-emission, the automobile industry failed to comply and fought efforts to produce more fuel-effective cars. To be sure, there were electric cars being produced and the narrative focuses on General Motor's EV1 vehicle. While scores of celebrities and ordinary people loved the electric car, it was pulled from the market in the Bush-Cheney era due to pressure from automobile and oil corporations. Committed to the electric car as a viable alternative, the filmmakers show how greedy

corporations and corrupt political forces act against the public interest and even deny consumers products they would eagerly purchase.

Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (2006) explores the role of the military-industrial complex in US society and answers his question by suggesting that the military is one of America's biggest and most profitable businesses.[15] Starting with President Eisenhower's 1961 Farewell Address warning about the growth of the military-industrial complex, Jarecki mobilizes a variety of conservative and liberal voices to try to explain US militarism and the excessive growth of the military-industrial establishment. The film cuts from interviews to footage concerning military interventions like Vietnam and Iraq, and exposes the lies and mendacity used to sell these wars to the public. In one poignant sequence, a retired New York cop, Wilton Sekzer, describes his anger after 9/11 and how he successfully persuaded the government to put his son's name on one of the first bombs dropped in Iraq. When he is later confronted by TV images of Bush admitting that there is no connection between the al Qaeda terror attacks and Iraq, the cop is bitter, feeling that he was manipulated and lied to.

Hurricane Katrina is documented in three major films that put on display the Bush-Cheney administration's complete incompetence and failure to address sufferings of people of color and poor people. The event of Hurricane Katrina itself validated media critique of the regime and George W. Bush himself, which had been suppressed or muted in the mainstream media after 9/11 (see Kellner 2005). Spike Lee's political critique of the Bush-Cheney administration is displayed in a highly engaging HBO documentary on Hurricane Katrina, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), which is one of his major achievements. The film provides historical background and penetrating exploration of the episode, which is widely acknowledged as one of the major failures of the Bush-Cheney administration. Interviewing scores of survivors and experts on local geography and politics, Lee compiles a powerful tapestry of the many contributing causes to the hurricane disaster and how it impacted on ordinary lives.

Taking a different tack, *Trouble the Water* (2008) provides a first-person video account of Hurricane Katrina approaching the city and the failure of the city authorities and politicians to evacuate the citizens who did not have transportation to escape. Documentarians Tia Lessin and Carl Deal were interviewing people in a Red Cross shelter in Alexandria, Louisiana, when they encountered Kim Roberts and her husband Scott.

The couple had lived through the hurricane in New Orleans' Lower 9th Ward and documented the emergence, force, and aftermath of the hurricane with a $20 video camera that Kim had just bought. Combining this footage with material taken later by the documentary crew, *Trouble the Water* shows up close water flooding into neighborhoods and people climbing to their attics or roofs to avoid drowning. The failure to evacuate hospitals and prisons is depicted, and when the military arrives to control camps and public grounds, they are adversarial to the people, refusing to respond to their needs. *Trouble the Water* also deals with the aftermath of the hurricane, showing the difficulties in rebuilding a life for people who have lost their homes and neighborhoods and the inadequate response and help from the Bush-Cheney administration.[16]

Finally, Leslie Cardé's documentary *America Betrayed* (2008) dissects the monumental failure of the Army Corps of Engineers to build a viable levee and put a hurricane protection system in place. The film focuses on the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet and its canals that failed to contain the floods from the hurricane and destroyed large parts of New Orleans. Cardé's compelling documentary delves into the history of the Army Corps of Engineers and its revolving doors from military trained engineers to corporate employees and lobbyists whom the engineers have given contracts and then hired at high salaries. Narrated by Richard Dreyfuss, *America Betrayed* suggests that the entire system of flood control, canals, and levees contributed in a major way to the failure of the system and that local and federal political administrations had failed for years to respond to criticisms of the flood control system's obvious inadequacies and dangers, chickens that came home to roost during the Katrina tragedy.

Anticipating the financial meltdown of 2008, Danny Schechter's *In Debt We Trust* (2006) and *Maxed Out* (2007), directed by James Scurlock, takes on credit card debt, targeting unscrupulous credit card companies who provide easy access to credit and charge exorbitant interest rates, driving people to bankruptcy and even suicide, as is documented in the case studies in *Maxed Out* of two college students who killed themselves after incurring enormous debt. Both films note that government provides a bad model for consumers by itself amassing almost unimaginable levels of debt, one of the financial (mis)policies of the Bush-Cheney administration that helped lead to the financial collapse of late 2008 (a point also made in Patrick Creadon's *I.O.U.S.A.*, 2008, although the latter tends to posit excessive government debt alone as the source of fiscal crisis).

Schechter's *In Debt We Trust*, subtitled "America Before the Bubble Bursts," prophetically anticipates the financial meltdown of 2008 in its comprehensive examination of how lobbyists control Congress, allowing deregulation of the credit card and financial industry. The documentary also goes into the coming mortgage crisis, presciently interviewing experts who warn of a "housing bubble zone," a bubble that was to burst in Fall 2008, along with major financial institutions. *In Debt We Trust* thus provides a comprehensive look at many of the factors which helped cause the current financial crisis and roots the problems in a dysfunctional economic and political system, needing radical restructuring.[17]

Documentary filmmakers thus took on the major scandals of the Bush-Cheney years, as well as the corporations who were unleashed to pursue maximum greed in a totally deregulated environment in which unbridled laissez-faire economics (let 'em do what they want) and market fundamentalism (a religious belief that an unregulated market economy can solve all problems) led to economic catastrophe. Documentary film of the era also provided critical visions of what was going on in the country and the way that the Bush-Cheney era was impacting on social life.

Republican Rule and Crises of Democracy

Steven Greenstreet's *This Divided State* (2005) evocatively documents the political divisions in the United States during the Bush-Cheney era and presents material for a strong diagnostic critique of contemporary conservativism. The story revolves around the response to an invitation by student leaders to filmmaker Michael Moore to give a talk at Utah Valley State campus in Orem, Utah ("Family City, USA") in the run-up to the 2004 election. The largely conservative Mormon and Republican community rose up in arms at the prospect of the Antichrist himself appearing on campus when *Fahrenheit 9/11* was creating such a sensation. Conservative students protested using school funds to bring Moore to campus, and a millionaire local businessman and Sunday school teacher, Kay Anderson, helped organize and publicize a campaign to prevent Moore from speaking and contaminating the minds of students at UVSC by peddling his "hatred and filth." Anderson and other conservatives also undertook a campaign to defame and have driven from office the student leaders who invited Moore, Jim Bassi and Joe Vogel. (The DVD recounts how Anderson had earlier spearheaded a successful

attempt to fire a school official who had sanctioned an outdoor concert by a hip hop group.)

As the debate unfolded, the school decided to invite conservative Fox News pundit Sean Hannity to speak before Moore for "balance." Yet the fierce debate over freedom of speech continued, with some students and professors arguing for the virtues of allowing alternative views to be heard, while conservatives continued to oppose Moore's visit and extremists in the community militated to retaliate against the students who had dared invite him, and who continued to receive hate mail and threats. Some students interviewed pointed out that Mormons should be especially cognizant of the value of freedom of speech, since they settled in Utah after being denied the freedom to practice their religion elsewhere, but no arguments seem to work for the fiercely anti-Moore conservatives.

Sean Hannity arrived to the rapturous applause of his True Believers, and the scenes of his speech to a packed auditorium put on display the vacuousness, thuggery, and demagoguery of a certain brand of contemporary ultraconservatism. When a young philosophy professor, Pierre LaMarche, attempts to question Hannity's clichéd defense of Bush's Iraq War and Bush's denouncing of opponents to the war, Hannity interrupts, insults, and berates the professor, with conservative students booing the dissenter; one woman student is shown glaring at the heretic professor with hatred for daring to expose his liberal views. When a liberal student raises his hand to speak from the audience, Hannity grills him, invites him to the stage as if a liberal were a freak show, and insults and interrupts the good-natured young man as conservative students boo and hiss. The scene puts on display the fascist tendencies of Hannity and his followers' brand of conservatism, and the documentary evokes a strong contrast between conservatives and the more liberal students and professors who try to form arguments, engage in dialogue, and defend basic American rights, even for those with whom one disagrees. This civilized and democratic behavior is contrasted throughout to the unbridled mass chanting and mean-spirited aggression of conservatives.

Michael Moore arrives to speak, salutes the students who were open-minded enough to invite him and to come listen to him, and gives an energetic speech and his usual entertaining show. *This Divided State* clearly puts on display divisions within the country and how Bush-Cheney conservatism produced aggressive intolerance for those who disagreed with their views and policies. The film shows Kay Anderson continuing

to use the legal system to sue the student leaders for what he took as misuse of school funds. In the heated atmosphere, one student leader is forced to resign and becomes estranged from the other, his longtime best friend, as pressures over the legal harassment, organized personal insults and threats, and ongoing media publicity continue.

The 2004 election itself is the subject of James D. Stern and Adam Del Deo's *So Goes the Nation* (2007). While *Unprecedented* and *Counting on Democracy* highlight questionable computerized voting machines, *So Goes the Nation* offers a conventional look at campaign strategies by both sides. Interviewing political insiders in both the Bush and the Kerry campaigns, the interviews suggest that the Bush campaign successfully mobilized voters while the Kerry campaign did not, in effect blaming the Democrats for the election result. Although the documentary shows long lines of African-American and student voters on election day, it does not explore the systematic efforts to take African-American voters off voting lists in Florida, Ohio, and other states, nor the lack of adequate voting machines in predominantly Democratic Party precincts, especially ones inhabited by low-income African Americans, contrasted to the abundance of machines in Republican precincts. Nor does the lame film note statistical anomalies that suggested election fraud, and the ways that the Ohio Secretary of State Ken Blackwell, replicating Katherine Harris's partisan manipulation in Florida in 2000, systematically attacked Democratic precincts and votes with unprecedented legal harassment while doing everything possible to facilitate Republican votes, leading several authors to write books claiming that the Ohio election and thus the 2004 presidency had been stolen, since Ohio was the decisive swing state in the election (see Gumball 2005; Miller 2005; Fitrakis and Wasserman 2005).

Simon Ardizonne and Russell Michaels' *Hacking Democracy* (2006), by contrast, takes on the scandal of computerized voting machines produced by Diebold and other companies with Republican Party connections. Focusing on citizen-activist Bev Smith's BlackBox voting project, devoted to demonstrating the problem with touch screen and optical scan voting machines, the film demonstrates how easy it is to hack computers and change results, as a Finnish computer programmer hacks a Diebold machine's memory card to dramatically alter votes. The film does not, however, deal with the broader problem of election fraud, although it clearly makes the point that without ballots that can be hand-inspected in close elections, the possibility of continued fraud and stolen elections is inevitable.

In 2008, as the fateful day of the presidential election approached, Starz TV released David Earnhardt's powerful documentary *Uncounted: The New Math of American Elections*. This hard-hitting exposé focuses on the stolen 2004 election and the ways that the Republican Party was able to block votes by scrubbing voting lists, not providing enough voting machines, actually switching votes, and other nefarious activities. Interviewing Gumball, Fitrakis, and Wasserman who had written books about the election theft in Ohio, activist Bev Harris, founder of BlackBox.org, a group dedicated to exposing the dangerous flaws of computerized voting systems, and Athan Gibbs, inventor of the TruVote voting system that produced transparency and paper ballots, the film provides ample documentation of how votes were stolen in Ohio, providing testimony involving local citizens, investigative reporters, and members of Congress like John Conyers, who released a report on the scandal.

Most compelling, the film interviews Clint Curtis, a conservative computer programmer from South Florida who was asked by Florida congressman Tom Feeney to make vote-flipping software that could be used in Florida election machines to rig elections. At first thinking Feeney wanted protection against fraud, after he invented the software that allowed hacking, it was clear to Curtis that this rigged computer program was going to be used to illicitly rig the elections. He resigned, trying to expose Feeney. Putting his affidavit online, Curtis caught the attention of Bev Smith's BlackBox voting project, as well as the filmmakers, who used Curtis's story to publicize the scandal of computer voting machines, owned by Republican Party companies, that could be rigged. The film notes how California and other states cancelled their Diebold contracts, but how most states are still using dicey machines, revealing a truly rotten worm in the core of the election system. In a side story, Curtis switches party affiliations and runs against Feeney for Congress in Florida, and then challenges the results when he is beaten in his 2006 congressional run.

Also produced with the 2008 election in mind and released for free downloads on the Internet, Michael Moore's *Slacker Uprising* documents Captain Mike's 2004 campaign to rouse up slackers to vote against Bush and for Kerry. Cameras followed Moore on his 62-city tour in swing states and showed Moore and rock star friends like Eddie Vedder and Steve Earle performing and trying to mobilize young audiences to vote. Most reviews panned the film as an advertisement for Moore and, surprisingly, although the film ended with the close Ohio race, Moore did

not mention the successful attempts in the state to block Democratic Party votes, or the arguments made in several books and documentaries that the election in Ohio was also stolen (for a discussion of Moore's serious films, see chapter 3).

Taken together, the documentaries of the 2000s provide a compelling and accurate view of the scandalous period of the Bush-Cheney years, providing far more detail and critical insight than the country's official presidential historians who, in both scholarly treatises and the media, tended to ignore the misdeeds and crimes of the Bush-Cheney regime and a lifetime of scandal within generations of the Bush family.[18] The documentaries of the era are supplemented, to be sure, by a small library of books exposing the malfeasances, mendacity, and fiascos of the Bush-Cheney administration (see Kellner 2005, which draws on and references this critical literature). While the mainstream media provided propaganda coverage of the Bush-Cheney administration actions from 9/11 well into the Iraq invasion and occupation, the documentaries described above revealed the unsavory and often frightening truth of the nature and consequences of the failed Republican policies. The critical documentary films that engage the crises and scandals of the era display the maturity and sophistication of US documentary filmmakers, and comprise one of the most impressive sets of documentary films in film history.

Real Disaster Films: From *An Inconvenient Truth* and Environmental Documentaries to Animated Allegories

Environmental crisis and the un-benign neglect of climate change and global warming by the Bush-Cheney administration have been the subject of many documentaries. While the Davis Guggenheim/Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) has become the best known and most rewarded environmental documentary, a wide range of others, too extensive to survey, have dealt with dimensions of the ecological crisis. In addition, a series of animated features and Hollywood fictional films have allegorically portrayed the consequences of continued environmental degradation, using genres from animated children's movies to the political thriller and disaster film to portray the crises confronting life on earth today.

Climate Change and Environmental Crisis Documentaries

Davis Guggenheim and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) dramatically documents the threat to planet Earth of climate change and severe environmental crisis. The film received a large global audience, making it the third highest grossing documentary film in history, triggering widespread debate, and helping to win an Academy Award and Nobel Peace Prize for Gore.

After environmental activist Laurie David, who helped produce a documentary on global warming for HBO, *Too Hot to Handle* (2006),[19] saw a ten-minute version of Al Gore's slide-show in 2004, she helped organize presentations for Gore on climate change in New York and Los Angeles. His highly impressive performance and well-documented multimedia presentation led to meetings with Gore, David, eBay billionaire Jeff Skoll, TV director and producer Davis Guggenheim, Quentin Tarantino's producer Lawrence Bender, advertising guru Scott Burns, producer Lesley Chilcott, and others of the Hollywood left, who undertook to make a documentary based on Gore's slide-show and lectures within the following six months. One report indicated "the schedule was so grueling that Gore jokingly referred to it as 'Kill Al Vol. III' " (a riff on Tarentino's *Kill Bill* films that Bender produced).[20]

While the film's focus is Gore's lectures and audiovisual material, the titles, graphics, and compelling documentary footage created by the filmmakers help make Gore's key arguments about global warming accessible and engaging to theatrical, home, and classroom audiences. Gore proves to be an extremely competent lecturer, as well as a committed environmentalist. On the DVD commentary, director Davis Guggenheim tells how he pressed Gore to tell personal stories of how he became devoted to environmental issues, and the result is a highly sympathetic portrait of Gore, showing him in airports and lecture halls, having conversations, and relaxing and talking on his Tennessee family farm.

An Inconvenient Truth opens on Gore's farm and portrays the quiet beauty of nature under threat. It then cuts to Gore's opening lecture joke: "My name is Al Gore. I used to be the next president of the United States." The film quickly moves to explaining global warming. Charts document a growing rise in temperature, while an animated cartoon illustrates how global warming works, and Gore's lift upon a hydraulic crane dramatizes how quickly the carbon dioxide level is increasing. Gore's lecture also addresses the dangers of population explosion, and urban and industrial congestion

and pollution, and how these factors help produce extreme weather events, which charts show are on the rise. One of the more dramatic features of the documentary include warnings concerning the melting of glaciers and threats to the continental ice shelves in Antarctica and Greenland. Indeed, the most apocalyptic claims concern the weakening and break-up of the ice sheets, and graphic reproductions of how resultant rising ocean currents could flood vast areas of the east and west coasts of the US, China and India, and other highly populated coastal regions.

The latter point was claimed to be alarmist in an article by William Broad in the *New York Times*, who asserted that the tide level would have to rise over 20 feet to create the damage envisaged in Gore's graphics, but scientists predicted only a 23–24 inch melting of the ice-caps by the end of the century.[21] This argument, widely touted in the corporate media and rightwing blogosphere, presupposes only "normal" melting of the ice-caps, whereas Gore's scenario envisaged increased breaking up of the ice-caps that would accelerate melting, a phenomenon already underway and which his film dramatically portrayed with documentary footage.[22]

The film was heavily promoted by activist groups and found a large and enthusiastic audience. It received generally favorable reviews, although critics of Gore either attacked the film or Gore's persona and politics. Roger Ebert, however, was so enthusiastic that he wrote:

> I want to write this review so every reader will begin it and finish it. I am a liberal, but I do not intend this as a review reflecting any kind of politics. It reflects the truth as I understand it, and it represents, I believe, agreement among the world's experts.
>
> Global warming is real.
>
> It is caused by human activity.
>
> Mankind and its governments must begin immediate action to halt and reverse it.
>
> If we do nothing, in about ten years the planet may reach a "tipping point" and begin a slide toward destruction of our civilization and most of the other species on this planet.
>
> After that point is reached, it would be too late for any action.
>
> These facts are stated by Al Gore in the documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Forget he ever ran for office. Consider him a concerned man speaking out on the approaching crisis. "There is no controversy about these facts," he says in the film. "Out of 925 recent articles in peer-review scientific journals about global warming, there was no disagreement. Zero."[23]

Although there is indeed overwhelming consensus in global warming studies concerning the seriousness of the issue, *An Inconvenient Truth* revealed that of 636 reports on the global warming debate in the popular press, 53 percent put in question key aspects of the arguments. This media bias is not adequately explored in Gore's film, nor is the role of corporations and lobbyists in blocking political solutions that corporations see as threatening their short-term interests and profits. The documentary also saves its suggestions concerning what is to be done about global warming for an end-credits sequence, accompanied by Melissa Etheredge's Academy Award winning song, "I need to wake up."[24]

In addition to winning the Academy Award and becoming one of the most widely seen documentaries of all time,[25] *An Inconvenient Truth* became a global phenomenon, elicting attention and controversy throughout the world. Gore was co-awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007, when it was noted that his commitment to fighting global warming "has strengthened the struggle against climate change," and he was called "probably the single individual who has done most to create greater worldwide understanding of the measures that need to be adopted."[26]

Other documentaries dealt with global warming, climate change, and other threats to the environment. Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare* (2005) documents the devastation created by the introduction of Nile perch in Lake Victoria in Africa in the 1960s. The highly invasive and predatory fish killed off other species, some of which fed on algae and maintained the lake's ecosystem that was now slowly dying. The film focuses on the Nile perch factories that send millions of tons of fish a day to Europe, constituting Tanzania's largest export. Poignant episodes depict the incredible poverty among those who come from the countryside to work in a factory or serve as fishermen at minimum wage, the AIDS epidemic from prostitutes who service the workers, the armies of children who sniff glue and struggle for tiny amounts of food, and the possibility that the airplanes which fly the fish exports to Europe return with guns sold to various factions that bring civil war and further devastation in Africa.[27] A revealing interview by a former teacher who works in a fish factory suggests that the struggle for control of African natural resources has traditionally led to vast inequalities between the haves and have nots, with the strongest and most powerful forces seizing control. Hence, just as the Nile perch destroy other species in Lake Victoria, so too do the predatory global powers who control Africa's resources condemn the general population to a life of misery.

Gregory Greene's *The End of Suburbia* (2006) opens with stock footage of post-World War II suburbia in the United States, and the automobile and consumer culture that accompanied its rise and expansion. It quickly cuts to how the end of peak production of oil will collapse this "American Dream" based on high consumption and suburban living. Greene marshals an impressive array of experts who warn that peak oil production is rapidly approaching, or is here already, and that there will be drastic reductions in the amount of oil available in the coming years. While the warning and wake-up call is salutary, the filmmakers do not push alternative energy and debunk most candidates to replace oil. While many alternative energy sources do have their downsides, one hopes that a critical mass of multiple new energy sources could address the crisis. The film's failure to indicate alternatives reveals a lack of vision and hope in some segments of the left.

Daniel B. Gold and Judith Helfand's *Everything's Cool* (2007) focuses on corporate shills who masquerade as scientists and attack climate change science contrast with those experts who point to the dangers of global warming. The film documents how critics of global warming receive funding from energy and other corporate entities opposing regulation and restrictions on industrial activity. Begun in 2003, the film documents a number of sites throughout the Americas that are being damaged by global warming and even shows an early version of Al Gore's speech and slide-show that became the basis for *An Inconvenient Truth*. The film also follows global warming activists, who they humanize by going to their homes and doing personal interviews, as well as presenting their analyses of the dangers of climate change and criticism of those who would deny the problem.

The 11th Hour (2007) takes off from *An Inconvenient Truth*'s warnings about the dangers of climate change and global warming, and provides a harrowing overview of the earth's various eco-crises. Using the metaphor of the 11th hour, the film dramatizes the relative shortness of human life on earth and the possibility that if current crises continue, the ecosystem will collapse, threatening the survival of the human species. Co-produced and narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio and directed by Nadia Conners and Leila Conners Petersen, *The 11th Hour* uses documentary footage and interviews with over fifty environmental experts to dramatize the dangers of global warming, escalating extreme weather events, cascading pollution, the depletion of ocean resources, deforestation, desertification, the melting of polar ice-caps, the rapid depletion of fossil

fuels, overpopulation, and disease epidemics, especially in overpopulated and polluted urban areas. Multiplying the global challenges to human survival, the film postulates that a "convergence of crises" could produce apocalyptic collapse, with Stephen Hawking warning in a dramatic segment that if things continue on their present course, life on earth could end, and the planet could became an arid and lifeless orb like Venus, without atmosphere to sustain life and with sulfuric acid for rain. Further, *The 11th Hour* goes much further than *An Inconvenient Truth* by pointing to specific causes and suggesting solutions. Many experts deplore the system of corporate greed that allows pollution and environmental destruction at the cost of imperiling the earth and its resources. Reliance on non-renewable fossil fuels is cited as a major problem and the need for renewable energy sources and more sustainable products is emphasized. Accompanying interviews on the DVD elaborate on solutions, such as alternative energy sources, eco-friendly houses and architecture, green products, and how a more sustainable mode of life might be produced.

The 11th Hour strongly indicts the political class in the United States, pointing out that in the early 1970s Democrats and Republicans worked together to begin dealing with problems of the environment, but since then bi-partisan congressional action on the environment has been sorely lacking. There are also philosophical analyses that claim we need an entirely new way of viewing the world and our dependence on nature, grasping our embeddedness in the natural environmentand perceiving our need to preserve the planet for future generations. All in all, the film is a sobering look at the serious environmental problems facing the human race and the need for serious solutions.

Finally, Werner Herzog's idiosyncratic documentary *Encounters at the End of the World* (2008) provides a fascinating exploration of the relation between humans, science, and nature in Antarctica that concludes with a pessimistic warning about human extinction. Herzog interviews a wide variety of interesting people working on the relatively unknown continent, including scientists who study micro-organisms, one of whom describes frightening evolutionary battles among underwater micro-organisms, while another scientist is proud he has just discovered three new species. The barren and forbidding landscape and the precarious attempts to establish camps and tunnels to explore the novel ecology lead Herzog to meditate on the fragility of the ecosystem and the human species.

This discussion takes us to engaging Hollywood allegories of environmental crisis that portray various types of threats to the existing

environment and dangers of collapse, a theme that will be developed in succeeding sections.

Animated Visions

One of the most popular documentary films of the era, French filmmaker Luc Jacquet's *March of the Penguins* (2005), evades the issue of climate change and global warming. This charming film tracks the march of the Emperor penguins in Antarctica to their seasonal mating and then separation during the harsh winter, but only in a *National Geographic* documentary on the DVD is global warming and the threat to the survival of the penguins mentioned.

George Miller's animated penguin story *Happy Feet* (2006), by contrast, shows how human plundering of natural resources is adversely impacting upon the natural world. Sean Cubitt (2005) points out the long and curious connections between animation and animals, and the tendency of animated films to anthropomorphize animals while sometimes zoomorphizing humans. Disney tended to use animated films to anthropomorphize animals for the purposes of constructing conservative ideological machines, but many recent animation films have used animal figures and narratives to make pointed critiques of human follies, including Pixar/Disney's *WALL-E* (see below).

Happy Feet's warm story centers on Mumbles, a highly individualized penguin who cannot sing and win penguin love (voice of Elijah Wood). Mumbles was born to dance, leading to his ostracizing, before acceptance by other penguin groups, themselves different from the Emperor penguins. This plotline is connected to a quest drama whereby the dancing penguin wants to discover why the group's fish supply is dwindling. En route to discovery, and after threats from predatory birds and killer fish, the group encounters Lovelace the Guru (voice of Robin Williams), who has a plastic six-pack container around his neck that he claims is a magic talisman. Mumbles soon discovers that the penguins' fish are being taken away by humans and that pollution by humans is wreaking havoc in Antarctica.

The satirical animation film *Farce of the Penguins (*2007) goes further, twice bringing up climate change as a threat to the penguin's survival, a major factor left out of the idyl of *March of the Penguins*. Indeed, *March of the Penguins* idealizes and anthropomorphizes its penguins, opening with Morgan Freeman's narration that the documentary is a "love story,"

and he closes on the same note, telling that it was "love" that drove the penguins to return to their mate and children against great obstacles.[28] Samuel Jackson's narration on *Farce of the Penguins* mocks the idealistic narrative of *March*, and creates an unsettling story of penguins constantly faced with threats to their survival. *March of the Penguins* also presents an idealized vision of nature and triumph over adversity, while *Farce* and *Happy Feet* present darker visions of cruelty, the struggle for survival, and the destructive interventions of humans, upsetting the balance of the natural world.

An Arctic Tale (2007), directed by Adam Ravetch and Sarah Robertson, combines *National Geographic* nature footage of the Arctic with a fable about the dangers of global warming and how it is affecting the region's species. The narrative features parallel adventures in the birth and maturation of a walrus pup named Seela and a polar bear cub named Nanu, characters constructed from composites of multiple walruses and bears filmed over several years. Scripted by Linda Woolverton, who has written Disney films, Mose Richards, and Al Gore's daughter Kristin, the film uses a story narrated by Queen Latifah to dramatize the harsh lives of the walrus, polar bear, and other species. While the film is aimed at kids and family viewing, it presents a dark vision of the predatory struggle for survival, and dramatizes how global warming robs animals of their natural habitat.

In his reading of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), Sean Cubitt (2005) emphasizes ecological themes and the harmonies between nature, diverse cultures and beings, and technology. Whereas Tolkien tended to be anti-technology and romanticized preindustrial society, Cubitt stresses that in "establishing shots of Hobbiton, Rivendell and Rohan, for example, the fit between culture and nature is celebrated in the harmony of design and environment" (p. 11). Tolkien's themes of the destruction of nature through mining and manufacturing, however, are preserved in the long fly-through shots of the underground foundaries of Saruman as a "vision of hell" (p. 18). In Cubitt's reading, ecological harmony and the preservation of nature are a major positive theme in Jackson's rendition of Tolkien's novel.[29]

Yet it is perhaps Pixar's animated film *WALL-E* (2008), directed by Andrew Stanton, that provides the most poignant animated film warning about environmental collapse and the fragility of life on earth. The film opens with images of a devastated earth inundated by garbage, a dramatic warning of how the excesses of the consumer society could overwhelm

the ecosystem. The charming narrative has a garbage-compactor robot WALL-E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter-Earth-class) doing his daily work of collecting and compacting garbage and industrial waste into mangeable units that he diligently stacks on top of each other, producing an artwork of sorts, as his creations begin to resemble skyscrapers. Although it appears that WALL-E's labors are a Sisyphean task – the mounds of refuse are endless and violent storms force him to seek refuge in his makeshift shelter – WALL-E makes the most of his bleak existence, collecting items for his warehouse home, one of the most valuable of which is an endlessly replayed tape of parts of *Hello Dolly*. He also seems to have cultivated a relationship with an indestructible cockroach, perhaps the only surviving living thing on earth.

WALL-E's harsh and repetitive life presents a critical vision of alienated labor under capitalism, but WALL-E struggles to have a meaningful private life in his collection of discarded objects from the consumer society. His routine is interrupted one day, however, by the arrival of a robot probe EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator), just at a moment when the first fragile shoots of plant life reappear on the planet. While WALL-E is a poignant figure of industrial labor – with his box-like shape, mechanical parts and functions, and a life spent in repetitive labor – EVE represents a more high-tech post-industrial age with her sleek cylinder form (and resembles Apple computer products, the corporation that partly owns Pixar), multiple tasking, and complex functions.

The early scenes with WALL-E and EVE on earth highlight the wonder of things – their shapes, light and color, properties and functions – as the two discover beauty and meaning in their desolate surroundings and attempt a primitive form of communication. As they leave earth to return to the mother ship that sent EVE, the spectacular images evoke the wonders of space, technology, and earth. Just as earlier the Disney team anthropomorphized animals to produce morality tales for humans, in *WALL-E* machines are anthropomorphized to produce a critique of a mechanistic techno-capitalism and to embody admirable human traits like love and resistance.[30]

EVE had been sent by a corporation named Buy 'n' Large, which had evidently covered the earth with megastores whose waste and excess have inundated the planet. The corporate elite and wealthy consumers have apparently left earth hundreds of years ago on a space ship where they are served by robots, move around on reclining hoverchairs, communicate through video screens, slurp food through straws, and have grown

into almost identical, fat, middle-aged infants, controlled by machines. The president of the corporation who rules the world (possibly modeled on George W. Bush and played by Fred Willard) utters pleasant banalities to "stay the course" and assure the overgrown consumers that all is well, but the ship is really run by a sinister computer named Auto, voiced by Sigourney Weaver and modeled on *2001*'s villainous computer HAL. This trope plays into fears of domination by technology, harking back to *2001* (1968), *THX-1138* (1971), and other technophobic science fiction films of the last decades (see Kellner and Ryan 1988: 245ff).

When the ship's captain learns from EVE that a fragile plant has appeared on earth, suggesting that life may be sustainable again, the orbiting spaceship prepares for a return to earth, but Auto opposes the plan, driving WALL-E and EVE, assisted by the captain, to lead resistance and take the ship back. The segment on the ship contains a powerful critique of technocapitalism whereby giant corporations provide consumers with basic needs and confine them to a life of leisure and consumption. When the captain realizes the computerized program that has ruled their existence for 700 years is enslaving the crew and passengers in a life of indolence and passivity, he has an awakening. While the computerized mechanism of the ship wants to confine him to his quarters, the captain uses the public address system to rally the passengers to a return to earth. With the help of WALL-E and EVE, the mission is accomplished.

In a Disneyesque happy ending, it appears that romance between WALL-E and EVE is now viable, that life on earth may be sustainable, and that the human race can rest assured that although it may have been exiled from its homeland for 700 years or more, a happy return is possible. The captain joyously tells the returned inhabitants of planet earth that they can do things like farm and produce their own food, and a final pan shot shows that indeed green plants are being restored to the barren planet.

Allegories of Catastrophe: Social Apocalypse in Disaster, Horror, and Fantasy Films

As we have seen in the previous sections, global warming, climate change, and the horrors of an unrestrained corporate globalization endanger the earth. Contemporary cinema has addressed a wide range of environmental issues and threats to the survival of humanity and nature. In an earlier era, films warned about nuclear war by portraying post-nuclear holocausts,

ranging from the highly realistic and frightening BBC film *War Games* (1965) by Peter Watkins, to more allegorical films like *Blade Runner* (1982), which portrayed a post-holocaust Los Angeles, or *Escape from New York* (1981), which portrayed a post-holocaust New York.

In the Bush-Cheney era, allegories of disaster and visions of social catastrophe emerged, ranging from environmental disaster films to a number of dystopic visions of the future found in a fusion of science fiction and horror.[31] Whenever social anxieties proliferate, films and fantasy evoke social apocalypse, a trope evident in the Hollywood films of the 2000s that articulate worries about environmental crisis and socioeconomic and political collapse.

Environmental Meltdown

Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) uses the conventions of the disaster film to dramatize the dangers of climate change and global warming, ignored by the Bush-Cheney administration.[32] In an eco-disaster extravaganza featuring tornadoes devastating Los Angeles, a massive tidal surge sweeping through Manhattan, and the freezing of the northern hemisphere, Emmerich takes the disaster film to new extremes. The film opens in Antarctica where Professor Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) and other scientists confront a polar ice-shelf cracking. At a New Delhi environmental conference, Hall warns that a change in the Gulf Stream caused by global warming could bring about a dramatic decrease in temperature. The Dick Cheney look-alike vice-president (Kenneth Walsh) is skeptical and notes the adverse effects of the Kyoto accord on the economy. Yet a Scottish scientist (Ian Holm) tells Hall that his studies of plummeting ocean temperatures in the North Atlantic support the hypothesis that sudden climate change could produce another Ice Age.

Highlighting the global nature of ecological crisis, *The Day After Tomorrow* portrays extreme weather events in India, giant hailstones in Japan, and a Tsunami tidal wave inundating New York, followed by a hard freeze of the entire northern hemisphere, with international astronauts viewing the murderous storm systems wreaking havoc. In an ironic reversal, the film shows people from the northern hemisphere desperately trying to cross the border into Mexico, with Mexican police attempting to turn them away.

The climatologist Jack Hall warns the US government that "in seven to ten days, we'll be in a new Ice Age." When the clueless president (Perry King) in



Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* uses the conventions of the disaster film to dramatize the dangers of climate change and global warming.

a baseball hat is confronted with the magnitude of the cataclysm, he asks his now-chastened vice-president, "What do you think we should do?" Such images transcode popular perceptions of Bush as incompetent and disengaged, and of Cheney running the presidency, and highlight the dangers of having an administration which ignores serious problems.

The Day After Tomorrow puts on display the potentially devastating effects of failing to take ecological crisis seriously and not having plans to deal with environmental problems. Resonant images of a wall of water crashing down on Fifth Avenue in New York, the Empire State Building and New York skyscrapers cracking apart, the Statue of Liberty half-buried in a frozen ice block, and tornadoes ripping the letters off the Hollywood sign, produce an imagination of disaster that provides cautionary warnings about environmental breakdown.

Indie auteur Jim Fessenden's *The Last Winter* (2006) provides a cautionary eco-horror/disaster film about the consequences of global warming. Set in the high Arctic Circle, the film opens with a PR documentary discussing how a corporation, North Industries, has just received a government contract to begin exploration in an area previously denominated a wildlife preserve, geared to discover new oil supplies to make the US more energy independent. The oil explorers and scientists already stationed in the wilderness are beginning to suffer stress, with young Maxwell (Zach Gilford) roaming the empty tundra on his own at night and mumbling about mysterious gases and images. Project manager Ed Pollack (Ron Perlman) returns to discover that Hoffman (James LeGros), an environmental activist who's been hired to monitor the project, has become convinced that the ecosystem is melting down and that with winter temperatures well above normal, the permafrost is melting, making "ice roads" needed to bring in heavy equipment impossible. Further, Hoffman is sleeping with Abby (Connie Britton), Pollack's second in command and previous lover, leading to conflicts between the corporate oil officials who want to drill, baby, drill, and the ecologists worried about effects on the environment.

As it quickly turns out, Maxwell is getting weirder, mumbling about the revenge of nature against human meddling and exploitation of the environment, and that oil, which consists of dead fossils and animals, is emanating strange phenomena after centuries of resting undisturbed. Indeed, the cracking ice and wind are emitting mysterious sounds, and a sour gas may be driving Maxwell crazy (although a Native employee mentions Wendigo, native spirits in the area). After Maxwell's death from freezing, and increasingly bizarre sights and events, the macho Pollock and the ecologist Hoffman leave for help after a plane that has flown to rescue them inexplicitly crashes into their station. The ending is not a cheerful one, but the film closes with chirpy and brightly lit newscasts reporting strange weather occurrences around the world, suggesting climate change and global warming, which the corporate media, however, are apparently failing to investigate.

Horror Shows

Crises of the 1960s and 1970s were often represented allegorically in horror, disaster, and other genre films (Kellner and Ryan 1988). The nightmares of the Bush-Cheney regime were represented in a cycle of genre

films depicting social apocalypse. The first in a social apocalypse genre franchise, *Resident Evil* (2002) was based on a popular Japanese video game and inspired a cycle of films. Directed by Paul W. S. Anderson, *Resident Evil* has a strong corporate conspiracy subtext and opens with a detailed description of how a mega-corporation has taken over the US:

> At the beginning of the 21st century, the Umbrella Corporation had become the largest commercial entity in the United States. Nine out of every ten homes contain its products. Its political and financial influence is felt everywhere. In public, it is the world's leading supplier of computer technology, medical products, and healthcare. Unknown, even to its own employees, its massive profits are generated by military technology, genetic experimentation and viral weaponry.

Resident Evil opens with the release of a deadly gas that sets off a biohazard warning signal and is soon killing people who are regenerated as zombies. An elite crew is sent to contain the infestation, but as it gets out of control the Red Queen computer that controls the underground facility orders a shutdown, so the crew must struggle against zombies, infected dogs, corporate henchmen, and a malevolent computer to escape. The crew – led by two super kickass women, Alice (Milla Jovovich) and Rain (Michelle Rodriguez) – appears to shut down the Red Queen, but countless zombies escape, giving rise to sequels in the franchise. At the end of the film, the main character, who we will learn in sequels is Alice, survives, but observes that the city above the underground research facility has been overrun by zombies and she faces a desperate future.

While the first *Resident Evil* film took place largely underground in a claustrophobic environment where new evils and challenges appeared around every corner, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (2004) takes place amid an urban apocalypse in which Alice, endowed with genetic superpowers, fights zombies, monsters, and corporate thugs, teaming up with some other survivors, including two strong women, to escape before the quarantined city is nuked by the evil corporation. Alice and a couple of her companions make it out for the sequel, but *Apocalypse* ends with the nuclear attack covered over by the Umbrella Corporation as the malfunction of a nuclear power plant, playing on fears of government cover-ups. Further, news reports claim that earlier stories of corporate malfeasance were false and that people should be grateful to the Umbrella Corporation

for preserving their way of life, a barely disguised allegory of lying by corporations and the state during the Bush-Cheney era.

In *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), urban life has been destroyed globally and Alice and a small band of survivors try to survive amid the zombie hordes in a mostly desert environment. Directed by Australian Russell Mulcahy, this zombie gore film shamelessly rips off *Mad Max* and *The Road Warrior* with endless battle scenes, highlighted in an attack by a flock of virally infected birds, who make Hitchcock's flock look tame and harmless by comparison. Superpower-endowed Alice fries the birds and hooks up with Claire Redford and her band of uninfected survivors, who are falling fast to the zombies taking over the world. Las Vegas is in ruins and the only hope for the group is to make it to Alaska, where reports say there are survivors (obviously they haven't seen *30 Days of Night*, which shows Alaska overrun by vampires).

The ultra-violent and nihilistic *Resident Evil: Extinction* is a right-wing survivalist fantasy. After the collapse of civilization only the most violent can survive in a dog-eat-dog and zombie-eat-the-few-humans universe. The *Resident Evil* films articulate fears of evil corporations and uncontrolled biotechnology, human beings dominated by technology, and outbreaks of deadly biochemical plagues – a fear inflamed by the anthrax attacks (never explained) following 9/11. Cumulatively, the franchise falls into a subgenre cycle of zombie films, all ripping off George Romero copiously, who returns, as we shall shortly see, to pastiche himself.

A series of other mutant zombie films focuses on the dangers of science and technology careening out of control and producing catastrophic consequences. Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2003) opens in a research lab in which monkeys have been injected with a pure aggression virus to study violence and its control. Animal rights activists inadvertently "liberate" the monkeys, who begin a murderous rampage, infecting the entire population with a rage virus that turns people into zombie-like killers. Produced in 2000–2001 – when an epidemic of foot-and-mouth disease in Britain forced the slaughter of hordes of cattle, and the anthrax attacks after 9/11 were creating anxiety – the film appeared during the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003. Thus the pandemic shown in the film had great resonance in the real world.

The DVD commentary and documentary dramatize the dangers of global pandemics. Fear of an out-of-control military is another subtext of the film, as a small group of survivors flees to a military camp in the

north of England, responding to a broadcast message that survivors associated with the military are seeking a cure to the virus. The group finds the military encampment, but the survivors include a young black woman (Naomie Harris) and a teenage girl (Megan Burns), and it is soon evident that the military seek to make them their sex slaves in a scheme to repopulate the earth (and satisfy their sexual desires), thus positioning the audience against predatory masculinist militarism.

A sequel, *28 Weeks Later* (2007), directed by Spanish filmmaker Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, articulates specific fears of the US military out of control. A continuation of the previous story but with completely new characters, the film envisages a US-led Nato occupation of Britain to deal with the dangers of another outbreak of the virus after the initial hosts appear to have died. Predictably, the virus and monster rampage reappear and US-led troops – some of whom were complaining about the lack of "action" – begin shooting the zombies, with some of them exulting in the kills. In the context of the US occupation of Iraq, the Code Red order to exterminate survivors of the first virus wave along with the newly infected, and the protracted slaughter and eventual firebombing of a rehabilitation camp, produce resonances with real-world horrors.

Both films have a survivalist and Darwinian subtext, but also express fears of societal breakdown and resultant unrestrained aggression. The hand-held jittering camera and quick editing in the action sequences of *28 Weeks Later* especially, create a sense of existence careening out of control, of being thrown into an unbearable chaos, vividly evoking fears of everything going to shit. A refrain throughout both films – "It's all fucked" – expresses the ultimate anxiety, suggesting that everything is indeed so fucked there is fuck all to do to improve things or provide any hope for the future.

Perhaps Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) is the most complex and thought-provoking meditation on the breakdown of the contemporary political system in its allegory of a world spinning into apocalyptic collapse and Orwellian fascism. In its science fiction premise, based on a novel by P. D. James, the story presents a world fallen into terror and hopelessness when global infertility mysteriously erupts after a flu pandemic in 2009. Set in London in 2027, the truly frightening scenario shows political tendencies of the present leading to chaos and collapse. Using long shots and long takes, Cuarón's camera forces the viewer to explore an environment that looks very much like present-day reality, only more

drab, dangerous, and frightening. Opening television images present a montage of a world in collapse where "only Britain soldiers on":

> *Newsreader:* Day 1,000 of the Siege of Seattle. The Muslim community demands an end to the Army's occupation of mosques. The Homeland Security bill is ratified. After eight years, British borders will remain closed. The deportation of illegal immigrants will continue.
> Good morning. Our lead story.

Since the economy and social order have disintegrated everywhere except in Britain, streams of refugees flood into the country where they are sent to internment camps. A revolutionary group called the Fish fights for immigrant rights and the end of the police state, and plans a violent uprising. All hope is gone after the death of the youngest human, Baby Diego, throws the world into despair. A government bureaucrat, Theo, played in his best anti-hero mode by Clive Owen, leaves a café that is bombed by terrorists and is kidnapped by them. His ex-wife Julian (Julianne Moore) is a member of the group and she helps persuade him to get exit visas for a refugee pregnant woman, Kee (Claire-Hope Ashitey), to take her to the Human Project, where attempts are being made to regenerate human life.[33] Observing the horrors of state repression, Theo becomes an active participant in the quest to smuggle Kee and her baby out of the country. This plotline provides the occasion for a stunning montage of a police state, terrorism, refugee internment camps, and accelerating social disintegration – intensifying tendencies in the present and providing a warning that if things are not dramatically changed we will slide into catastrophe.

While *Children of Men* calls attention to growing fascism and the collapse of democracy and civilization, it has a conservative subtext. The disintegration of civilization makes one yearn for the good old days and the film celebrates childbirth as the key to humanity. The revolutionaries are shown to be brutal terrorists, who gratuitously shoot Theo's lovable friend, Jasper (Michael Caine), and who plan a quixotic "uprising" that appears to be leading to more destruction and their own probable extinction. While the film valorizes political activism and charts Theo's transformation from a depressed cynic into a committed activist, hope is projected onto a nebulous Human Project and the birth of a lone child who becomes an object of religious adoration. Throughout there are media images of Islamic terrorism, and one long scene near the end,



Children of Men depicts an apocalyptic future police state with caged immigrants.

where Theo and Kee seek to escape and deliver the child to a boat that will take it to the Human Project, features a menacing demonstration of what appears to be an Islamic radical group, thus reproducing the contemporary tendency to fear Arabs and Islam.

Yet, on many levels, the film provides prescient critical visions of the present era, evoking the horrors of militarism and a fascist police state. The images of social decay and the faded and saturated colors of *Children of Men* provide a gloomy vision of where contemporary trends may be leading us if action is not taken and change embraced.

In a fascinating article on the proliferation of zombie themes in popular culture, "This Zombie Moment," Gendy Alimurung argues that the dazed and lumbering zombies bent only on survival stand in for figures of millions who as a result of Bush-Cheney Republican economics have lost jobs, stock market wealth, and pension funds, are unable to pay healthcare and mortgage costs, and are worn down by years of war and escalating societal violence.[34] As my analysis suggests, the proliferation of zombie films indeed provides allegories of deadened masses of people and irrational violence that has specific societal origins and references with the politics of the 2000s. While conservative catastrophe films show evil coming from sources external to the existing system or from more supernatural sources, a socially critical tradition exhibited in many of the 2000s catastrophe films discussed here, shows evil and monstrosity emerging from out-of-control aspects of the existing society. George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) and *Diary of the Dead* (2007), for example, provide updated constructions of his zombies-returning-to-life series that provide critical allegories of the present moment. If the zombies in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) could be read as the silent majorities threatening the counterculture in the 1960s, and *Dawn of the Dead* (1973) could be read as an allegory of how consumerism makes zombies out of people, *Day of the Dead* (1985) could be seen as a satire on the greed and violence of the Reagan era, while *Land of the Dead* can stand as an allegory for the deterioration of life in the Bush-Cheney era.

In *Land of the Dead*, after years of zombie attacks on one of the few urban sites of safety, society is divided between those living in high-rise luxury apartments (a fitting figure for gated communities) and the lower classes living in squalor. A small cadre of police tries to protect the upper classes from the zombies and to scavenge supplies from the countryside. The class division represents the growing discrepancy between rich and poor during the Bush-Cheney years, and the zombies initially appear as working-class types who have had the life sucked out of them and are distracted by firework displays which keep them entertained. In Romero's vision, however, the zombies are becoming more intelligent, learning to communicate, use weapons, and organize their forces to assault the city of the living and privileged.

The high-rise city is ruled by Kaufman (Dennis Hopper), an impervious dictator who is resonant of Donald Trump and Donald Rumsfeld (in a DVD video accompanying the film, Hopper said he intended to play the character like Rumsfeld). In a scene where a rogue policeman (played over-the-top by John Leguizamo) threatens to use stolen weapons against

the compound, Kaufman snaps: "We don't negotiate with terrorists," an obvious jab at the Bush-Cheney administration.

Led by an African-American zombie, Big Daddy (Eugene Clark), who has learned to use weapons, the zombies attack the gated high-rise, an image of revolutionary insurrection against the ruling elites. A fireworks display fails to distract them, a symbol of growing revolutionary class consciousness, and the zombies continue systematically to assault the ruling-class refuge in the film's fantasy of class revenge.

Romero's later *Diary of the Dead* (2007) goes back to the beginnings of his *Dead* mythology to show the emergence of the Living Dead zombies. In the film's narrative conceit, a student filmmaking crew from the University of Pittsburgh is filming a horror film in the woods when media reports tell of a strange eruption of people returning from the dead to feast on the living. When the students observe the phenomenon themselves, a young filmmaker, Jason, resolves to capture the horrors on video, to produce a document of the event in which "everything changed." They obtain media coverage from Internet video and discern that the government is lying, covering up the enormity of the horror. The young crew resolves to shoot footage of what is really happening and upload it on the video, pointing to a era of new media and sources of news and information in which "viral video" can be quickly distributed across the world via the Internet.

Of course, the theme of a lying media evokes the US corporate media in the run-up to Iraq and during large stretches of the Bush-Cheney era. The film is full of topical commentary, as when a radio talk show speaker announces "the real immigration problem" is now about people crossing the line between life and death, a dig at conservative commentators who wax hysterical about immigration problems. In a larger sense, in the current environment, the very notion of the Dead returning to life points to the cycle of death and vengeance, endemic for centuries in the Middle East and other parts of the world, that the US has stirred up with the Pandora's Box of its Iraq intervention. Compared to real-life horrors, Romero's zombie films seem relatively tame and subdued.

Richard Rodriquez's *Planet Terror*, the first half of his *Grindhouse* (2007) double bill with Quentin Tarantino, also provides a critical twist to the zombie horror extravaganza, as the film off-handedly explains its zombie killer mutations as resulting from a biological-chemical weapons experiment used in Iraq and gone awry in the US. The ghoulish mutations ravage citizens – an allegory of the system producing monsters in the military who will return to wreak havoc on the populace. The film's

major villains are US military thugs trying to sell the biological-chemical weapons developed in Iraq, and played with tongue-in-cheek irony by Bruce Willis and Tarantino himself.

Interestingly, there have been waves of post-apocalyptic thrillers whenever conservative Republicans serve two terms of office, increasing gaps between rich and poor, the haves and the have nots, and generating economic crisis. During the Reagan years the *Mad Max* films, *Escape from New York*, *Blade Runner*, and countless lesser vehicles showed civilization collapsing into chaotic violence, a conservative nightmare that law and order would disappear, largely caused (although the films would never let you know this) by conservative economic policies.

The number of post-apocalyptic films in the Bush-Cheney years dramatically proliferated as conditions of life worsened for many and crisis intensified. Such films offer allegories of social collapse, dystopias that provide warnings that trends in the present age can spiral out of control and produce catastrophic disaster on a grand scale. While allegories of catastrophe may reproduce the politics of fear exploited by rightwing politicians, they also suggest subliminally that the Bush-Cheney era of unregulated market fundamentalism, rampant militarism, Social Darwinism, and fear may produce the sort of societal collapse evident in *Land of the Dead*, *28 Days Later*, and *Children of Men*. These films can thus be read as allegories of the disintegration of social life and civil society, and the emergence of a Darwinian nightmare where the struggle for survival occurs in a Hobbesian world where life is nasty, brutish, and short. The zombies and monsters represent not only conservative nightmares, but also visions of where the ultra-right Bush-Cheney regime has been taking us.

Notes

1 Many conservative scholars like John Dean (2004, 2006, 2007) and Kevin Phillips (2006) wrote books excoriating the Bush-Cheney administration for rightwing extremism and authoritarianism, claiming it had betrayed true conservativism. While there is no question but that the Bush-Cheney administration was the most hard-right in recent history, it's also true that there are definite ideological and policy continuities with Reaganite conservativism, so I am using both the terms *rightwing extremism* and *ultraconservativism* to discuss the administration's ideological orientation and policies.

2 On the bankruptcy of corporate news media in the US, see Kellner (1990) and McChesney (2000, 2007).

3 Curiously, reviews and later retrospective articles describe *Unprecedented* as one of Robert Greenwald's productions (see, for example, Charles Musser, "War, documentary, and Iraq dossier film truth in the age of George W. Bush," *Framework* 48, 2 [Fall 2007]: 11f). In fact, however, although Greenwald loaned editing machines and gave advice on distribution, the film was an independent production of Sekler and Perez (interviews with Joan Sekler, Los Angeles).

4 While the vote recount story is admittedly complex, a media consortium that inspected and counted ballots indicated that if "intent of the voter" was used as a criterion, and if undervotes and overvotes were counted under this rule, and if all of the Florida election districts would have actually recounted the votes, then Al Gore would have clearly won the election; see Kellner (2001) and the sources in note 6, below.

5 There were allegations that there were also many irregularities in computer voting and other problems in the 2004 election, which many claim was also stolen by the Bush-Cheney-Rove Gang; see Miller (2005), Fitrakis and Wasserman (2005), and Gumbel (2005).

6 See the articles collected at Bushwatch at www.bushwatch.com/gorebush.htm (accessed June 3, 2008) and Robert Parry, "Gore won," November 21, 2001, at www.consortiumnews.com/2001/111201a.html (accessed June 3, 2008). Undervotes were votes on ballots that were not counted, in some cases because the machines were full of chad and the vote registered as a "dimple"; these would have been counted according to strict "intent of the voter" criteria. Overvotes were ones where either a voter voted for two presidential candidates, as on the Butterfly Ballot that had two separate pages, or handwrote the name of the candidate after punching in the vote. There were tens of thousands of these overvotes signaling that the voter intended to vote for Gore. If these had been counted he would have handily won. A spokesman for the Florida Supreme Court indicated that the court had planned to count all undervotes and overvotes in all Florida counties according to "intent of the voter" criteria when the Supreme Court stopped the counting (see Kellner 2001).

7 See Wilson's (2004) account of his clash with the Bush-Cheney-Rove Gang. Cheney's Chief of Staff I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby was indicted for lying about his attempt to destroy Wilson's wife's CIA career, but the sentence was commuted. Although there was speculation that Rove would also be charged, he has so far dodged the bullet, eventually resigning from the Bush-Cheney White House in 2007 to write a book on the scandal-ridden administration and try to profit on the lecture trail and as a commentator on Fox News.

8 The film was rereleased in October 2004 for theatrical showings in an 87-minute version with the title *Uncovered: The War on Iraq*. This version

included more material on the lead-up to the Iraq War and a revealing interview with UN weapons inspector David Kay.

9 Musser, "War, Documentary," p. 9ff situates *Uncovered* in a genre of "legal film truth" documentaries in which the filmmaker puts on trial members of a political administration or legal system, and places the results in question, as Errol Morris does with *The Thin Blue Line* (1988).

10 A short primer on Dick Cheney: after Cheney was asked by presidential candidate George W. Bush in the lead-up to the 2000 election to help him choose a vice-presidential candidate, he quickly chose himself, coming to play a major role in what many see as the Bush-Cheney presidency. Earlier, when Cheney was CEO of Halliburton in the mid-1990s, while on a hunting trip on the same ranch where he was later to shoot a 78-year-old lawyer in the face, Cheney shook hands with the CEO of construction company Brown and Root on a merger, which was subsequently quickly carried out. It soon emerged that Brown and Root had pending asbestos suits that threatened to bankrupt the new Halliburton entity, but Cheney saved the day by securing billions of no-bid contracts to Halliburton in the early years of the Bush-Cheney administration and pushed hard on the Iraq invasion to win more lucrative no-bid contracts for Halliburton, thus pushing up the stock, saving his investments, and paying off Halliburton for the $33 million-plus financial settlement they gave him to leave and go work for Bush (and the corporation). Cheney also pushed through a hard-right ideological agenda and got many other juicy contracts for his ideological allies in an epic scandal that should someday make a good Oliver Stone movie. On Cheney, see Nichols (2004) and Gellman (2008).

11 On Brave New Films, see www.robertgreenwald.org/index.php (accessed September 20, 2008).

12 On the documentary activist strategies of Greenwald and his associates, see John Haynes and Jo Littler, "Documentary as political activism: An interview with Robert Greenwald," *Cineaste* (Fall 2007): 26–8. On Greenwald's documentary work, see also Musser, "War, documentary," p. 13ff.

13 Greenwald continued to make short films exposing Fox News' corruption of journalism and affronts to documentary, distributed on his website and other sources; see www.robertgreenwald.org/ (accessed November 28, 2007).

14 Ken Lay and Jeff Skilling were found guilty in courtroom proceedings in 2006, but Lay was found dead, allegedly of a heart attack, before the sentencing hearing. Skilling was sentenced to 24 years in prison and fined $45 million. Fastow plea-bargained and received a six-year jail sentence.

15 For a revealing interview with the filmmaker, see Gary Crowdus, "Why we fight: An interview with Eugene Jarecki," *Cineaste* (Spring 2006): 32–8. For the film's informative website, go to www.sonyclassics.com/whywefight/ (accessed October 17, 2008).

16 For more information on *Trouble the Water*, see the website at www.troublethewaterfilm.com/ (accessed June 8, 2009).

17 Danny Schechter has a new book based on *In Debt We Trust titled Plunder: Investigating Our Economic Calamity and the Subprime Scandal* (2008) and claims on his website to be working on a new documentary to explain the economic crisis; see www.indebtwetrust.com/index.php (accessed May 24, 2009).

18 The only critical biographies of the Bush family dynasty published so far were written by Republican maverick Kevin Phillips (2004) and Kitty Kelley (2004). Official presidential historians have so far failed to document the misdeeds of three generations of the Bush family.

19 For Laurie David's activism, see her website at www.lauriedavid.com/bio.html (accessed December 21, 2007).

20 See Tina Daunt, "Feeling warm all over," *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 2007: E1, 10; other production information was culled from the DVD commentary by the director and others in the creative team.

21 See William J. Broad, "From a rapt audience, a call to cool the hype," *New York Times*, March 13, 2007. Broad's article provided fodder for a bevy of rightwing attacks on Gore, but for a thorough demolition of Broad's hatchet-job, see Bob Somerby's analysis and critique on his Internet site *The Daily Howler* from March 14–20 and beyond, saved in his archive at www.dailyhowler.com/archives-2007.shtml (accessed December 29, 2007).

22 The scientific jury is still out on the rate of melting of the polar ice-caps, the reasons for the disappearance of snow on Mount Kilimanjaro in East Africa, whether polar bears are drowning in large numbers in a quest to find ice, and a couple of other details, leading a British High Court judge to rule that the film could only be shown in British schools if it was accompanied with a pamphlet indicating that there was no strict scientific consensus. See BBC News 11/10/07 at news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/education/7037671.stm (accessed December 29, 2007). Corporate and rightwing media in the US used the British ruling unethically to make false claims that the judge had ruled there were nine errors in the film that required supplementation if it was to be used in British schools. See, for example, a *Washington Post* article headlined "UK judge rules Gore's climate film has 9 errors," October 12, 2007: A12, and an October 13, 2007: A18 editorial "Gore vs. Bush," where the *Post* describes Gore's achievement as "impressive and important, notwithstanding factual misstatements and exaggerations such as the 'nine significant errors' in the film cited by a British judge Wednesday." As Bob Somerby points out, neither the word "significant" nor the word "error" appeared in the British judge's ruling and the judge threw out the lawsuit seeking to prevent *An Inconvenient Truth* from being shown in British schools, ruling: "Gore's presentation of the causes and likely effects of

climate change in the film was broadly accurate." See Somerby's analysis at www.dailyhowler.com/dh101707.shtml (accessed January 11, 2008).

23 Roger Ebert, "An Inconvenient Truth: Disaster movie," at www.rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060601/REVIEWS/60517002/1023&template=printart (accessed December 21, 2007).

24 On the DVD commentary, director Davis Guggenheim claims he insisted that the positive agenda to fight global warming be thus restricted so as to keep the documentary focused on demonstrating the existence of the crisis and to keep the film non-partisan; he also believed motivated viewers could check the website for information on what they could do.

25 As of January 2, 2009, *An Inconvenient Truth* had grossed over $49,749,351; see www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=inconvenienttruth.htm.

26 See Alan Zaremo and Johanna Neuman, "Peace prize for Gore stirs hope and speculation," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2007: A1.

27 Sauper indicates that his initial impulse was to document the arms trade, but this theme became sidelined by documentation of the systematic ecological and human ravaging of the area by forces of corporate globalization. See Joshua Land, "Darwin's director Hubert Sauper on the ethics of free trade and filmmaking," *Village Voice*, August 2, 2005, at www.villagevoice.com/film/0531,voiceover,66468,20.html (accessed February 8, 2008).

28 Conservatives warmed to *March of the Penguins*, claiming it was "pro-life," made "a strong case for intelligent design," affirmed "traditional norms like monogamy, sacrifice and childrearing," and in general championed conservative values; see Jonathan Miller, "March of the conservatives: Penguin film as political fodder," *New York Times*, September 13, 2005. Yet, as critics insisted, *March of the Penguins* embodies the basic principles of evolution and survival of the fittest; penguins have at best a seasonal monogamy and change partners frequently, and may even be gay; see Andrew Sullivan, "Not-so-picky penguins muddy the morality war," *Sunday Times*, September 18, 2005. In *Encounters at the End of the World* (discussed above) Werner Herzog asked a penguin expert if penguins were gay. The response was skeptical. While the scientist stated he had never observed gay penguins, he had seen some penguins involved in a ménage-à-trois and what could be interpreted as penguin prostitution, as female penguins, in search of stones for their nest, engage in sex with male penguins guarding stones and then run off with the stones after the deed.

29 While arguing for a multiperspective allegorical reading of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, I tended to stress the conservative and militarist elements of the films, but accept that they have multiple dimensions and can give rise to a wealth of conflicting readings. See Douglas Kellner, "*The Lord of the Rings* as allegory: A multiperspectivist reading," in *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings* (New York:

Rodopia, 2006), pp. 17–40. A picture circulated on the Internet in 2004 of George W. Bush as Sauron, exhibiting the One Ring; see Steven Hart, "Who's Sauron – bin Laden or Bush?" Salon, February 28, 2004, at www.dir.salon.com/ent/feature/2004/02/28/lord/index.html (accessed February 6, 2009) and Luis Yerovi, "Free trade and the ring of power" at www.goecuador.com/magazine/editorials/ringofpower.hmtl.

30 In his banal commentary on the DVD version of *WALL-E*, director Andrew Stanton denies that he had any political intentions or message to convey, but the ecological subtext and critique of consumer capitalism comes through clearly in the film, causing many rightwing bloggers and critics to attack it and liberals to extol it. For an interesting attempt by a conservative to insist that *WALL-E* embodies genuinely conservative values, see Charlotte Allen, "*Wall-E* doesn't say anything," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2008: M5. In fact, *WALL-E* contains a contradictory mix of radical messages and cinematic form with a conservative love story and formulaic narrative segments. See Kenneth Turnan, "Out of this world," *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 2008: E1.

31 Kirsten Thompson (2007) sees a rise in apocalyptic fears in end-of-the-millennium US cinema, but her analysis is too caught up in contextualizing the films in terms of religious problematics and (following Robin Wood) grounding contemporary horror films in a crisis of the family. In his introduction to his edited collection *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*, Chris Sharrett interprets the theme of apocalypse in contemporary cinema largely in Baudrillardian postmodern terms as the collapse of the subject, the social, and meaning in postmodernity (1993: 2ff). Socioeconomic determinants of crisis and catastrophe are thus erased in the (idealist) postmodern vision of cultural collapse. Stroup and Shuck (2007) argue that a "column of juggernauts rolls over the identity of contemporary citizens in leading democracies," leading to cultural pessimism and a diminished sense of self and the future. While there are clearly multiple determinants to cultural pessimism and visions of apocalypse, in retrospect, I would argue that the anticipations of social apocalypse in the cinema and popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s were prescient of a catastrophic collapse of the economy fueled by decades of neoliberalism and particularly the Reagan and two Bush regimes that pushed through massive deregulation and a conservative economic agenda, amassed crippling debt with corporate give aways and tax breaks for the rich, and thus widened gaps between rich and poor, while deregulating housing and fiscal markets. Hence, while I would agree that there are multiple factors that account for the rise in visions of social apocalypse in popular culture in the cinema of the 2000s, I contextualize the apocalyptic catastrophe films of the 2000s, by contrast to books cited above, in real fears of social collapse – of the environment, polity, economy, and world order – generated in part by the policies of the

Bush-Cheney administration and neoliberal globalization, which I claim have produced often-unconscious social dread – as well as real fears that have a rational grounding, as was made clear in the global economic meltdown in late 2008.

32 On the disaster film, see Kellner and Ryan (1988). *The Day After Tomorrow* grossed an astonishing $544,272,402 worldwide; see www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=dayaftertomorrow.htm (accessed January 2, 2009).

33 Heather Collette-VanDeraa has suggested to me that while the name Theo evokes theology, the name Kee evokes the Chinese root Chi for the life-force and the Egyptian Ka for the immortal soul, brought together in Kee, who is also the "key" to life and a successful narrative conclusion in the film.

34 Gendy Alimurung "This Zombie Moment," *LA Weekly*, May 15–21, 2009: 21–7.