

Hollywood Report | *Sam Schechner*

March of the Inconvenient Truths

With last summer's "An Inconvenient Truth," Al Gore managed to bump global warming to the top of the national consciousness – and sell over \$24 million of U.S. tickets. Now Leonardo DiCaprio is betting he can repeat the feat.



See trailers for "Taxi to the Dark Side", "War Dance", and "Angels in the Dust."

Mr. DiCaprio hosts, narrates and partly funded "The 11th Hour," a documentary out today that paints a bleak picture of humanity's prospects unless environmental policy is shifted almost immediately. It's just one of an unusual number of politically motivated documentaries slated to hit theaters in coming months, from a Darfur film featuring Don Cheadle to "Taxi to the Dark Side," which uses the death of an Afghan taxi driver to examine U.S. detention policies.

But America's stomach for such sobering fare may be starting to flag. Ticket sales this year for documentaries are down about 25% to roughly \$27 million compared with this point last year – and Michael Moore's "Sicko" accounted for all but about \$3.7 million of

that, according to Media by Numbers. By contrast, at this time last year, documentaries other than "An Inconvenient Truth" had racked up about \$13 million at the box office.

In recent years, hits such as "Fahrenheit 9/11" and "March of the Penguins" helped spur a broad documentary renaissance, prompting independent distributors like ThinkFilm and studios' specialty divisions like Warner Independent to offer aggressive documentary slates. But other factors are now at work. Netflix, the mail-order rental firm, has opened a way for niche documentaries to find an audience. And a growing number of philanthropists are funding political movies with an eye less on the bottom line than on social impact.



Left: Cinemalibre Studio;
Center: Warner Independent Pictures;
Right: ThinkFilm

The result: At least six political documentaries are headed to theaters in coming months, and more are in the pipeline. At this year's Sundance Film Festival, the number of documentary contestants with contemporary political messages rose to six from two in 2003. Next

More politically oriented documentaries are coming out, boosted by philanthropists. From left, scenes from 'Angels in the Dust' and 'Taxi to the Dark Side,' and Leonardo DiCaprio while filming 'The 11th Hour.' Below, a scene from 'Darfur Now.'

month's Toronto International Film Festival will have at least nine such films, and is expected to include a portrait of Jimmy Carter's pursuit of Middle East peace by Jonathan Demme, who directed the Oscar-winning thriller "The Silence of the Lambs."

Documentary films – on TV or in theaters – have long focused on social and political issues, from the Dust Bowl to the Vietnam War. But the new crop is different, says Sheila Nevins, president of HBO's documentary unit, which plans ones on Iraq and Darfur. "Documentaries that look back on the sins of the past are different than documentaries about the sins of the moment," she says. "We're right in the thick of the terrors of the moment."

Prison-Abuse Photos

Many filmmakers say the charged political atmosphere is drawing them to make more political films. "I think a lot of people are disenfranchised. They feel disconnected from the politics of the moment and powerless to affect it in any meaningful way," says Errol Morris, famed for "The Thin Blue Line," a 1988 documentary that helped overturn a murder conviction. "That clearly finds expression in filmmaking." He's working on "Standard Operating Procedure," about the Abu Ghraib photos of prisoner abuse, a film he says isn't explicitly political but is, in essence, antiwar.



See the trailer for "The 11th Hour."

The genre's hits have made the industry more confident that there's a politically concerned audience out there, too. "I think people are craving information," says Polly Cohen, president of Warner Independent, which is releasing "The 11th Hour." "There is a contingent of people that's not being served by the news, and this sort of fills that niche."

Enter the philanthropists. Former eBay president Jeff Skoll was an early proponent of the idea of a "double bottom line," looking at films in terms of social impact as well as profitability. His company, Participant Productions, produced "An Inconvenient Truth" and has two politically themed documentaries on tap for fall –

"Darfur Now," featuring Mr. Cheadle, and "Angels in the Dust," about a South African family that gives up its middle-class life to start an orphanage for kids with AIDS.

"Since 'Inconvenient Truth,' more people are starting to look at media as a strategy to achieve their philanthropic goals," says Melissa Berman, chief executive officer of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. John Sloss, an entertainment attorney and fixture in the independent-film world, says more people are coming to him wanting to fund films with social content than ever.

Pierre André Senizergues, founder of California sports-apparel company Sole Technology, had never invested in a feature film before "The 11th Hour." But the former pro skateboarder from France became one of the biggest investors in it. "My intention has never been to make any money from this," says Mr. Senizergues.

Other documentaries set for this fall, including "Taxi to the Dark Side," have also been funded by wealthy individuals with at least partly political aims. "War/Dance," about displaced Ugandan children who enter a dance competition, was produced by a New Jersey couple who contributed a quarter of its \$1 million production budget to call attention to the children's plight.

A Liberian Protest

Thus far, the most visible advocacy films have been tied to liberal causes. But Moving Picture Institute funds and produces films on themes such as free-market economics and individual rights, including the documentary "Indoctrinate U," about what MPI founder Thor Halvorssen calls "the denial of First Amendment rights to those who do not subscribe to the university orthodoxy."

Philanthropist Abigail Disney, a grand niece of Walt, visited Liberia in 2006, after years of civil war. Etweda Cooper, an activist also known as Sugars, told Ms. Disney how she and other women held warring factions hostage during peace talks until they agreed to break a deadlock – at one point threatening to strip naked in protest. "I thought, 'I can't believe I don't know about that,'" Ms. Disney says. She produced and largely funded a \$750,000 documentary, her first, on the subject.



Warner Independent Pictures

Christina Weiss Lurie, a philanthropist and co-owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, says she has invested in the "mid six figures" on two documentaries in progress, one about Iraq and another on Nigerian oil. Rather than aiming for a profit, "it's much more about having an impact on the national conversation," she says.

Increasingly, films can have an impact without making it to theaters: Netflix says about 82% of its 7,800 documentary titles have been rented at least once in the last year, and that documentaries are taking a modestly bigger share of all rentals.

But political documentaries face another challenge: the end of George W. Bush's presidency. "Bush has been the best thing for this documentary renaissance," says Sean Farnel, director of programming for Hot Docs, a documentary film festival in Canada. "We'll see. It might really dry up."

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