

“An Evening with Chris Palmer”

The Best Environmental Feature Films from Hollywood

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By Chris Palmer

Tonight, I want to focus on Hollywood fictional feature films about the environment.

I'm not going to discuss documentary films like *The Cove*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Cowspiracy*, *Planet Earth*, or *Winged Migration*, which are all great films.

Instead, I'm going to talk about fictional films like *Avatar*, *Happy Feet*, *Bambi*, *Free Willy*, and *Finding Nemo*. These types of films can reach extremely large audiences, including people not usually exposed to environmental messaging.

Tonight, I will reveal my top five picks for the best environmental narrative films from Hollywood. But first, I'd like everyone to stand up, find someone you've never met before, and discuss for two minutes a Hollywood film about the environment that you found influential and enjoyable.

Ask audience members for their ideas!

These films have a huge potential for impact. Plot, character, story, conflict, resolution, and imagery are as important as they are in documentaries. And narrative films can be purpose-written for maximum emotional impact for the audience.

Here is a compilation of clips and trailers from Hollywood narrative films for your entertainment. See how many of them you recognize!

Show 10-minute compilation of clips.

That compilation tape included *Fern Gully*, *Wall-E*, *Whale Rider*, *Happy Feet*, *Rio*, *Bambi*, *Finding Nemo*, *Free Willy*, *The Last Winter*, and *Waterworld*.

So, what made my list of top environmental Hollywood narrative films of all time? Let's start with my 5th choice.

NUMBER 5:

Show clip from *The China Syndrome*.

The China Syndrome, starring Jane Fonda, Michael Douglas, and Jack Lemmon, is about nuclear power in California. Released in 1979, it pits two journalists and a scientist against an organization trying to cover-up a likely nuclear meltdown accident with lies and corruption. The

owners of the power plant want to protect their billion-dollar investment and are willing to resort to criminal tactics to achieve that goal.

Amazingly, 12 days after its release, the infamous “Three Mile Island” accident occurred—the partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor in Pennsylvania.

Jane Fonda is an ardent opponent of nuclear power. She was delighted by the commercial success of *The China Syndrome* and she used it to crusade against nuclear energy. The film galvanized the anti-nuclear movement in the US.

I put *The China Syndrome* on my list because it deals with an issue that we, as citizens, don’t discuss enough—the risks of nuclear power, such as what to do with the spent fuel waste. It’s also an amazing example of life imitating art, and the power that media has to capitalize on a national moment, whether intentional or not.

Take questions from the audience!

NUMBER 4:

Let’s go to my 4th choice. *SHOW CLIP of Avatar*

In *Avatar*, the indigenous Na’vi people of the planet Pandora work hand-in-hand with nature to fight back against greedy and resource-hungry humans, who want to strip Pandora of its rare minerals.

The story draws a parallel to the white European invasion of the Americas, the resulting environmental destruction, and the systematic decimation inflicted upon the many indigenous peoples living there.

James Cameron is a dedicated environmentalist. He believes we mistreat the natural world and that we have a malignant and rapacious sense of entitlement. In one interview, he characterized the problem this way: “We’re here, we’re big, we’ve got the guns, we’ve got the technology, we’ve got the brains, we therefore are entitled to every damn thing on this planet.”

I put *Avatar* on my list because it is a powerful plea that we get smarter and live more in harmony with nature and with each other.

Take questions from the audience!

NUMBER 3:

Let’s go to my 3rd choice. *SHOW CLIP of Chinatown*

In this 1974 film classic, starring Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, and John Huston, a private detective hired to expose an adulterer finds himself caught up in a web of deceit, corruption, and murder. The plot is based in part on real events that formed the California Water Wars, in which William Mulholland acted on behalf of Los Angeles to secure water rights in the Owens Valley.

I put *Chinatown* on my list because it is a strong story depicting abuse of power, and the corrosive effect that unalloyed greed can have on something as essential as our water. It's an especially appropriate choice because water issues throughout the west are only going to get worse in the coming decades thanks to climate change and seemingly never-ending population growth.

Take questions from the audience!

NUMBER 2

Let's go to my 2nd choice. *SHOW CLIP of Erin Brockovich*

Erin Brockovich, played by Julia Roberts, is a woman in a tight spot. Following a car accident in which Erin is not at fault, she pleads with her attorney to hire her at his law firm.

Erin stumbles upon some medical records placed in real estate files and goes on to discover a cover-up involving contaminated water in a local community that is causing devastating illnesses among its residents.

This film is a dramatization of the true story of Erin Brockovich, who fought against the energy corporation Pacific Gas and Electric Company. Hollywood could have made a documentary about Erin Brockovich, but by dramatizing her true story and adding major star power, the film reached a much bigger audience.

I put this film on my list because it draws attention to the importance of citizen activism and to the impact that one determined person, in this case a single, working mother, can have on the world. We should all be inspired by the example of this one dedicated voice to bring attention to an issue that big business was trying to sweep under the rug.

Take questions from the audience!

NUMBER 1

Let's go to my top choice. *SHOW CLIP of The Day After Tomorrow*

The 2004 movie *The Day After Tomorrow* is loosely based on the theory of "abrupt climate change." The plot of the movie is that, because of global warming, our planet's ocean currents, which act as a global "air conditioner," shut down, heating up the tropics and cooling the North Atlantic.

After climatologist Jack Hall, played by Dennis Quaid, is largely ignored by U.N. officials when presenting his environmental concerns, his research proves true when an enormous "superstorm" develops, setting off catastrophic natural disasters throughout the world, plunging the planet into a new ice age. Jack Hall must make a daring trek from Washington, D.C. to New York City, to reach his son, trapped in the cross-hairs of this tempest.

The film sparked heated debate when it was released and was criticized for its scientific inaccuracy. But an even bigger issue with the film was its apocalyptic and dystopian tone, which offered little hope for the future.

The recent film *Geostorm* was similar. Viewers don't know what to do when presented with massive and fiery catastrophes. Scary disaster movies full of gloom and doom only seem to numb people and make them politically comatose and catatonic.

Nevertheless, I put *The Day After Tomorrow* on my list because it makes a very bold attempt to bring attention to climate change, something more Hollywood feature films should tackle. I also chose it to pose a question to all of you. Do you think scientific accuracy is important? Is it okay to sensationalize an issue as daunting and dangerous as climate change?

Take questions from the audience!

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None of my top five films, as good as they are, are good enough. They are often missing one or more of six key ingredients:

1. Riveting stories
2. Accurate science
3. High stakes
4. Compelling and relatable characters who give us hope
5. Campaigns driven by well-funded nonprofits
6. Social impact

Film company Participant Media has been a leader in focusing on narrative films that inspire and compel social change. Their most recent film is *The Post* about the Pentagon Papers. Founded in 2004 by Jeff Skoll, Participant Media combines the power of a good story well told with opportunities to drive large-scale social impact across the globe.

We must emulate Participant Media's example. Of all the weapons we have at our disposal, feature films have the potential to move people's hearts and change their behavior and reach incredibly large, broad audiences.

Take questions and comments from the audience

With the recklessness of the current administration, it is all the more important that Hollywood be more successful at producing environmental feature films with high social impact and which harness the star power of blockbuster films to boost conservation.

Expertly crafted fictional films are powerful tools to educate and inspire. When accompanied by a resource-rich outreach campaign whose impact is multiplied by partnerships with like-minded organizations, the right film at the right time can truly make a difference and change the world.

Thank you.

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