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Climate change hangs like Damocles' sword over metropolises around the globe. With torrential rains and floodings occurring almost on a daily basis, the menace has become omnipresent. Al Gore, former Vice President of the USA, has been fighting for many years to raise awareness of the dangers of global warming. As the front man of his own climate initiative he is viewed as one of the most influential non-political figures in the environmental arena. Despite persistent, often scathing criticism, Gore never considered letting go of his mission. What keeps the man who was once ridiculed as the climate clown going? An encounter.

TANJA BRAEMER

Al Gore Rhythm

“Our democracy has been hacked. Big money is taking power. In order to solve the climate crisis, we have to fix our democracy crisis.”

AL GORE

Former Vice President of the USA and Nobel Laureate

Miami Beach has choked. On the waters of the Atlantic. The ocean has inundated the city knee-high on this bluer-than-blue summer day. Streets have become rivers, squares are now lakes. The sun is scorching and the air threatens to burst with humidity as streams of perspiration are running down mayor Philip Levine's face. Together with Al Gore and a few others he is watching the pumps that were supposed to keep Miami Beach dry. They turned out to be completely useless. “With these new high tides that came in ... you can't do anything for it”, says Levine. It is the melting glaciers in Greenland and at the polar ice caps that cause these floods. Parts of the city will be moved to a higher, safer level. “What level of sea level rise is this designed to protect against?”, Al Gore wants to know. His rubber boots are overflowing with brackish water. “We are building in one foot of sea level rise”, one of the experts in the group explains. “Kinda hard to pump the ocean”, Gore replies.

In Berlin, former US Vice President turned full-time climate protector Gore has no need for rubber boots. Not a single cloud mars the sky spanning across the teeming crowds at the Brandenburg Gate. It is an uneventful day in Germany's capital – quite different from only a few weeks ago when torrential rains flooded the streets and pulled the legs from under a number of pedestrians. Gore is in Berlin to present his

new film, *An Inconvenient Sequel – Truth to Power*. The scene in Miami is taken from it. He will talk to journalists and politicians about the threats that come with climate change until far into the night.

Al Gore has a pleasantly firm handshake and attentively looks into one's eyes. His hair has thinned and taken a further turn towards white, his face has become more rotund than it was a few years back. He speaks articulately, with a deep, crispy voice which instantly draws one's full attention. “I wish I had more time”, he says apologetically right away, pointing to his tight schedule. He is wearing cowboy boots – together with a suit. “They are 30 something years old. If I go on a long trip, they are the most comfortable footwear I have”, he says looking down to his creaking boots that give a strange kind of angular appearance to his strides. Gore's jacket lapel sports a bright green ring, the size of a thumbnail – he wears it like a medal. It is the symbol of The Climate Reality Project that Gore founded shortly after the release of his first film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, in 2006. The organisation – with Gore as the front man – trains people across the world to become climate activists who after completing their training will teach others. Before *An Inconvenient Truth* came out, Gore had been travelling across the US for years to warn against the fallout of the climate crisis as he calls it. With the film, he

began reaching out to a mass audience. The documentary was based on a “slide show”, as it was mocked by some, that he had been using – and still uses – as he travelled from one lecture to the next (rumour has it that it now comprises a collection of more than 400,000 slides). The response to the documentary was huge, but also vicious: critics accused Gore of propaganda, claiming he was over-exaggerating. He was ridiculed as the climate clown – despite the fact that many scientists seemed to support Gore's narrative. Gore himself, incidentally, was not at all convinced of his undertaking, as he later admitted in a Norwegian TV show. “When I was first approached with the idea of making the slide show into a movie, I thought it was a terrible idea. But there are some talented people in Hollywood who know what they are doing.” At the box office, Gore's film turned into a hit, a veritable blockbuster that reaped 50 million dollars worldwide and became one of the most successful documentaries ever. It received two Oscars in 2007 and that same year Al Gore was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work, together with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

“It may not be for me to say how influential the first movie was”, Gore says today, “but I was very happy to hear so many others say that it had a profound impact on them. The polling in many countries before and after the first



Urban apocalypse: On 29 October 2012 hurricane Sandy pushes the Atlantic ocean up to the 9/11 Memorial construction site in New York and floods it. Al Gore had anticipated the scenario six years earlier in his first documentary, which earned him scathing criticism.





THE BLUE MARBLE

PERFECT BEAUTY In 1972, while travelling to the moon, the crew on the Apollo 17 mission took the first photo ever to show the entire Earth. The photo extends from the Mediterranean Sea to Antarctica, the South polar land mass, which is partially hidden by a large cyclone. The fully lit-up blue and white sphere confronted humankind with the beauty and vulnerability of its home planet and considerably inspired the modern climate movement.

movie seems to buttress the argument that it had a big impact.” He comes across as quite modest while referring to his unforeseen success, speaking at a lower pitch than expected. The criticisms of him and his mission, which are still being levelled at him today, no longer hit home. “It’s very common for people who do not like a particular message to launch personal attacks against the messenger. I could say that I am honored to be attacked by the large carbon polluters. It doesn’t always feel like an honor. But I have developed a thick skin during my years in the political system.”

Some of what Gore predicted in *An Inconvenient Truth* has become reality in the meantime. One scene in the film that provoked outrage was a simulation of how the rising sea level would push the water all the way to the site of the 9/11 Memorial in New York City and flood it. On 29 October 2012, what was considered impossible was precisely what happened: hurricane Sandy bore down on the Eastern Seaboard’s largest cities and drowned the Ground Zero construction site. It is Al Gore’s merit that many people today understand what is at stake. The voices of those who initially painted him in the corner of the almost-president who refused to leave the political stage in dignity have faded. Gore’s voice, on the other hand, is very much being listened to today. For him in 2000, after his bitter defeat against George W. Bush, sealed

by the Supreme Court, it must have been rather obvious that he needed to do what he then initiated. He had learned it as a politician and brought it to perfection: turning his life into a permanent campaign, Gore built a powerful movement, an intelligent swarm of like-minded activists that would spread the word and fight for the cause. Only the theme he had chosen was a different one. He thereby re-created himself as a polarising postpolitical figure, now devoted to an idea bigger than those of any party could ever be.

Meanwhile, Al Gore can count on that intelligent swarm and on many other allies as well. The most powerful one, in his eyes, is Mother Nature. He purposely calls her that, for metaphors, images, allow us to connect emotionally rather than just understand. He is well aware of that. And the images are no longer shown only in Gore’s slide show but also in the news. “Extreme events like flooding in the Maldives, extreme droughts, wildfires have really shaken people up.” Time, it seems, is another important supporter of Gore as the consequences of global warming become more obvious every day. It helps him to win people over. “We are gaining momentum. That revolution has the magnitude of the industrial revolution but the speed of the digital revolution. It has been driven with the new digital tools including the internet of things.” The solutions by which the climate crisis could be solved, he believes, have become available and



more cost-efficient in the meantime. And so Gore's new film makes the case for an optimistic attitude in tackling climate change. Even so humanity is facing a brutal race against time. "Every day we put another 110 million tons of manmade global warming pollution into the sky as if it was an open sewer. Some of it will be there 1,000 years from now. We have to reach the inflection point as quickly as possible. The longer we wait the more expensive it will be to solve the crisis and the more horrific damage we will program into the climate system for the years ahead."

Ever since he was at university, Al Gore has carried that message into the world and defended it vehemently. At Harvard he first heard about the detrimental effects of manmade CO₂ emissions from Roger Revelle, one of the first scientists who explored its repercussions on the atmosphere. Gore's commitment did not waver when he was elected a member of Congress nor later when he became Vice President under Bill Clinton. In his office, a huge photograph reminded him of his calling every day: a copy of *The Blue Marble*, the

first picture that shows the Earth in its entirety, taken on the Apollo 17 mission in 1972. The photograph displays a sublimely beautiful, luminous sphere in blue, white and green, visible against a black infinity. It revealed to humans the beauty and the vulnerability of their home planet. The fascination the image has wielded on Gore has not in the least worn off. He is as much convinced of his mission as ever. Raising his voice slightly, he says: "The stakes are so high. I have never considered letting up on it. It feels that I am doing what I am supposed to be doing." He views solving the climate crisis as a moral as well as a political obligation. "Our democracy has been hacked. Big money is taking power and its influence has been growing. In order to solve the climate crisis we have to fix our democracy crisis."

Yet the influence that Al Gore as a climate activist wields in the political arena has its limits. Gore himself admits: "Personally I am under no illusion that there is any other position in the world with as much potential to bring good changes as the position of president of the United

States." The confines even extend to climate protection work itself. In 2015, at the COP 21 in Paris, 195 countries, including the US, agreed to a framework that aims to keep the global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. His second documentary portrays Gore as a central figure behind the scenes, perpetually rushing from meeting to meeting, making phone calls and pulling strings. But in Paris the actual deal certainly was negotiated by others. The film – whether intentionally or not – points to the central tragedy of Gore's career: in 2000 it was not he, the sophisticated thinker who became the most powerful man in the world. Instead, George W. Bush moved into the Oval Office and Gore was forced to take a back seat. At the time this must have been a profound disappointment, an inconvenient truth for him. Today he appears to have made his peace with the part that fate assigned to him: "My energy is not diffused, it is highly focused on one subject. I feel grateful to have found other ways to try to bring good changes outside of the political system."



Al Gore speaks to members of the media after meeting with Ivanka and Donald Trump at Trump Tower in New York on 5 December 2016.

Photos: pg. 34/35 NASA; pg. 36/37 picture alliance/AP Photo

And then there is Trump. The Republican who belittles climate change as a hoax and surrounds himself with climate change deniers. Al Gore has been fighting them for over a decade, but at the end of 2016 he lost the presumably most important battle in that war. In a number of meetings Al Gore tried to convince Trump to stay in the Paris Agreement. Gore characterises them as “cordial and respectful”, remaining silent on the actual content. “I thought there was a good chance that he would come to his senses.” Between the lines his comments betray incomprehension if not contempt. But Gore was powerless. “I wasn’t able to convince him. We have to work around him. And we are working around him. He has isolated himself, the majority of Republican voters in the US think we should have stayed in the Paris Agreement.” When Trump announced the withdrawal from the Paris climate accord in the White House Rose Garden in June, he said: “I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh not Paris.” Al Gore finishes the story with a grin in his face: “The next day, the Mayor of Pittsburgh said:

‘Well, we are still in the Paris Agreement.’ He announced his goal to make Pittsburgh 100 per cent renewable.” Where Trump has failed to position himself as a leader, institutions and initiatives at the local levels, in particular the cities, will become more important. “I feared”, says Gore, “that other nations would use Trump’s withdrawal as an excuse to pull out themselves. The opposite happened: the entire rest of the world redoubled its commitment to the Paris Agreement. The governors of California and New York and many other states stepped forward to announce even bolder commitments. And many cities around the US announced to switch to 100 per cent renewable energy.” For Gore, Trump is an “experiment. We are only 6 months into it. And some experiments are ended early for ethical reasons.” If Trump is not reelected in 2020, his successor could still reverse the withdrawal with 30 days’ notice. Some think of Gore as this new president. Gore, who describes himself as a “recovering politician”, considers that extremely unlikely. Mother Earth gave a different rhythm to his life years ago. And it seems that Al Gore intends to stick with it.

It is the very same rhythm that has begun structuring time in Miami Beach as well. The flood protection programme is calculated at 400 billion dollars, it is designed to protect the city for only 30 or 40, possibly 50 years. Not more than a blink of the eye in geological terms.

FILM

AN INCONVENIENT SEQUEL – TRUTH TO POWER directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk. Paramount Pictures, 2017. In cinemas now.



🔍 HOW IS HUMANKIND

DOING IN THE FIGHT

AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE?

Watch the trailer of Al Gore's new documentary *An Inconvenient Sequel*

– *Truth to Power* on

toposmagazine.com/time/al-gore