Climate Change as Social Drama

Global Warming in the Public Sphere

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1

Introduction

The Problem of Climate Change

Scientists agree that anthropogenic climate change is real and that it is a very serious threat on multiple levels for the entire planet (IPCC 2014). Economic, social, political, and biological systems are all said to be in trouble. Moreover, the window of opportunity for dealing with the problem is limited. At the same time, the public around the globe is mostly apathetic. Even in countries like Norway, where high levels of environmental concern and political involvement are the norm, climate change often seems more like "background noise" than a problem demanding radical collective action (Norgaard 2011). Contrary to what one might think, a similar situation pertains in the United States. Here, despite an effective right-wing campaign to discredit climate science (Oreskes and Conway 2010), surveys today show that a majority of people believe that climate change is happening and needs to be addressed, including, now, a majority of Republicans (Maibach et al. 2013). Yet many of these same surveys indicate that most Americans are unwilling to make meaningful sacrifices to deal with the problem. There appears to be insufficient support for social mobilization of the kind that will make a real difference (for a dissenting view, see Krosnick and MacInnis 2013). True enough, political and bureaucratic elites can mandate the kinds of policies advocated by climate science, with its long-term, evidence-based views. Yet there will be problems with compliance and implementation when public buy-in is weak. In democratic contexts, electoral sanctions can follow if cultural horizons for responding to climate change are not aligned with public policies (Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006).

What exactly is the problem? It is not simply that there is a substantial corps of climate change deniers confusing the public with nefarious

tactics, nor is it that the carbon industries have easily bought off political leaders. The issue is more subtle. Whereas the science community sees itself as almost completely unified, the public is more likely to perceive dissent and scientific uncertainty, with many still doubtful about whether climate change is caused by specifically human activity.[1] The public is also rather likely to believe that climate change will not greatly impact upon themselves personally. People see it as a problem for other generations or distant parts of the globe. Whereas the scientific and environmental communities speak of the urgency of the issue and the need to implement radical solutions, the general public is more likely to believe or hope that a painless technological fix will eventually come along. Finally, even though climate change is increasingly said to be a "serious problem," it somehow gets pushed to the bottom of the heap when respondents are asked to prioritize a number of "serious problems" in rank order. Education, health care, jobs, and so forth are generally picked out as the leading priorities facing each nation at any given point in time (e.g., Downing and Ballantyne 2007; Lorenzoni and Pidgeon 2006).

The frustration of the science community is palpable. It has worked patiently for years, often in difficult circumstances, to assemble evidence (Weart 2008). A cross-national, cross-disciplinary field of brilliant minds has emerged that is characterized by unparalleled levels of cooperation. By and large the message from this coalition has remained disciplined and consistent, too. With the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), they have built a transparent and exhaustive review process. As the historian of climate science Paul Edwards (2010, 439) puts it, "this is the best knowledge we are going to get." The scientists have done their part. It is a success story. Yet, at the end of the day, neither facts nor experts seem to matter that much when it comes to shaping popular perceptions and motivations, especially in countries like the United States, where climate politics is still sharply divided.

Explaining this gap has become a social science cottage industry. Anthony Giddens (2009, 2) has even given it a name: Giddens's paradox. This states, "since the dangers posed by global warming aren't tangible, immediate or visible in the course of day-to-day life, however awesome they appear, many will sit on their hands and do nothing of a concrete nature about them. Yet waiting until they become visible and acute before being stirred to serious action will, by definition, be too late." Researchers working with this basic assumption typically isolate several factors that make climate change a tough sell and that dampen the impact of scientific consensus (see Ungar 2000; Wuthnow 2010). These are as follows:

1. As noted in the preceding Giddens quotation, climate change looks to be a chronic rather than an acute condition. It suffers relative to immediate threats, such as the SARS virus, because life never appears to be in clear and present danger. This keeps it on the back burner. The typical analogy here is giving up smoking. What harm will another cigarette do?
2. People tend to discount future discomfort against current pleasure. An increase of a few degrees in temperature or of a couple of feet in sea levels a few decades from now will be a problem only for the "future me," not for "now me." It will cause less pain to "future me" than any action today would cause to "now me."
3. Efforts to identify catastrophic and immediate impacts by pointing to flooding, hurricanes, tornadoes, wars, and so forth seem contrived, as the causal pathways to such specifics from a generic process are indirect or multivariate. Besides, these things all existed before climate change and will exist forever.
4. Dealing with climate change the way that environmental activists wish would dramatically alter all aspects of lifestyle and impose costs right across the social system. The habituated barriers to buy-in are considerable. Denial or disassociation becomes the more attractive psychological option.
5. Scientific nostrums are seemingly contradicted by personal embodied experience on a daily or seasonal basis. The weather changes from day to day. Every time we have snowfall, it seems as if global warming is a myth.
6. Climate change is an ongoing background issue. It must struggle to become newsworthy or attention grabbing because there is no interruption to a pattern. We report an eclipse of the moon, not the fact that it came out last night as usual.
7. The problem is complex in its causality, widespread in its impacts, and not amenable to any easy conversion into compelling cultural forms that transmit danger and urgency to ordinary people.

[1] For the most detailed and revealing surveys of American public opinion, see the *Global Warming's Six Americas* series put out by the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication and the George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication (Leiserowitz et al. 2013). For cross-national overviews of public opinion on climate change, see Brechin (2010) and Brechin and Bhandari (2011).

8. Deeply entrenched values and norms that are reinforced by personal networks are a source of bias. These prevent people from accepting scientific data on climate change, from seeing the real threat, and from being able to change their attitudes and actions.
9. Free rider problems dog efforts at collective action over climate change. The rational strategy is to continue to pollute while others cut their emissions.

Such analyses look persuasive initially. Yet they become less convincing if one thinks counterfactually of a world in which climate change *was* taken seriously as an urgent problem. In that parallel universe, would not many of the same factors be edited, redescribed, and then invoked post hoc a couple of decades later as reasons for success? Most notably, the spatial, temporal, causal, and consequential ubiquity of climate change allowed it to be "seen everywhere" and so never escape our attention (arguments 1, 3, and 6). Furthermore, this complex, large-scale, and octopus-like quality maximized opportunities for the conversion of the danger into compelling cultural forms (argument 7). Multiple amelioration strategies were available, allowing everyone to buy in and gain a sense of participation in addressing the problem (argument 4). As a nagging problem, it was like a toothache that could not be ignored (argument 1). Discourses sentimentalizing childhood and urging stewardship led to action on behalf of future generations. Just as individuals take account of the distant future all the time with things like their pension plans or prepaid funerals, and states plan ahead when they issue thirty-year bonds or dedicate national parks in perpetuity, so did agents also plan ahead for climate change (argument 2). Binding international treaties were easy to develop, as humans are capable of reflexivity and generosity when it comes to the tragedy of the commons. Earlier precedents in fields like nuclear nonproliferation, whaling, and chlorofluorocarbon production bans made it easy to see how to set up such agreements (argument 9). The reality of climate change was confirmed by bodily experience every time there was "unusual" weather (argument 5). (With its record-shattering heat waves, droughts, and wildfires, 2012 sealed the deal.) As for those values and norms and their associated "culture wars" subtext (argument 8), these crumbled amazingly quickly, just as they had with other seemingly visceral and intractable responses to racial segregation in the 1960s or to homosexuality and gay marriage more recently. Just as having a gay child was shown to change the attitudes of hardened Republican politicians, the personal networks that were supposed to hold climate irrationality in place turned out to be the pathways through which progressive attitudes were propagated.

Climate change also had the benefit of being complex and hard to understand, with diffuse causal connections and long-term payoffs (argument 7), like many other cultural forms that have done well in human history. The major world religions, for example, have proven to be very effective at propagating themselves. These, too, are complex, abstract systems that are unverifiable and often contradict experience (e.g., the problem of suffering), offer salvation only after death, and require far-reaching and often sacrificial changes to lifestyle that extend as far as martyrdom. Marxism–communism as a social movement likewise inverted common sense in its problem diagnosis, required deep identity transformations, and offered a payoff for generations in a long distant future. Neoliberal economics has swept the world. Yet this is an idea whose core model famously involves a hand that is as invisible as carbon dioxide. Markets are caught up in complex chains of causation; the payoff to painful economic restructuring is often distant. None of this stopped people from believing in the power of markets, putting shares in their pension plans, or closing down entire industries. What is more, we are accustomed to thinking of nature as responsive to our moral failings. Is it any surprise that when we looked at the modern history of ideas about climatic change, we saw periods of intense anxiety about the disastrous effects of human activity (Behringer 2010; Boia 2005; Fleming 1998; Grove 1995)? Although humans have never faced a problem quite like contemporary global warming (Chakrabarty 2009; McNeill 2008), they *have* changed their societies to prepare for future worlds.

So what is to be done? Most work by social scientists looks backward. It offers a diagnosis of the reasons for failure. By relentlessly indicating the magnitude of the task we face, then itemizing barriers to climate awareness and action, it arguably contributes to the mood of fatalism it purports merely to analyze. It normalizes the status quo rather than trying to open doors. Such a perspective contrasts sharply with that of activists who are incessantly looking for pragmatic ways to break down fatalism, for options to change the game rather than parse its rules. We try to occupy a middle ground. Ours is a scholarly analysis, not an engaged one. Yet we look forward and with hope. Where we diagnose failure, we do so with reference to surmountable contingencies in representation and performance, not the wiring of the brain or the objective features of climate change itself. Like activists, we also turn to culture for answers. More and more scholars are doing the same to explain climate politics,

and we cheer this trend.[2] But we also break quite sharply from many of these scholars, and in some important ways. For the most part, as we see in Chapter 2, they use culture to identify deeply rooted and divergent values, epistemologies, and structures of feeling that prevent action. Our focus is more strongly on contingency and on the possibilities that climate change could or should be able to open up for multiple and flexible cultural plays. With some theory and considerable analysis of positive and negative examples, this book explores how such discussions are configured, what gets attention, what is going wrong, and even what might work. At the end of the book, we have no sales manual for climate change activism, but there will have been some lessons learned.

Our principal claim will be that climate change within the public sphere takes the form of a social drama. We expand on this insight in Chapter 2. In the interim, it is sufficient to say that much of what the average citizen follows is an unfolding set of stories with characters and plots. These arrive episodically, sometimes as a portentous saga, sometimes as melodrama, and at other times as soap opera. Paying attention to this drama, exploring its various incarnations, and figuring out just how to study it form the core purpose of our book. This is a different perspective to the usual social scientific investigation of cultural bias, risk perception, or the public understanding of science, but it is not fundamentally incompatible with them. We believe that the theory of social drama brings cultural analysis closer to the actual properties of globally circulating texts and images, which until now have been most creatively studied by researchers in the humanities. In keeping with this interdisciplinary project, we turn away from the so-called leading edge of sociological theory and show that the Greek philosopher Aristotle offers many of the "new" theoretical resources we need to explore this rich world of representation and performance. We mine his thought in a new way by synthesizing his two major texts, the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric*, and connecting him to more contemporary cultural theory. The *Poetics* offers insights into cultural structures and their emotional impacts. The *Rhetoric* exposes the conditions for successful performance when making claims to an audience. Together they provide remarkable leverage when it comes to unpacking dramatic effects in public events.

[2] Prominent examples include Beck (2009, 2010), Boykoff (2011), Crate and Nuttall (2009), Demeritt (2001), Doyle (2011), Hulme (2009), Jasanoff (2010, 2011), Kahan et al. (2011), Malone (2009), Norgaard (2011), Rayner and Thompson (1998), Strauss and Orlove (2003), and Urry (2011).

In arguing that climate change is a social drama, we need to be clear at the outset that we are not using the term *social drama* in a pejorative sense. We are not suggesting that it is a panic or even a "moral panic" replete with disproportional responses and false beliefs that will disappear like a flash in the pan. Nor are we saying that activists are overly emotional. Nor are we saying that fiction is more powerful at the end of the day than scientific facts. In Australia and Britain, the phrase "no dramas" is sometimes used interchangeably with "no worries" to suggest that things are under control. The implication is that drama is bad and that, if we can get rid of the dramatic, we can all calm down and get back on track. However, we are not saying that climate change should only be considered or represented in cool, clinical, rational ways and that culture is a barrier to clear understanding – that a "no worries, no dramas" path is one that our society should take. Our argument is quite different. We argue that, like it or not, climate change takes on a certain set of properties once it moves from nature and science and into the public sphere. We see the concept of social drama as capturing much of this. Our intent in this book is to map, explain, and think through what this means.

Hence the empirical chapters that follow scout the social drama over a number of domains where it has moved toward the foreground in public life. Each domain also allows us to highlight in various proportions the centrality of diverse Aristotelian constructs, although we also make use of literatures elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences to make our analytic points. Chapter 3 looks at the role of genre, that is to say, the patterned and predictable qualities of narrative forms. We show how climate change has been represented in various ways over the years and demonstrate that generic representation ties to risk perception. This keys in turn to themes like urgency and permissible sacrifice. Our discussion highlights widespread genre confusion as an enduring problem for activists. Chapter 4 provides a telling and accessible illustration of the continuing relevance of an Aristotelian analysis of *ethos*, or character, as a force in public life. We focus here on Al Gore's rhetorical triumph in the film *An Inconvenient Truth* and, in particular, on the ways in which the movie establishes him as a person of virtue. Chapter 5 looks at another creative activity aimed at improving climate change awareness: climate change art. The analysis confirms Aristotle's hints about the limits of spectacle as a communicative mechanism. The chapter documents the failure of such art to achieve much impact and allocates considerable responsibility to a disorganized art world that is unable to establish *ethos* and convert visual stimuli into meaningful discursive action.

In Chapter 6, we move from the creative industries to the realm of the newsworthy. The chapter begins with an exploration of outrage at bungled climate change advertising campaigns and moves on to consider the leaks of e-mails known as Climategate. Pivotal to our analysis here is the intersection of *ethos* with *pathos*, or audience sympathy. These news stories damaged climate activism by making audience identification with both activists and scientific protagonists unattractive. Chapter 7 continues the study of newsworthy public events by investigating the representation of climate conferences. We suggest that conferences are about more than just treaties and horse-trading; they are also a visible symbol of global solidarity or discord and so might be considered to be acts of theatre. A comparative study of gatherings at Copenhagen, Durban, and Cancun enables us to isolate the qualities of an effective collective performance by participants. We also pay attention to the rhetorical power of individual truth-tellers. Our final empirical chapter, Chapter 8, looks at the role of place, locality, and event and so switches attention from the players to the stage or setting on which the drama unfolds. The spotlight here is on meaningful landscape and on place myths as constitutive dramatic elements. Through analyses of the genocide in Darfur and of Superstorm Sandy in New York, we suggest that place can be thought of as an agent that has particular narrative effects. Although our book is for the most part an anatomy of missed opportunities, our concluding chapter offers some hopeful moments. Following Aristotle, we discuss the positive role of shared emotional engagement in public events. We highlight our positive examples and flag the Aristotelian targets for which activists should be aiming as they seek to engage with *ethos*, *pathos*, and genre.

Approach and Methodology: Justification and Explanation

Before we proceed to these in-depth discussions, we should pause to outline the wider intellectual perspective that underpins this book. Many of our readers will be familiar with the norms of interpretive social science and may wish to skip the next few pages. Those with backgrounds in cultural studies and the environmental humanities, for example, will have an intuitive or theoretical understanding of our approach. Yet given the interdisciplinary reach of climate change as a field, we expect some readers to be from positivist backgrounds in environmental science or those social sciences making use of formal and experimental methods such as social psychology. Such scholars and activists may well be unfamiliar with our root paradigm. A brief orientation can help.

Emerging from the cultural turn in the social sciences more widely, the field of cultural sociology (for a recent collection, see Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012) starts with the premise that meanings shape social outcomes. In this sense, cultural sociology can be thought of as a variant on long-standing philosophical claims about the social construction of reality (famously, Thomas and Thomas 1928). The point is not that reality is "all in the mind" and has no objective basis but rather to recognize that humans, individually and collectively, act on the basis of the meanings through which they interpret and define what is real. Such meanings do not exist in isolation from other factors (power, resources, social ties, etc.), but they do exert a significant independent and "causal" influence that needs to be studied. For example, culture structures shape behaviors and attitudes, offer frameworks and action paths, and offer legitimacy for policy. These meanings are not personal and private but rather public and visible. This public culture circulates through society and takes the form of grammars, codes, narratives, symbols, and icons. Individuals try to shape the prevailing set of meanings through cultural performances, although their capacity to do so is often limited by human failings and by the unintended consequences of action. The analyst's job is to reconstruct the influential systems of public interpretation and understanding that emerge from this process.

This is no easy task. The meanings at play have to be isolated and distilled from their visible traces in the speech acts, mass media reports, images, and Internet chatter that make up the world of public culture and communication. The method involved is one of hermeneutic reconstruction, in which deep reading permits the analyst to get to the nub of a complex world of circulating texts and symbols. It is not claimed that all possible meanings are identified in this book but rather that dominant or prevalent patterns within particular contexts are located and described. Importantly, establishing the truth or falsity of public knowledge relative to the agreed-upon scientific facts is not a primary task of analysis. Unlike much research on "communicating climate change," we are not centrally concerned with measuring the public understanding of climate change and holding this up to a scientific benchmark. False beliefs are worth studying not because they are false but because they are beliefs. Regardless of their accuracy, representations matter, be they partial, flawed, distorted, or stylized, because people believe them to be true, feel in certain ways in response to them, and act accordingly. As Thomas and Thomas argued long ago, social constructions of reality are not the same as reality itself, but they are real in their consequences.

Cultural sociology typically relies on the case study method rather than on formal sampling and coding (see, e.g., the chapters in Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012), with its seductive belief that complex meanings can be easily captured with tallies and tick-boxes. As Richard Biernacki (2012) has shown, efforts to make interpretation more "scientific" through quantification and coding actually make it less so, in large part because they render the work of translation and selection invisible through rhetorical and ritualistic deference to positivist norms. It is a kind of sleight of hand. The result is thin interpretation. As pegs of diverse contour are hammered into square holes, complex systems of meaning are reduced to implausibly simple formulations that do not, in fact, accurately capture their spirit. For this reason, generally the presentation of a case in our qualitative work is accompanied by multiple items of qualitative "data" (those pegs, if you will, but this time treated with respect) that illustrate the play of meanings in that case. This method allows readers to see how we as authors came to conclusions and also to get a "feel" for the issues. This texture-rich approach is akin to the method of exposition that Clifford Geertz dubbed "thick description," although we would argue that "deep interpretation" or "thick interpretation" are more accurate terms. With certain variations it is also the method used by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and other giants of cultural analysis (although we by no means compare ourselves to these luminaries). In contrast to abstract theoretical pronouncements, plausibility can be reviewed as readers match the evidence presented to its reconstruction by ourselves. If they are not satisfied, they are entitled to return to our primary sources (or even find their own with a little time on the Internet looking at our case studies) and attempt a falsification, a more refined analysis, or an alternative interpretation (for three examples of this, see Biernacki 2012, or see Smith 2008 for a data-based reinterpretation of some of Foucault's major exhibits). In effect, this method is a variation on the hermeneutic tools of the humanities where scholars present evidence for the accuracy of their interpretation of a book or painting, writer or artist.

Importantly, for the cultural sociologist, interpretation is shaped not only by the data but also by cultural theory. This gives the analyst clues as to the nature of cultural structures and offers resources for interpretation that move us beyond the limits of commonsense summary. For example, narrative theory tells us that much shared meaning in public life takes the form of stories. That same theory alerts us to the importance of characters, plot, and emotional moods and the relationships between these. Exploring the impacts of any particular story (say, Climategate) may well involve drawing on these resources to explain how particular impacts might eventuate (in the case of Climategate, on trust for and solidarity with scientists).

Of course, complaints about arbitrary case studies and the selective presentation of confirmatory data haunt all qualitative work in the social sciences, including that of truly influential scholars. We take our task too seriously to load the dice. Methodologically, our case studies were selected according to several criteria that can better be dubbed thoughtful than "rigorous" or "systematic":

- Most can be generally greed upon as unusually important or influential and hence worthy of study. In this book, *An Inconvenient Truth* would be such an example. So would the Copenhagen Climate Conference, Climategate, Cape Farewell, and Superstorm Sandy. Each was the most significant example of its type in the public sphere: the failed conference, the science scandal, the artistic enterprise, and the natural event.
- Some examples we discuss are less well known but result from our immersion in the field. Rather than setting tight sampling and research design parameters that might limit inquiry, we endorse the ethnographer Mitchell Dunier's (2000) injunction to "follow the thing" to arrive at a full understanding (a phrase and method also deployed by leading figures such as Arjun Appadurai, James Clifford, and James Scott). During long hours of research we were often led away from where we started to new places that illustrated the range and depth of the phenomenon in question in new ways. For example, our research on climate change and place started with the obvious example of Darfur. Reading around our topic and looking at how "climate change" and "place" were considered beyond the world of politics, we discovered less visible discussions on the Great Lakes of the United States or Cornwall in the United Kingdom. These offered new insights into how this relationship might be configured, especially how it potentially impacted a more subtle sense of place rather than contexts of genocide and war.
- Other cases were selected because they illustrated particularly well a prevalent cultural pattern we had identified or provided a second data point for an argument. For example, our research into climate change art suggested this generally did not result in productive discourse on science, technology, and human values. This failure was well captured

in the disorganized Internet threads associated with the Deviant Art contest and the *Rethink* art exhibition. These were arguably not the single most important events of their kind but they were useful didactically. Furthermore, they offered confidence that the unproductive pattern we had identified in public responses to the world-renowned artist Antony Gormley was not an outlier emerging from his celebrity status.

- We were particularly interested in material from 2005 onward. We do not see ourselves engaging in a systematic study of climate change's social history nor as documenting the most significant public events in that history; rather, we want to understand current forms of representation and performance. Given changing audience knowledge, technological advances, and so forth, paying attention to recent events would seem to optimize case study relevance.
- At the microlevel of raw data, we generally select and display quotations and other forms of visible culture that indicate or capture a prevailing mode of discourse or public response. In this book, commentary from newspaper editorials and journalists on an event (e.g., the Copenhagen conference), Internet postings and threads (e.g., on the 10/10 advertising campaign), critical reviews (e.g., of climate art), and so forth, are deployed in such a way. We also make use of remarks by opinion leaders and opinion-leading media. Such individuals and institutions are empirically important not only in setting agendas; they also serve as bookmarks with which to map a range of opinions in the wider discursive fields of the public sphere (see Jacobs and Townsley 2011). For this reason, readers will see we also make heavy use of certain "quality" newspapers and media outlets (such as the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Economist*, and the British Broadcasting Corporation or BBC) and their websites to evaluate opinion and reception. Aside from leading the pack in the somewhat hierarchical and parasitic world of news journalism, and hence determining what is deemed newsworthy and setting the talking points for opinion columns in the minor leagues, many of these have the communicative advantage of being of known political valence by our readers. The *Guardian*, for example, represents the liberal Left and believes in the reality of climate change. It is a favored newspaper of teachers, students, and activists. The *Daily Telegraph*'s readers are older, conservative, and skeptical. The BBC tries hard to be neutral but is generally thought to have a slight liberal bias. The *Economist* pitches itself as having a politics-free and evidence-based approach. Its prescriptions are often for market solutions. Familiarity with these sources will assist readers in understanding (and, we hope, critiquing) our book as they interpret and evaluate quotations and comments. Some will be disappointed that we were not more inclusive of fringe sources (e.g., climate-skeptic blogs; activist newsletters) and also that we did not make more of international and regional sources of opinion. We would point out in our defense that we do in fact draw on environmentalist media, global sources, and so forth, at many places in our book. However, the truth is that pragmatic issues relating to scope, page limitations, shared audience knowledge, and the need to give priority to building theory rather than exhaustive documentation of diverse geographic effects drew us to the global information clearinghouse of the English language core. This offers a conceptual lingua franca of sorts at a worldwide level. We certainly believe that future studies on discourse and representation, making use of sources from Indonesia, Brazil, and Sudan, for example, will be extremely important, and we encourage other scholars to take up the baton in dedicated studies that can do proper justice to local cultural and political complexities. We simply cannot do this in the context of our present text.
- Finally, we make use of microlevel exhibits that captured a particular view extremely well, often through effective reasoning or the pithy use of language. Often we sifted through our files of commentary and opinion looking for a statement that would nail a particular issue or allow us best to illustrate the nub of a theoretical point. In this case the quality of the discourse and its fit with our agendas determined which items are displayed in this book. The actual universe of material we read was, of course, far wider. Skillful practitioners whose use of language gets to the heart of the matter tend to be oversampled for this reason. So do editorials. Such examples are not "typical" of discourse, but they are the "best," much as Shakespeare would be dominant in a survey of Elizabethan drama. At times, however, we do turn to the vox pop of Internet threads to try to assay a range of nonelite discourses. For example, in the contexts of climate art and the 10/10 advertising campaign, the measured prose of experts with its attendant reasoned justifications did not truly capture the indignation, irrelevance, and irony that characterized many responses to such initiatives.

The result of all this activity has been in our book the reconstruction of systems of meaning using theory and the presentation of a layered

range of illustrative materials showing these in action. The former steps back from everyday experience to give perspective; the latter anchors analysis in familiar forms of visible evidence. We follow this method as we believe that the truth or falsity of our work is a matter of importance. So is transparency. Our aim in this book has not been to offer virtuoso interpretations that only academic audiences can understand (a point of contrast with much work in the cultural studies tradition, for example) but to provide an accurate and accessible account of how climate change plays out in the public sphere. En passant, we have also offered some analysis of the effectiveness of particular strategies and performances – although this has not been our central goal. Furthermore, we have sought to develop new theoretical tools for this and related tasks confronting cultural sociology. We hope we have been successful at one or more of these tasks. We also hope for our failure and that our shortcomings will provoke efforts at dialogue, falsification, and challenge. Making sense of the meanings of climate change should be a collective endeavor. Our approach is only one among the many that are on the table.

2

Climate Change as Social Drama

Gus Speth is often called the "Dean of the environmental movement."[1] In a recent manifesto published in *Orion Magazine* (2012), this consummate technocrat makes a startling admission:

> Regarding the language we use and the messages we seek to convey, I can see clearly now that we environmentalists have been too wonkish and too focused on technical fixes. We have not developed well the capacity to speak in a language that goes straight to the American heart, resonates with both core moral values and common aspirations, and projects a positive and compelling vision. Throughout my forty-odd years in the environmental community, public discourse on environment has been dominated by lawyers, scientists, and economists – people like me. Now we need to hear a lot more from the preachers, the poets, the psychologists, and the philosophers. And our message must be one that is founded on hope and honest possibility.

Speth is not alone in moving from the "hard" world of policy to the "soft" world of culture. In both academic and popular environmental debate, there has been a clear cultural turn of late. Talk of "iconography" and "ideology" abounds; "myths," "frames," and "symbols" are common currency. Today it has become something of a cliché, even in scientific circles, to describe climate change as first and foremost a "cultural problem."

So culture shapes the perception and politics of climate change. But *just how*? This is not so clear. Scholars and critics offer a number of

[1] Among other distinctions, Speth was cofounder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and founder of the World Resources Institute; he has also served as administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, chair of the UN Development Group, dean of the Yale Forestry School, and chairman of the U.S. Council on Environmental Quality in the Carter administration.

competing answers. In this chapter, we try to cut through the confusion by presenting a theory of climate change as social drama. Our approach is deceptively simple. Most theories look to root causes rather than surface effects. Some blame controversy and inaction on conflicting worldviews, value systems, and cosmologies of nature. Others blame the ideological influence of "carbon class power" (Urry 2011), with its deep impacts on commonsense expectations about lifestyle and ethical behavior. These theories are valuable, but they tend to underestimate the pragmatic flexibility and historical dynamism of cultural structures. They underrate the power of performance in the public sphere. They offer little by way of grounds for hope. By contrast, we believe that speech acts make a difference. This is why we look to neither the sociomental nor the structural-economic "root causes" of climate controversy but to that controversy itself. We turn to the surface, visible, public realm of deliberative rhetoric and agonistic ritual – to news stories, protests and performances, charismatic individuals and conferences, advertisements and artworks. If, as we argue, climate change is a story that "everyone knows," just *how* does everyone know it? What form does that knowledge take, and how might it be connected to the "core moral values" and "common aspirations" that Speth attributes to our democratic culture?

Narrative theory provides an essential starting point for our journey.[2] Put simply, climate change exists in a complex field of stories defined by multiple, competing genres. Its discursive environment is deeply layered. It is not simply a discourse about nature, energy production, policy, or scientific facts. It is also at a second level about people and institutions: scientists, activists, politicians, corporations, nation-states. These actors are also spectators and critics, engaging in a yet another, third order of reflexive narration in which the representation of climate change itself is analyzed, dissected, and subject to storytelling. How well is the story being told? they ask. Which story is gaining traction with the public? What will be the next strategy to make people care? Are people *truly* scared yet? It is not only activists and academics who ask themselves these questions. They are also common coin in wider venues for public communicative exchange such as mass media editorials and opinion items. We might think of this debate about meanings, their qualities and fate, as exemplifying the cultural reflexivity of the public sphere. It gives climate change something of the quality of a soap opera, sporting contest, or mythical saga. Who is winning? Who is making the smartest moves? It is a form of deadly serious spectacle aimed at persuasion. This is why narrative is not enough. We also need a theory of performance.

The concept of social drama was famously introduced by the anthropologist Victor Turner (1968, 1974) and used to explain periods of social turmoil in traditional African societies. According to Turner, an initial normative breach or crisis would be followed by a period of instability, tension, uncertainty, and creativity that he called liminality. This in turn would give way either to reunification and the emergence of a renewed political order or to the recognition of an irreparable schism between contending parties. Turner wanted to emphasize that this was not simply a recurring pattern of objective politics. Rather, it was a template of stylized gestures and ritualistic moments, an "experiential matrix" from which all genres of social performance are derived (Turner 1980, 158). Breach was enacted, crisis was enacted, redress was enacted, reconciliation was enacted. Through these enactments, politics was made and social bonds ultimately strengthened or broken.

According to Turner, such cultural performances were not mechanistic in any functionalist way but rather highly reflexive. They were "active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living'" (Turner 1988, 24). This dimension of "performative reflexivity" Turner defined as "a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members acting representatively, turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public 'selves'" (24). Thus social drama became a way of "scrutinizing the quotidian world – seeing it as tragedy, comedy, melodrama, etc." (27). Whereas advanced levels of ritual accomplishment

[2] Ecocritics have produced the most insightful work on the narrativization of environmental risk (Buell 2001; Heise 2008; Houser 2014; Nixon 2011). As Ursula Heise (2008, 138) explains, "narrative genres.... provide important cultural tools for organizing information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories. But to the extent that such genre templates have a cultural power that can make them override alternative stories that fit less well into existing cultural narratives, they can also shape, filter, and rearrange such information in ways that are not always politically or ecologically benign. Narrative analysis should therefore play an important role in examining the ways risk perceptions are generated by and manifest themselves through various forms of representation, from documentaries and journalism to fiction and poetry." Pointing to Lawrence Buell's analysis of "toxic discourse," a risk genre pioneered by Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* and apotheosized in Don Delillo's novel *White Noise*, Heise notes how such genres "filter and shape information about risk so as to postulate certain causal sequences" (139) – Eden destroyed by hidden pollution, awakening consciousness of contamination, a battle of weak versus strong to restore ecological and human health.

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permitted traditional societies to resolve crisis with performative competence, in complex societies, the process can be derailed in any number of ways. If redressive action repeatedly fails, for example, societies can become mired in bitter conflict and permanent crisis (Turner 1990, 9) – a situation that might well describe climate change. In extreme situations, revolution ensues.

Although somewhat marred by a teleology suggesting an inevitable progress through the designated quasi-ritual phases, Turner's ideas have in fact been productively applied to contingent politics in industrial societies. Scholars like Robin Wagner-Pacifici (1986) and Ronald N. Jacobs (2000) have demonstrated that terrorist activities, racial crises, and judicial inquiries can be fruitfully investigated as dramatic interludes where protagonists perform to concerned publics. These show that a breach has taken place and dramatize resolution. Complex patterns of narration are pivotal to this process. These describe characters, plots, and situations and shape outcomes by opening and closing doors of subjective and objective possibility for agents. When combined with postcritical theories of the mass media and of public-sphere deliberation, a powerful tool emerges for understanding "how societies think" as collectivities through shared and visible public communication as well as via second-order reflexivity about that communication. We expand on the possibilities of such an approach for the climate change field later in this chapter. First we must turn to prevailing visions and explain how they fall short of capturing this colorful play of stories and performances.

Climate Communication and Cultural Bias

With a problem as "wicked" as climate change, it is tempting to see culture in a fatalistic light. Pace Speth, when we consider the incredible inertia of carbon-intensive lifeways – factory farming, air travel, air-conditioned strip malls – culture looks more like an impassable barrier than a useful tool.[3] We speak here in particular of the dominant research tradition that identifies deep "cultural bias" as a block on collective action. When tethered to a raft of sociopsychological mechanisms, this bias is said to prevent belief in anthropogenic climate change, stall collective mobilization, and reinforce the economic status quo. Despite good-faith attempts to imagine alternative possibilities, culture is largely understood in social-psychological terms as a handicap to full rationality. Many researchers end up echoing the entirely understandable but ultimately reductive complaint, *If only people could take off their cultural blinders, they would see how much trouble we are in and get their act together.* There are exceptions, of course, but their voices are marginalized in most social scientific circles.

There are three main problems with this line of reasoning as it currently manifests. First, as numerous scholars have argued (in a literature effectively synthesized by Hulme 2009), "the trouble" itself is a product of cultural interpretation, not simply a physical fact waiting to be discovered. Second, it assumes that culture is mostly epiphenomenal, a by-product of deeper psychological, social, or political-economic processes. Third, it erroneously conceptualizes culture as integrated value commitments or "ways of life" that serve to guard tightly coupled modes of social organization rather than as a flexible domain of play, contingency, strategy, gesture, and interpretation.

In their influential volume *Creating a Climate for Change*, climate change communication experts Susanne Moser and Lisa Dilling (2007, 5–8) illustrate the sociopsychological facet of this general approach, adding "solution skepticism" and "threats to values" to various physical and psychological millstones – perceived remoteness of impacts, time lags, imperfect markets, the tragedy of the commons, and so forth (we counterfactually questioned this kind of argument in the prior chapter). According to Moser and Dilling, "the inherent natural characteristics and deep societal roots of climate change stack the deck against the issue being recognized as an urgent and actionable problem" (8). Researchers in this realist vein tend to treat culture, not as a public realm of communication, but rather as a set of distorting normative lenses. Their hope is that we can polish and grind until people see things clearly – or, as Moser (2010, 36) puts it, to "find clearer, simpler metaphors, imagery, and mental models as well as compelling framing to lay the foundation for more appropriate cognitive processing." Although we share their faith in the power of metaphor and imagery, we have a very different model of culture in mind, one in which cultural codes do much more than mediate between mind and physical reality. Nor do we see inappropriate cognitive processing as the major cultural problem.

Similar arguments can be found in work that critiques the impacts of the neoliberal political economy. Here culture has become a form of ideological power, a set of symbolic tools for guarding the interests of Big Oil and Cold War–era technoscience (Jacques 2009; Jacques et al. 2008; McCright and Dunlap 2000, 2003, 2010, 2011; Oreskes and

[3] On climate change as a wicked problem, see Hulme (2009, 334–337).

Conway 2010). According to sociologists Riley Dunlap and Aaron McCright, global warming has been projected as a "nonproblem" by a loosely organized but well-funded network of conservative ideologues fighting to preserve the industrial status quo. These "merchants of doubt," as the historian Naomi Oreskes and journalist Eric Conway (2010) call them, use a variety of representational strategies to inject misunderstanding and skepticism into public debate, obfuscate scientific research, and intimidate experts. Meanwhile media outlets have given these pseudo-experts more or less free rein to pollute public debate (Dispensa and Brulle 2003). Although researchers working in this genre have made important contributions by revealing the social organization of antienvironmentalism and exposing the immense power wielded by a relatively small group of plutocrats, they have very little to say about how these reactionary forces have made their stories stick nor about why their audiences have been so receptive to them in the first place. One wonders if money and strategy are enough to explain the lockdown and confusion. Consider, for example, that millions of public relations dollars can do little to protect Big Oil from becoming a populist punching bag whenever there is a major spill or that millions of climate change believers are doing next to nothing to address the problem. In other words, this perspective has had surprisingly little to say about the cultural content or cultural form of environmental attitudes or the conditions under which money can make meanings sticky. Strictly put, the central achievement of analysis has been to unmask efforts at the strategic use of culture to shore up social power – a worthy task, but one that can only take us so far. Even in more hermeneutically nuanced research on climate politics and communication influenced by cultural studies, culture is largely imagined as a kind of dominant ideology or generalized domain of Foucauldian-Gramscian "cultural politics" (see, e.g., Boykoff 2011; Luke 2011). Meaning and knowledge are vehicles for the exercise of power. Like many in the field of cultural sociology, we reject this implicit hierarchy and see meaning at the very heart of power itself.

Against both hard-nosed materialism and more theoretically sensitive cultural studies, a third camp, populated largely by scientific researchers in the field of risk perception, has also been pushing for more serious consideration of culture as cultural bias. Inspired by structuralist anthropology, some in this field have developed a systematic, transposable template for cultural analysis that they call *cultural cognition*. As the name suggests, this is an explicit attempt to make cultural theory psychologically testable and so in fact marks a positivist turn away from deep hermeneutics toward a schematic, cognitive approach to meaning. Cultural cognition is based on a simple premise. As Yale law professor Dan Kahan (2010, 296), one of its leading exponents, explains, "People endorse whichever position reinforces their connection to others with whom they share important commitments." In debates over environmental risks such as climate change, cultural cognition practitioners argue that information is not the problem. Nor even are the seemingly hardwired cognitive biases we mentioned earlier, such as lack of concern for probabilistic time-distant dangers or disregard for future generations. What matters are group values. More than race, class, political ideology, gender, income, education level, personality type, or anything else, it is these values that matter. In the United States, they often can be thought of as trumping information along "culture war" lines. In the case of climate change, for example, the kind of man who (to invoke a stereotype) loves NASCAR and collects guns may well find it impossible to adopt an environmentalist position. New scientific evidence will be neutralized and dismissed. Climate skepticism will be embraced because this stance will enable in-group ties with other so-called NASCAR dads to be reaffirmed.

Cultural cognition represents the merger of two longtime rivals in the world of risk analysis: the psychometric paradigm of social psychologists such as Paul Slovic and the systematic, neo-Durkheimian, anthropological Cultural Theory of Mary Douglas and her colleagues (the capital letters are commonly used – a practice we find vaguely imperialistic, given the variety of cultural theories available today). Practitioners have pitched cultural cognition as a scientifically legitimate, antifunctionalist evolution of the Douglas paradigm (Kahan 2012a). By identifying specific, measurable psychological mechanisms that connect abstract cultural structures to concrete social networks and risk perceptions, they aim to show how levels of concern and political conflict are profoundly social. Other specialists in the psychology of climate change communication have taken Cultural Theory in similar deterministic directions. In an influential study, Anthony Leiserowitz (2006), director of the Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, showed how grid-group position (levels of social integration and hierarchy in an individual's immediate community) conditions affective responses to images of dangerous climate change, and how these affective responses are a more powerful predictor of individual risk perception than levels of scientific knowledge. In other words, it is how people *feel* about climate change that matters most, and how they feel is a function of what they *value*, this coming in turn from their concrete social location and social networks.

At first glance, there is much to recommend this turn toward emotion, trust, and moral solidarity. Sociology moves to the foreground through attention to community and identity. Yet this camp, too, paints a somewhat misleading and reductive picture of culture. For one thing, they bleed much of the hermeneutic complexity and historical richness out of cultural practice, turning what is already one of anthropology's more mechanistic cultural theories into a meaning-creation machine: culture is the operating system that converts group social structure into individual belief. Much like the middle-period Durkheim on whom Mary Douglas relied, this is a theory in need of a Geertzian and Turnerian intervention, one that can highlight play, gesture, ambiguity, and performance. Steering clear of the historical and anthropological literature on trust, credibility, and public reason in scientific controversies, it offers no account of what it means to believe in scientific evidence in the first place, no account of the narration of technoscience in modern society, nor any strong sense of where ideas about environmental danger come from (see Jasanoff 2012 for an up-to-date synthesis of this neglected literature). Second, and even more problematic, it has virtually nothing to say about the cultural process of democratic civil society, a problem inherited from Douglas and her disciples with their somewhat silo-like understanding of coexisting but noncommunicating cultural systems. The cultural cognition approach claims to overcome the crabs-in-a-bucket social vision of rational choice theory and Hobbesian materialism by leaving room for cultural convergence around democratic solutions for "overdetermined" social problems. It contends that divergent value systems can indeed overlap (Kahan 2012b). Yet it fails to see that this overlapping takes place in a public sphere that displays its own layered cultural logic and allows for the dialogue, reflexivity, and critique that might construct or hold back rather than simply host overlappingness.

Risk, Trust, and Cultural Performance

All of this work rests on a key assumption: "In the world's industrial nations, 'risk' has become *the* organising concept that gives meaning and direction to environmental regulation," and thus to environmental politics (Jasanoff 2012, 133). As we have already seen, Mary Douglas did more than anyone to forge the consensus that "risk" and "risk cosmologies" are where the action is. Yet her work is frequently caricatured, and some of its most profound insights have been largely forgotten, even by her followers. In a series of essays on risk and cultural bias written through the 1970s and culminating in her controversial collaboration with the political scientist Aaron Wildavsky, *Risk and Culture* (1983), Douglas identified a limited pool of cosmologies applicable to all known societies that make subjects more or less open to beliefs about environmental instability. Denying neither the empirical reality of environmental hazards nor the rationality of environmental fears, Douglas and Wildavsky very usefully showed that debates about risk are often debates about the moral order of society. What they call "pollution beliefs" trace causal chains from the impure actions of polluted individuals and groups to their disastrous consequences; they divide "the moral from the immoral and so sustain the vision of the good society" (37). Although scientific knowledge and statistical thinking modulate these beliefs, they do not change their essential cultural logic. By decoding the symbolic movements from transgression to blame and retribution that structure these beliefs, the modern risk analyst discovers that "impurities in the physical world or chemical carcinogens in the body are directly traced to immoral forms of economic and political power" (47). Thus, with American environmentalists very much in mind, they write, "No doubt the water in fourteenth century Europe was a persistent health hazard, but a cultural theory of perception would point out that it became a public preoccupation only when it seemed plausible to accuse Jews of poisoning the wells" (7). Needless to say, this relativistic argument initially incensed environmentalists who wished to endorse the objective, scientifically validated nature of their position. Yet it has since been adapted as a touchstone for environmentalist advocacy, including by Douglas (1994) herself.

Since Douglas and Wildavsky's seminal statement, a number of researchers working at the border of anthropology and public policy have usefully refined and codified Cultural Theory, using it to examine a broad range of risk debates, including climate change. As the anthropologists Steve Rayner and Michael Thompson (1998, 266) explain in a definitive overview of this approach, "competing ideas about nature and about equity inform climate change policy debates at all levels from the family hearth to the international negotiation of the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC)." They describe Cultural Theory as an attempt to "map" the "moral landscape" of climate change, and they make the crucial observation that climate change "provides an arena for debating a wide variety of social, economic, and political issues that society finds difficult to address directly" (335). In other words, climate change is not just about climate change. Moreover, it is not just about experts overcoming the network-based cultural biases of the lay public.

Myths of nature are at work on all sides, competing to occupy the moral center of society. What matters is not knowledge and delusion but trust, blame, and consent.

We agree. With this subtext, Douglas, Wildavsky, and a few of their interpreters opened the door to a truly *cultural* sociology of risk. Yet it was slammed shut again by the weight of their more visible and dominant neopositivist sociology of socially structured risk perception. The project also suffered from latent pulls toward morphological reductionism. Egalitarian small-scale societies, cults, and sects, Douglas said, were characterized by intense sensitivity to pollutions and visions of nature as inherently unstable. This was their "cultural bias" – one akin to a witchcraft cosmology. Hierarchical and large-scale societies, by contrast, tended to be more complacent and to have another bias. They believed that administrative, market, and technical solutions could be found to most problems. Her model is elegant for its explanation of the "in here–out there" duality through which societies situate themselves in an environment, but it is dogged by a problem of fit. Put simply, we often find cosmologies in the wrong places. Cosmological views seem to be far more flexible and contingent than her vision of entrenched "cultural bias" might admit. Contemporary societies appear to be repeatedly plagued by premodern doubts and anxieties, when really they should not be. During the 1970s and 1980s, for example, conventional middle-class suburbanites came to share the pollution-sensitive ecological views of what Douglas claims were ecological "cults" that emerged in the 1960s. To account for this, Douglas and her colleagues have had to abandon their systematic model and resort to ad hoc secondary elaborations on theory. Marketing by organizations like the Sierra Club and noted events like the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island are pulled like rabbits from a hat to explain the export of the ecological worldview. From our social drama perspective, a better approach might have been to interrogate more systematically the way the Three Mile Island crisis was narrated and to think about the capacity of these circulating, social context–free narrative forms and dramatic gestures to reach over and across, perhaps even transform, competing rationalities. Contingent cultural alignments and performances make some dangers more pertinent than others, opinions shift due to talk, images stick, minds change. This is how social drama works in a public sphere.

After Douglas, the most influential and theoretically elaborated attempt to connect culture and risk came from the German sociologist Ulrich Beck. Although an extremely fertile source of ideas about postindustrial environmental consciousness, Beck's theory suffers from inattention to contingency and an objectivist-structuralist explanation of risk awareness. Writing in the late 1980s, he argued that we now live in the era of "risk society," this offering an entirely new set of challenges for social administration. Rather than solving problems of uncertainty, modernity has itself produced various new potential dangers, mostly in the form of industrial pollution, chemicals, and radiation. These have contributed in part to a growing culture of social critique with attendant social movements that Beck, with Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (1994), called *reflexive modernization*. Crucially, Beck isolated many features of these ecological threats. They are resistant to everyday perception. They are often invisible and unknowable without the assistance of science, technology, and statistics. To come to terms with them or to begin to understand them requires faith in scientific expertise. Furthermore, the threats are incalculable in their magnitude and diffuse in their impacts – so at the end of the day, even those scientists can't help us much in figuring out what is going on. Nor is there escape from them by virtue of privilege, as the externalities of modernity will boomerang back onto the affluent. According to Beck, social life is increasingly organized around the control or management of these invisible dangers from which we might never be able to hide.

Beck's thesis is brilliant as a reading of a cultural pattern of anxieties. Yet it is also flawed by a tendency toward objectivism. For Beck the risks are real, their properties endemic to their nature, our anxiety a largely appropriate response to danger (Alexander and Smith 1996). Taking a step back, we might read Beck himself as an exhibit; his treatment of dangers and risks as an exemplar of a particular cosmology. In the sense raised by Douglas, he provided a case of an extended treatise written from a sectlike point of view. His eloquently crafted writing on proliferating, unknown, and invisible dangers, in fact, mirrors that of Douglas's witchcraft cosmologies. A more hermeneutic approach might have allowed Beck to see representations of danger as uncoupled from objective risk properties, the gap between "reality" and "representation" helping to explain variations in concern and its timing. More important still, a social drama approach might treat his best-selling and influential work yet more reflexively as an effective performance through which risk awareness was itself talked into being. Beck might be understood as having captured and articulated a zeitgeist and, in so doing, shaping and generating opinion and activism, at least among the German green Left.

To be fair, Beck seems in his final years to have grown increasingly conscious of the objectivist tendencies in his early work and to advocate for exactly the sort of theoretical shift we said was needed in the previous few sentences. Along with many thinkers in the so-called postenvironmentalist mold, he came to warn against the "seductive naïve catastrophic realism" (Beck 2010, 258) of mainstream environmentalism, going so far as to call the very idea of the environment "politically suicidal" (263). He became, as it were, more reflexive about reflexive modernization. Indeed, in his later writing, much of which focuses on climate change, he was explicitly concerned with what he calls the "staging" of risk. His key question now is how risks become "real" in the minds of diverse actors and institutions, and his answer, "reduced to a formula, is: global risk is the *staging of the reality* [*Realitätsinzeneirung*] of global risk" (Beck 2009, 10).

This turn toward the performative would seem to be exactly what we need. Yet although Beck expanded brilliantly on the phenomenology of global risk, at the end of the day, he merely flirted with the concept of performance. Staging, it turns out, is more theatrical metaphor than analytic necessity. Consequently, Beck underestimated both the theoretical challenges and semantic complexity of cultural performance. Questions of character, plot, and narrative genre are raised but then quickly dropped. He writes, for example,

> Far from aggravating a general sense of meaninglessness in the modern world, global ecological threats give rise to a horizon of meaning dominated by avoidance, resistance and assistance, a moral climate that intensifies with the scale of the perceived danger and in which the roles of hero and villain acquire a new political significance. The perception of the world within the coordinates of environmental and industrial self-endangerment combine morality, religion, fundamentalism, desperation, tragedy and tragicomedy – always connected with their opposites: salvation, assistance and liberation – into a universal drama. In this worldwide tragicomedy, business is free to assume the role of the villain of the piece or to slip into the role of the hero and rescuer. (Beck 2009, 99)

Beck intuits something profoundly important but did not sustain his analysis in the way we hope to in this book. For example, he described the Stern Report as a work of "stage management" (101) and speaks of the "top-down staging" of climate change by scientists, politicians, and social movements (72). He also toys with a comparison of religious proselytizing and climate staging, claiming, "as with any religion, in the case of the global climate risk there are also heretics, agnostics, mystics, unbelievers, the ignorant and also radical secularists" (72).

Here, as in his earlier work, Beck offers a metacommentary or gloss but failed to engage in the deep empirical work that would illustrate his views or put them to the test. Simon Cottle's (1998) analysis from long ago still rings true. He remarked of Beck's breakthrough work *Risk Society* that, although not "blind to the intimate relationship between the media and surrounding culture," his "statements on cultural resonance of the environment remain underdeveloped" (15, 17). A turn to middle range and case study scholarship on the representation and reception of environmental and other risks, Cottle argued, might have allowed Beck to resolve some of the instabilities within his own theoretical edifice: the relative weight of risk reality and risk representation, the relationship of scientific uncertainty to social reflexivity, and so forth. The same holds today. We are left with provocative speculations that fly too high to provide answers. For example, Beck (2010, 255) asks, "The hardcore sociological question is: Where is the support for ecological changes supposed to come from, the support which in many cases would undermine their lifestyles, their consumption habits, their social status and life conditions in what are already truly very uncertain times? Or, to put it in sociological terms: How can a kind of cosmopolitan solidarity across boundaries become real, a greening of societies, which is a prerequisite for the necessarily transnational politics of climate change?"

Yet without a proper theory of performance and representation, without the sort of detailed case study research we provide in this book, Beck could not actually answer his own questions. His metatheoretical speculations about "staging" are consistent with the commonsense knowledge of the ecological community but left a yawning gap between semantics and pragmatics.

We think Beck's utopian streak led him to vastly underestimate the difficulty of winning the genre war or generating the performative resignification of climate change that he so strongly desires. Along with sociologists such as John Urry and Bruno Latour, he seems to assume that new structures of meaning will naturally emerge from new modes of social organization, just as the reflexive modernity of risk society would give rise to the progressive politics of the people Beck once dubbed "freedom's children." In this sense, his final nod toward "staging" can be read, perhaps too generously, as a halfhearted apology to the late-Durkheimian tradition, an acknowledgment that the material processes of reflexive modernization cannot *on their own* change how society makes sense of its situation. For such cultural change, we need systems of collective representation, background symbols, and foreground scripts (Alexander 2004). Yet Beck, like many other late-career converts to culture, such as Charles Tilly, was too deeply saturated in Weberian and Marxist traditions to accept the full demands of cultural autonomy, even if elements of his vocabulary hint at

a deep conversion. Paradoxically, this resulted for him in an anguished materialist idealism, a utopian faith in the spontaneous emergence of new forms of cosmopolitan consciousness from sociotechnological innovation (for dystopian variations on the same theme, see Urry 2011). He seemingly believed that environmental politics will begin anew with an inverted set of cultural systems. Yet we cannot simply choose to "love our monsters," as Latour (2012) has said of ecocidal technologies. As the cultural sociology of movements has repeatedly demonstrated, people cannot innovate their way out of conflict by pulling a rabbit from a hat. As we show repeatedly in this book, they try to *work* their way out using the symbolic systems at hand.

This fact has not been lost on everyone. A growing body of ethnographic research has shown how the interpretation of climate change is inevitably shaped by local experience, collective memory, and cultural identity (Crate 2011; Strauss and Orlove 2003). In the first such study of a rich industrial democracy (Norway), the American sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard (2011) seeks to explain how nonresponse to global warming is produced through the cultural practices of everyday life. Relying on Anne Swidler's (1986) influential theory of culture as "tool kit" and Eviatar Zerubavel's (2007) work on the social construction of denial, Norgaard shows how Norwegians use norms of conversation, emotion, and attention to manage their fear of irrevocable climatic change. More than just embodied interactional routines, these norms are further rooted in legitimating background narratives of national identity. In their national mythology, Norwegians are "close to nature, egalitarian, simple, and humble" (140) – a small, ecologically virtuous country deeply devoted to cosmopolitan democracy. By ritualistically invoking these myths, they are able to deflect attention from the economic and ecological reality of Norwegian life, which – notwithstanding the extensive use of hydroelectric power – makes a disproportionate contribution to global warming through oil production and export. They do this, moreover, by maligning "Amerika," Norway's supposed environmental antithesis. In what amounts to a metanarrative about the Global North's failure to deal with climate change, Norwegians say, "We aren't so bad; at least we aren't like *them*" (165). Yet by treating these narratives as "emotion management strategies" and privileging the psychosocial dynamics of everyday life, Norgaard gets us only partway toward a cultural pragmatics of climate change. She considers the deep symbolic background of public-sphere environmental conflict and narration almost as an afterthought, a way of setting the stage for the real cultural action, which takes place in the realm of embodied, routine practice. "Tool kits" are only part of the equation. We also need instruction manuals and stories about how and when to use them.

Toward a Theory of Social Drama

We have reached the end of our literature review; so where do things stand? Climate activism has called for a cultural turn with an eye to creative solutions. Yet existing scholarly approaches lock people into static meaning systems. They are imprisoned by their psychological biases, by their social networks, by their social location, by misinformation from nefarious organizations, and even by everyday life. What is explained is mostly why people – like toddlers having a tantrum or smiling at a slavering bear – are irrational, are stubborn, won't change, and can't understand those with different views or how much danger they are in. Notwithstanding scattered and incomplete moments in Beck and Douglas, and despite recognition among the top activist intellectuals and even scientists that myth and performance need to be enlisted, the cultural turn within academia has ended up theorizing the limits of culture, not its possibilities, in a truly positive and dogged way. It has explored the parameters around culture that constrain it, not its inner logic and outer texture. In this book we propose something different. We dig into culture as a structure of meanings. We think more closely about contingency and performance. We look not for hidden roots of belief but at the blindingly obvious ways that culture plays out in the visible activity of the public sphere as it represents and discusses climate change. We see culture as both a bridge and a roadblock, this depending on context, choice, and the skill of practitioners. To do all this, we must next return to and then extensively rework the concept of social drama that we introduced a few pages ago. This will take some time.

In conventional sociological applications the social drama has been understood as an unexpected, exceptional event of somewhat limited duration that compels continuous attention. Typically it will disrupt everyday routines and broadcast schedules, be a topic of conversation, and generate strong emotions. It will be the kind of moment described as a turning point, or as shaping a national destiny, or as a crisis involving schism and the need for unity. Often violence is involved at the point of breach. This seems to disrupt the social order, challenge a society's self-understanding, or threaten the sense of ontological security that tells us tomorrow will be much like today. Representative examples

from the literature include riots, hostage situations, terrorist acts, assassinations, and natural disasters. Wagner-Pacifici (1986), for example, looks at the kidnapping of Italian prime minister Aldo Moro and the anxieties this produced about Italian political stability and state authority. Jacobs (2000) explores the fallout of the Rodney King beating and the Los Angeles riots for reform in city hall and the police department; beneath all this was a deep concern about racial equality, race tension, and racism in America. Ron Eyerman (2008) examines the multiple meanings imputed to the assassination of the controversial Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh. Christine Walley (2004) investigates the contentious formation of a national park in coastal Tanzania. Following the classical social drama pattern, Simon Cottle (2012) shows that the South Asian Tsunami of 2004 generated initial expressions of collective grief – a narrative eventuated of disruption, then the reconstitution of the social.

Fair enough; but what we want to suggest here is that such an intense and event-focused application of Turner's theory is too restrictive. Dramas can be very short or very long in duration. They can be intense or diffuse. A milestone in our opinion was Cottle's (2004, 2008) analysis of the aftermath of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence in London in 1993. He shows a social drama *extending* episodically for more than ten years and sustained by periodic social activism, judicial inquiries, and court trials. It also *diffused*. No longer just about the death of Lawrence the expanding set of stories and signifiers drew into its orbit discussions about policing, the mass media, social justice, the definition of racism, and the possibility of multiculturalism. Although there is a risk to precision and a danger of banality when any theoretical concept is stretched beyond its original formulation, the payoff can also be a freeing up of repressed analytic potential. For this reason we wager that the concept of social drama should be taken even beyond Cottle's marker.

We suggest that, through their lives, people navigate and witness extremely diffuse dramas in episodic, half-aware ways. In the sense elaborated by Clifford Geertz, the cultural life of a society consists of multiple overlapping dramatic webs. These are the myths, narratives, and spectacles that any competent member of that society will to some extent understand. As Eleanor Townsley (2001, 99) puts it, they are "what everyone knows": a commonsense, shorthand selection and condensation from complexity. By becoming "what everyone knows," social dramas are meaning-clusters that have broken out of narrow sphere-specific domains of communication and association such as science, religion, or administration to become part of the common currency of exchange in a wider civil sphere or popular culture. Sometimes these narratives pass through generations. As such they offer a resource for interpreting new events and evaluating actors, inserting them into a plot and giving them a dramatic quality. Of course, the fact that a social drama is "what everyone knows" does not necessarily imply that there is agreement about the meaning, morality, or impact of events and actions any more than the fact that "everyone knows" a great novel or film or political celebrity will lead them to agree on particular points of interpretation. Nor does it mean in a pedantic and literal sense that every single member of a population has the same interest and knowledge of every issue of every field. It is easy enough to point to exceptions, such as children or the seriously mentally ill. Rather, the point is that there is a widely shared recognition among the averagely intelligent, moderately literate, news-following population of an issue as important, public, and "dramatic," and of the players in the drama as belonging to that issue. There is likely to be a common agreement on certain moments as somehow pivotal to the unfolding of the drama and as central to the effort of interpretation. And there is an awareness, however dim, that these moments express something like the spirit of the age.

We might take the civil rights movement (Alexander 2006) as a case in point. Here is a social drama that has persisted for decades and that is profoundly embedded in the American lexicon of competent citizenship. It starts with the corrupting breach of the transatlantic slave trade and moves toward redemption. Particular events, such as the *Dred Scott* decision, the iconic marches and protests in the Deep South in places like Selma and Birmingham, the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the presidential election of Barack Obama, stand out as dramatic highlights. These offer nodes for symbolic and interpretative activity, but they cannot really be understood merely as isolated happenings. Rather, they are connected to each other by the deeper, longer, persistent, morally persuasive drama of civil rights of which most citizens have some awareness. They provide data points for reflecting on that social drama in turn, operating as signals and hinges for thinking and debating racial inclusion and exclusion. Likewise, the incident at Three Mile Island should properly be considered a key plot point in the extended, multi-issue, multisite social drama that is the long running contest over nuclear power in the United States (Erikson 1994; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Walker 2004). The entire Clinton presidency can be thought of in this way, too. As Jason Mast (2012) shows, high-visibility individual events, such as Clinton's denial of sex with Monica Lewinsky or his emotive vow to seek

retribution on the Oklahoma City bombing terrorists, are not really self-contained social dramas at all. Rather, they are dramatic episodes in a wider story of Clinton's rise and fall. Whether or not we like Bill Clinton, whether or not we think of him as a crook or a savior, we share recognition of this bigger story. Dramas frequently connect to others in turn as interpreters seek their ultimate meaning. So interest in Clinton is linked to that relating to the ultimate significance and consequences of the social upheavals of the 1960s (Smith 2012; Townsley 2001); or of America as a zone of "culture wars"; or of those relating to gender politics. It is no accident that Clinton's critics, such as Pat Buchanan, often spoke of his "Woodstock values." A single epithet like this can activate a complex semiotic sequence – and it makes sense precisely because it taps silently and efficiently into the broader narrative that "everybody knows." But note that although millions of citizens within the United States might share a deep or intuitive sense of these events as long-standing dramas and be able to insert particular news items into them, they still disagree on their implications. Most think that the civil rights movement was a great thing, but some feel it produced overreach in areas like affirmative action, welfare, and school bussing. President Clinton, of course, remains much admired and much reviled. Nuclear power might save us from climate change or provide a supplemental environmental catastrophe, as it did at Fukushima, Japan.

The understanding that social dramas entail collective memory and semiotic switching can be easily extended to natural risks. Cottle (2012) convincingly shows that these are subject to ritualized, mediatized narration, but he also tends to focus on each as an isolated dramatic episode. We feel there is more to it than this. Disasters are always compared to each other. They can also cluster and combine to form dense mythologies extending forward through time. West and Smith (1997), for example, show that drought discourses in Australia have remained constant for more than one hundred years and have a formulaic quality. People claim each one is the worst ever; assert that idle city dwellers have no understanding of tough rural realities; cry out that solidarity is needed; and so forth. This is a ritualized response. More interesting is the fact that droughts are woven into the fabric of the national imagination, as is the realization that they are recurrent. They confirm self-understandings of Australia as a land of pioneer struggle, or of marginality and rugged manliness. Put another way, each individual drought provides fuel for the renewal of myth and is interpreted, in part, in terms of the ongoing, serial narration of the nation. It is one episode connected to many others in the slow-burning social drama that entails conquest of nature, the decline of the bush, and the precarious quality of life in the Antipodes. This tale is not simply told in everyday life in the manner of Norgaard's Norwegian informants. Rather, West and Smith show it circulates and is reproduced in the civil discourse of the Australian public sphere – in letters to the editor, in editorials, in public gatherings, in cartoons and political speeches.

If social dramas are shared and are all around us, some questions follow: What exactly do we find in them? What should the analyst be looking for? Here the Turnerian tradition seems strangely wanting in theoretical resources. His theory captures a sense of turmoil, possibility, and shared emotion. Yet it is also curiously similar to crowd psychology theory when contrasted to his other, more semiotic work. Turner's social drama theory is surprisingly devoid of useful tools and analytic strategies for unpacking the grammars of culture.

Other than Turner, the two most relevant efforts to theorize social life as a dramatic activity have come from Erving Goffman (1959) and Jeffrey Alexander (2004). Grounded in microsociology, Goffman suggests that everyday life consists of shallow and instrumental performances where individuals present idealized or preferred versions of themselves or play to their expected social roles (for more critique, see the end of this chapter). Alexander, for his part, emerges from the cultural sociology perspective and is far more attentive to public-sphere dynamics, moral choices, and symbolic environments of action. He suggests that effective performance is a central part of social life and that agents attempt to fuse themselves with circulating myths. Politics, for Alexander, consists of performances and counterperformances in which individual and collective actors attempt to embody the sacred and discredit their opponents. He has persuasively applied this perspective to the civil rights movement, the events of 9/11, the election of Barack Obama, and the Arab Spring in Egypt. Although Alexander's theory takes us much of the way toward an understanding of contemporary public performance, our belief is that a return to the origin of dramatic and performative theory might offer new tools and so move us further away from familiar ways of seeing. The Aristotelian tradition helps sociology address a core challenge: connecting cultural pragmatics to a structural understanding of culture.

Like Alexander, Geertz, and Goffman, we find a crucial directional clue in the work of Kenneth Burke, the literary theorist and rhetorician. In his social theory of "dramatism," Burke (1945, 1950) suggested that language and symbolic systems were important not only in literature

but also in everyday life. He argued that they shaped perceptions (the "terministic screen") and generated a sense of emotional connection or solidarity (what he termed "identification") and hence influenced policies and outcomes. In formulating this brilliant and (then) original stance, Burke drew heavily on Aristotle and wrote as a philosopher of language influenced by pragmatism. So in what follows, we turn also to this source. Our next task is to ask how this ancient Greek thinker might be reconciled with the contemporary cultural–sociological approach to social drama – one that looks to public narrative and to the civil sphere and that is informed by the legacies of structuralism, mid-range social theory, and empirical sociological research over a range of domains.

The fundamentals of staged drama were identified in Aristotle's *Poetics* some thousands of years ago, but his systematic cultural models have only rarely been used in sustained ways in sociological analysis (for exceptions, see Baker 2014; Jacobs 2000; Smith 2005). Aristotle's great achievement was to demonstrate that every (staged) drama must contain certain predictable relationships, themes, and elements.[4] These are universal.

- There are actors who are protagonists, antagonists, and witnesses. Usually these are individual humans ("the objects of imitation are men in action" [II, 1]). However, they can also be groups or something more abstract, such as the city-state.
- These actors have motivations to act. These propel the drama forward. So can acts of chance and divine intervention. In comic genres, the agents are somehow "less than us," whereas in tragic ones, they seem to be "greater than us."
- The drama takes place in a location and at a specific time with a specific set of circumstances at hand. This offers a stage for events that marks it out as distinctive, offering color but also often constraining opportunities for action. For example, a character on an island might not be able to leave without a boat.
- There is a plot or "story" that moves forward through time ("by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents" [VI, 6]). Events are not reversible. In the course of this plot, the fortune, luck, influence, prestige, and power of characters will rise or fall. Indeed the chief source of interest in a drama is often the turning point at which this happens.
- Plots fall out in genres, these being marked by emotional registers, action motivations, and character trajectories. Aristotle spoke especially of comedy and tragedy. Comedic genres tend to be optimistic and to culminate in pro-social outcomes. The tragic genre suggests that life is deeply serious. It hints that human actors are powerless or misguided and that events are driven by a cruel fate that they cannot control. Tragic narratives tend to end in social fragmentation.
- Not all points in a drama are equally important. Aristotle suggested we pay special attention to pivotal moments where intense change happens. He developed two concepts to capture this. *Peripeteia* involves a turning point or reversal of fortunes. This is the moment in which the status quo for a character is overturned. For example, the protagonist might become poor instead of rich or sick instead of healthy. *Anagnorisis* often accompanies *peripeteia*. The term refers to moments of recognition where the protagonist learns something new about herself, about her character or her relationship to others in a play.
- There is an audience. Actors play to this audience. In the classical Aristotelian formulation the audience becomes intensely involved in the drama through an emotional rather than an intellectual or rational connection. By mobilizing the emotions of pity and terror, the drama can help the audience attain what he termed *catharsis* and emotional balance.
- There are onlooking experts, critics, and analysts, such as Aristotle himself. These figures make public evaluations and offer second-order interpretations that can be influential. Aristotle, for example, was an advocate of the playwright Sophocles.

We will find the same elements in a social drama. Clearly a social drama as deployed by contemporary sociology[5] is not the same as an item of classical Greek theatre. There we had defined events (a play) that had

[4] There are many English translations of the *Poetics*. We rely on the venerable translation by Samuel Henry Butcher ([1902] 1998), which is freely available online.

[5] For recent theoretical elaborations on the theme of social drama, see the contributions by Alexander, Alexander and Mast, Mast, and Reed in Alexander, Giesen, and Mast (2006). See also Alexander (2011), Cottle (2004), and McFarland (2004). The most influential statement in sociology is still Wagner-Pacifici (1986). In cultural anthropology, Turner's ideas have largely fallen by the wayside, although they still exert a strong influence in performance studies (see, e.g., Schechner 2003). For the most comprehensive and detailed overview of Turner's contribution to performance theory across a range of fields, see St. John (2008). The concept of social drama has essentially no currency in environmental studies. For an important exception, see Christine Walley's (2004) excellent ethnography of the Mafia Island marine park in Tanzania, which treats environmental conflict as a form of social drama.

scripted outcomes. There were clear boundaries between players, audience, and critics. The entire event took place within an evening in a setting marked off from ordinary social life: the theatre. People collaborate in the enterprise as performers and audiences. With a social drama, things are different. Crucially, the drama is part of social life, not partitioned from it and requiring any suspension of disbelief. The social drama may be ongoing and without current resolution. It will involve improvisation and conflict. There might be deliberate efforts to "be dramatic" and gain public sympathy and attention or to "avoid drama" and get down to business. We might find a complex layering of genres, with romantic and solidaristic actions narrated for some contexts (a new solar array for an indigenous community) at the same time as a tragic one in other (yet another failed climate conference, despite the best of intentions). Audiences might participate intensively, but they might also have a range of involvement. Some will be highly engaged by the issues, some voyeuristic, others bemused. The conditions of spectatorship are also distinctive. No longer copresent with performers, audiences are distant witnesses to events relayed to them by the mass media. As with reading the movie reviews or the gossip pages, representations and critiques of performances and actions – a distant speech, a German advertising campaign, a fraught all-night conference session on another continent – may well be a more important source of cultural influence than direct personal observation. Further narrative processes related to politics, the media, and intellectual entrepreneurship will frame some events as relevant to a drama and others as outside of it. Nevertheless, the most basic point of commonality holds: *the world of public affairs is very much one that is constructed by players, narrated by observers, and read by audiences in a dramatic mode* (Mast 2006, 2012). What is more, people intuitively know this. From deep socialization they have a familiarity with the culture structures of the dramatic form, applying these in the effort to make sense of the world. The structures identified by Aristotle as lying at the core of Greek drama also shape the way we read events and identify and narrate a social drama. Ideas about events as tragic and comedic, ideas about heroes and villains, ideas about chance and fate, the ever-present possibility for *pertipeteia* and *anagnorisis*, run through our culture. These elementary forms simplify reality and exert persuasive force as they shape both interpretation and cultural production at various social levels.

What does this all mean for climate change? As we have intimated, this is not simply a natural process, nor just a matter of scientific communication and (faulty) risk perception, but also an ongoing, interpreted saga. Scientists and environmentalists often bemoan the fact that citizens do not understand the facts of climate science, the range of policy options, and the problems of collective action. But in truth, society already understands climate change – and in a profoundly consequential way. It is the drama of a contested claim. Like the political trope of "the Sixties" explored by Townsley, the environmental trope of climate change compresses and organizes a messy, complex range of meanings into a definite space and time. Regardless of the extent to which any particular member of the public believes in or even particularly cares about anthropogenic climate change, pretty much everyone will know that it is a competition between two camps for interpretative and political power. It may be largely "background noise" for many (Norgaard 2011), but even they know that there are problems of collective action; that there are treaties that might be formed or fall apart; that there is a gap between activist hopes and real-world outcomes; and that claims about planetary doom are made by some and shrugged off by others. This battle–struggle–contest is the social drama as it is experienced and configured in the lifeworld of mass media consumption and everyday conversation. Within this larger drama are a number of characters with their own narrative arcs. They struggle for attention, make claims, and represent battling perspectives. They are performers whose actions are subject to critique and evaluation. They are people like Al Gore, various leading environmentalists and climate scientists such as James Hansen, organizations like the IPCC, noted skeptics like Nigel Lawson and Michael Crichton, and rogue theorists like Bjorn Lomborg. Their fortunes rise and fall. Climate change can even be thought of as a character itself. Sometimes it is narrated as struggling for recognition – it is a victim in need of help. At other times it looks to be a winner gaining attention and resources. Sometimes it is a bully squeezing out critical discourse and overshadowing more pressing problems. Although the social drama of climate change bubbles along, specific settings and episodes, such as climate conferences, advertising campaigns, scandals, and major new reports from scientists, offer spaces for dramatic intensification, for the identification of *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*. At such junctures, critics and commentators frequently offer metacommentaries on "what is working," reflecting on the failures of performers and audiences alike. Such reconstructions may or may not be accurate in all their details. Nevertheless, they are effective in shaping public perceptions, motivations, and collective emotions and so are deserving of study.

Plot, Character, and Rhetoric

We have outlined how Turner's view of social drama and Aristotle's *Poetics* can be used for thinking about climate change as this manifests in the public sphere. In what follows we add two intellectual complications to the model. The first of these relates to the availability of romance as a genre-option. It also flags the significant weight placed in contemporary culture on the ethical being and causal force of choice-making individuals. We introduce the second complication in five paragraphs from here.

For Aristotle, tragedy was a serious art form and comedy a more trivial and purely entertaining one. In their original formulations, neither of these provides an attractive template for climate activism, and neither quite captures the narrative structures that we find in activist social movement politics today (see Jacobs and Smith 1997). Tragedy in the ancient Greek mode is never much of an option for mobilization as it keys to fatalism. Whatever we try to do is liable to be undone by the Gods or the absolute power of destiny. A plot anticipating unintended consequences and pointing toward futility does not encourage sacrifice for a cause and collective action but rather the kind of apathy that in the context of climate change leads to conventional, carbon-hungry lifestyles. Aristotelian comedy, meanwhile, suggests that everything will turn out fine in the end regardless of our idiocy and that high motivations (e.g., environmentalist values) are merely our cover for base ones (e.g., getting elected). Again, this is a message to carry on as usual that is rarely seen in serious public discussion. Instead of these nonoptions, climate change activists generally deploy instead the kind of humanist, post-Renaissance reworking of both these genres that we see in other social issue contexts. These depict human effort and choices as pivotal to outcomes rather than the actions of Gods or the cruel twists of fate.

Hegel benchmarked this shift better than any other theorist. Looking to Antigone rather than to Aristotle's beloved Oedipus as the sine qua non of the tragic form, in *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Hegel suggests that the essence of tragedy lies not in the triumph of a supernatural fate over human will but rather in choice within a difficult situation. The Greek tragic hero, for Hegel, is caught between ethical codes (e.g., duty to the law vs. duty to family) and must knowingly make the choice between them that will bring inevitable negative consequences. This interpretation of the dramatic form in antiquity differs from Aristotle's emphasis on divine intervention, chance, and natural law. It can be considered symptomatic in and of itself as an indicator of a growing sensitivity in modernity to agency and free will in plot. In his later lectures on aesthetics, Hegel goes even further. Here he argues that passions and psychological drivers rather than ethics and divine intervention are pivotal in post-Renaissance drama. He observes with unusual precision a decisive, empirically observable split between the tragic genre of antiquity and that of modernity. Antigone, it turns out, was just an outlying forerunner of a major cultural shift. As Hegel (1975, 1225) puts it, "in modern tragedy" the character is not even driven by ends, whether ideal or material; rather, "what presses for satisfaction is the subjectivity of their heart and mind and the privacy of their own character." In short, the search for inner resolution determines outer events. Consequently, there is heightened attention given to barriers against self-actualization and individuality. Whereas the tragic figures of antiquity represented or embodied ethical positions, they lacked a certain plasticity and psychological depth. In the modern drama – and here Hegel refers mostly to Shakespeare, Schiller, and Goethe – they are rounded sovereign individuals. Even when marked by a dominant character trait that leads to their downfall (jealousy for Othello, indecision for Hamlet, ambition for Macbeth, etc.), the tragic protagonist's internal complexity offers her a perpetual capacity for choice. Now tragedy arises due to action and inaction relative to moral and ethical challenges as these impact on an imperfect and fragmented self. People are responsible for misfortune. Goaded by Iago, a reluctant Othello acts on his perception; Hamlet does not act decisively and the moment is gone; Macbeth vacillates even as he chooses the more evil option time and time again. Likewise in a contemporary social drama – whether on climate change or any other matter – these themes of choice and personality come to the fore. They are deeply imprinted into the dramatic common sense through which we moderns both produce and read public personalities and public events.

The same emphasis on intentional actions and their profound consequences for plot in the modern tragedy can also be found with literary descendants of the comedic genres that Aristotle also analyzed. Of particular relevance here is the fictional mode dubbed "comic romance" or sometimes just "romance" by its most perceptive and influential analyst, Northrop Frye. In romance, a hero goes through a series of adventures, performing exceptional feats and struggling toward victory (Frye 1957, 33, 36–37; 1976, 65–93). Though human, the romantic hero derives his power "from a current of energy which is partly from him and partly outside him" (Frye 1976, 67), moving through a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are "slightly suspended" (Frye 1957, 33). Romance

is the stuff of folktales and legends, and in its comic variants, its end is social integration. According to Frye (1976, 68), the literary model of comic romance is the *Odyssey*: a hero returns home after years of dangerous exile, restoring social and natural order. If the overarching theme of Aristotelian comedy is the spontaneous integration of society (Frye 1957, 43), then we might say that the theme of "comic romance" is a heroic struggle for reintegration. This struggle is progressive. Whereas tragedies are about the isolation of a hero from society (or social disintegration), and comedy about the reproduction of stability in existing society, the romance is about the movement from one kind of society to another, with the new form crystallizing around the form and works of the hero (Frye 1957, 163). The creation of this new society is often accompanied by some kind of ritual of reintegration – a wedding, a banquet, and so on – which Frye describes as an "act of communion" with the audience (164). In modern democratic politics, the importance of comic romance cannot be overstated. Without it, most social movements could not exist – or at least they would not know how to describe their mission (indeed, Frye 1976, 77, himself suggested that "an element of social protest is inherent in romance"). Performing in the romantic mode, activists can engender belief in their cause and its possibilities for success, bootstrap feel-good emotions, foster solidarity, and overcome free rider problems (Jacobs and Smith 1997). At its heart, comedy entails a movement toward the real and the good – a movement "from one social center to another not unlike the action of a lawsuit, in which plaintiff and defendant construct different versions of the same situation, one finally being judged as real and the other as illusory" (Frye 1957, 166). Yet unlike high-mimetic heroes, who move in an all-too-human world of social conflict and political intrigue, romantic heroes have access to enchantment. One might say their job is to reenchant the social.

Although conventional Aristotelian readings of comedy and tragedy may well play a small part in metacommentaries about climate change (e.g., fatalistic or lampooning op-eds), the objective of activists is to encourage identification by deploying the cultural structures of post-Enlightenment times we have just been discussing. They suggest that tragedy is a hypothetical future outcome that can only arise if bad choices are made by complex, sovereign decision-making individuals, these agents ranging from world leaders to ordinary citizens. Only if we embrace romance and its associated world-transforming, solidaristic opportunities can we avoid a hot, unjust, and dangerous future. Skeptics and neutrals can set back this storytelling through a process of genre deflation (Smith 2005) characterized by realist and satiric frames like those of the comedy of Aristotle's time. These prick the balloon of portentous solidarity by suggesting (1) that nothing much is at stake, (2) that the major actors are misguided buffoons, (3) that the problem will solve itself, or (4) that it does not exist. In sum, Aristotle offers clues but not all the answers for our interrogation of culture structures within our social drama.

Our first complication, then, was that the model of drama provided in *Poetics* did not fully recognize the impact of humanism nor the rise of romance in place of the satirical comedy as the preeminent genre for solidaristic expression. Our second complication comes from within Aristotle's own oeuvre and is intended to provide a better understanding of social performance. We pursue this for the next several pages.

The Greek philosopher offered his *Poetics* as a theoretical treatise, critical appreciation, and "how-to" handbook on staged drama. In other words, it is a work of literary criticism concerning a shared and consensual fantasy enterprise. It understands genre as a quality of plot and character and identifies the conventions of both of these. Yet to more fully understand how argument plays out in the confrontational public sphere, we need a different Aristotelian resource, his *Rhetoric*.[6] There is a simple reason for this. Effective staged drama of the kind explored in the *Poetics* involves the actor becoming fully someone else. In the public sphere, effective performance generally involves speaking as oneself, and deeply so. Aristotle was the first great thinker to systematically interrogate and parse this truth, and so in the *Rhetoric* we find yet more tools for exploring dramatic interventions in public life.

Although climate change advocacy works in a variety of speech genres, the one that is most central to its social drama is that which Aristotle terms "political oratory." This has a proscriptive and future orientation. As Aristotle puts it:

> Political speaking urges us either to do or not to do something: one of these two courses is always taken by private counselors, as well as by men who address public assemblies.... The political orator aims at establishing the expediency or the harmfulness of a proposed course of action; if he urges its acceptance, he does

[6] We rely on two standard translations of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Roberts (1954), the most readable, and Kennedy (2007), the most scholarly. All quotations are from Roberts unless otherwise noted. This translation is in the public domain and is widely available online. Other social scientists have drawn on Aristotelian rhetoric to make sense of climate debates (Malone 2009) and sphere-specific climate politics (Roald and Sangolt 2012), but to the best of our knowledge, ours is the first study of climate change to mine his work in an extensive and systematic way.

> so on the ground that it will do good; if he urges its rejection, he does so on the ground that it will do harm; and all other points, such as whether the proposal is just or unjust, honorable or dishonorable, he brings in as subsidiary and relative to this main consideration. (1.3.1358b)

We hardly need point out that the social drama of climate change is one that is replete with speakers urging action and occasionally inaction. Dramatic tension emerges around the questions, Will listeners be persuaded? Will they act? And of the speaker, How well did she perform? Such performances, regardless of who is speaking, are evaluated in terms of their capacity to exert oratorical force and to bring about change – or at least signs of change. Although often mined as a brilliant source of observations on microlevel linguistic strategies in debating and practical reason (syllogism, metaphor, praise, quotation, the use of maxims, etc.), for our purposes the more interesting insights of the *Rhetoric* as to what makes for effective persuasion concern not arguments but character. For Aristotle, this was absolutely fundamental to effective public speaking. And as we see later in this book, the narration of character is pivotal to climate change drama. For whether or not she is making a direct attempt at persuasion, the character of an individual somehow stands as a marker of the truth of her ideas.

Persuasion and the Centrality of Character

Just how does this happen? Aside from *logos* (speech or logical argument – the sort of thing that scientists do in their reports), Aristotle identified two other and more influential components of successful rhetoric: *pathos* (or audience sympathy) and *ethos* (the moral character of the speaker). As Aristotle (1.2.4) puts it:

> Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. . . . It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. (1.2.1356a)

It is the combination of these dimensions, the performative fusion of *logos* with *pathos* and *ethos*, that explains why audiences would spontaneously stand and applaud after screenings of Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* (see Chapter 4). And it is the inability to fuse these dimensions that explains why so many other attempts to communicate climate change have fallen flat. Indeed, following Aristotle, we might argue that in the case of climate change – a case "where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided," if ever one existed – character can be the decisive factor in cultural performance. In this social drama, *logos* and *pathos* arguably exist in abundance. *Ethos*, however, is in short supply. Let's explore this further.

Classicist George Kennedy (1984, 15) defines *ethos* as "the credibility that the author or speaker is able to establish in his work." In Aristotelian theory, *ethos* inheres entirely within speech and is not produced by reputation or social position. Our view is more sociological; we believe that cultural expectations about character type clearly play a crucial role in shaping audience response. Credibility is a performative achievement, but its ingredients are unevenly distributed. Expertise, celebrity, and charismatic authority matter. Money matters. Yet despite these rather obvious positional restrictions, *ethos* is never predetermined and cannot simply be bought. As we will see, authority to speak on climate change can be claimed in various ways. Within the climate denial movement, for example, physicists with little or no background in climate science have become powerful arbiters of scientific truth (Lahsen 2008; Oreskes and Conway 2010). At the opposite extreme, journalists and celebrities often have more prestige than the scientists whose work they champion (Anderson 2011). We note this not in a spirit of skepticism but simply to show that *ethos* is a complex coproduction of established roles and performative prowess. As Wagner-Pacifici (1986, 7) puts it, "the protagonists of the 'social drama' respond to and clothe themselves in their culture's stock of sedimented symbols, archetypal characters, and rhetorical appeals." Working with these tools, virtuosic performers can manipulate and even transcend the expectations of their audience.

From an Aristotelian perspective, credibility and morality are inseparable. To seem credible, Aristotle says, speakers must exhibit three qualities: practical wisdom or good sense (*phronesis*), virtue or moral character (*arête*), and good will (*eunoia*) (2.1.1378a). Without wisdom, we cannot trust speakers to form correct opinions or behave sensibly regardless of how lovable and well intentioned they are. Without virtue we cannot trust them to be honest about their opinions and engage in pro-social self-denial. Without goodwill we cannot trust they have our interests at heart (2.1.1378a). Speakers produce goodwill through their practical knowledge of the emotions; indeed, it is through *eunoia* that the passions enter Aristotelian rhetoric (Garver 1994, 110). Whereas virtue and

practical wisdom are characteristics of the speaker as such, goodwill is a "relational property of the speaker relative to an audience" (Garver 1994, 111), and it is forged through the experience of shared emotion – pity, fear, confidence, and so forth. These emotions are not optional add-ons or dirty tricks. On the contrary, they are essential to collective judgment and rational deliberation. As the philosopher Eugene Garver explains, "being too logical and therefore not ethical is a danger specific to the art of rhetoric.... Reason can drive out *ethos*" (177, 178). Aristotle was acutely aware of the rhetorical dangers posed by excessive rationality. He was the first person to note an interesting paradox: demonstrations of inescapable logic can actually *undermine* trust.

For Aristotle, pertinent virtues include justice, courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence, and wisdom (1.9.1366b). With an issue such as climate change, where hard evidence and analysis (*logos*) are supposed to be what matters, these virtues might seem immaterial. Who cares if the IPCC or Exxon Mobil are magnanimous? As it turns out, everyone cares, and quite deeply, too. Because climate change has become a metanarrative about the future of global society – a symbol of everything from food security to spiritual salvation (Hulme 2009) – *who* "speaks for the climate" matters tremendously (Boykoff 2011). Even in its low-mimetic incarnations, climate change is inescapably eschatological. It embodies our deepest hopes and fears about the direction of history. Echoing Ulrich Beck's visions of reflexive modernity superseding the "zombie categories" of modernist sociology, the anthropologist Steve Rayner goes so far as to suggest that climate change "has become the key narrative within which political issues from the local to the global are framed," replacing "capital and social class as the organizing theme of political discourse in contemporary society" (Rayner 2009, xxiii). This may be true in Oxford, England, but it is certainly not true in Oxford, Mississippi. Yet the character of climate communicators probably matters more in Mississippi, and precisely because there uncertainty about climate change is far greater than in the cloisters of Headington stone.

When *logos* and *pathos* are contested, *ethos* comes to the fore. For example, it is no accident that in America, where religious faith is seemingly required for full membership in civil society (Weber [1906] 2009), activists on both sides have sought the imprimatur of the pulpit. Gore is just one of many environmentalists who have bent over backward to display their Christian bona fides. He is also just one of many to be branded as a religious fanatic by the Christian Right – or, in the memorable words of Texas governor Rick Perry, "a false prophet of a secular carbon cult" (Shear 2011). As we explain later, this is no category error. Gore's prophetic *ethos* has been carefully crafted and contested.

If underplayed, the importance of character has not been entirely lost on climate change researchers. However, it is typically used as shorthand for psychological type, not performing persona. Anthropologists working with Mary Douglas's grid-group paradigm have long used character as an analytic device by dividing the social world into ideal types: hierarchists, egalitarians, individualists, and fatalists. Aligned with the cornucopian–catastrophist dualism popular since the 1970s (Cotgrove 1982), this schema has produced an ever-more elaborate typology of environmental attitudes (Rayner and Thompson 1998; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990). There are problems here. Empirically, this picture simply does not hold up, especially not in the United States. Many of the players in the longer drama of American environmental politics break these molds in multiple ways, from Thoreau the libertarian romantic to Wendell Berry the evangelical communitarian to Richard Nixon the right-wing environmental regulator.

In science studies, the notion of *ethos* is most familiar from Robert Merton's (1973) famous norms of universalism, communalism, disinterestedness, and skepticism. His scientific *ethos* was "an emotionally toned complex of rules, prescriptions, mores, beliefs, values and presuppositions which are held to be binding upon the scientist" (258n15; on). In the so-called strong program of science and technology studies (STS) and its various offshoots, trust and credibility are even more fundamental. With his seminal history of scientific truth in seventeenth-century England, Steven Shapin (1994) shows how scientists won trust through the performance of gentlemanly honor. In studies of scientific decision making in the present day, scholars such as Brian Wynne and Sheila Jasanoff have repeatedly shown how trust in scientists shapes deliberation over environmental risk, including deliberations over climate change (e.g., Jasanoff and Wynne 1998; Wynne 1980, 2010; see also Demeritt 2001; Yearley 1999). For this branch of science studies, it would not be too much to claim, with Shapin (1995, 257–258), that "credibility should not be referred to as a 'fundamental' or 'central' topic ... [but as] the *only* topic." And as Shapin (2004) has recently argued, trust in experts is not just about expertise; it also has a deeply moral dimension. To be credible, scientists must persuade their audiences (both other scientists and the public) not only that they know what they are talking about but also that they are well intentioned and trying "to do the right thing" (Shapin 2004, 48). In Aristotelian terms, they must display *arête* and *eunoia*.

When the limits of scientific knowledge are in question, "credibility contests" develop (Gieryn 1999). In the case of climate change, the allocation of epistemic authority – in this case, to represent the massively complex and largely invisible workings of the climate – thus hinges not on credentials but on moral boundary work. Again, "in cases where there is not exact knowledge but room for doubt," *ethos* is everything. This is not just true of climate change. As the rhetorician Carolyn Miller (2003) argues, Aristotelian rhetorical theory suggests that in conflict over environmental risks more generally, *ethos* runs the show. Yet, as Miller notes, the moral character of risk analysis is systematically denied in the language games of scientific controversies. Virtue and goodwill are subsumed by technical expertise, *phronēsis* by *episteme* (Miller 2003). Hence an overly rationalistic faith in the wisdom of experts has become the norm in deliberations on risk. It is no wonder that so few people know whom to trust.

Although we draw on these ideas from science and technology studies, our interest in character is far more ecumenical. We wish to examine the *ethoi* of a broad range of actors within the broader attention space defined by climate change: politicians, celebrities, journalists, religious leaders, artists, and even nature itself. STS scholars are primarily concerned with the construction and contestation of scientific knowledge. They want to understand how trust and credibility are generated in a very specific domain of social relations (universities, labs, advisory bodies). This matters to us, too, but we are also interested in the way "trust" is narrated and performed as part of a wider climate drama. We follow the sociologist of science Brian Wynne (2004) in treating "trust" and "credibility" as analytical artifacts that are themselves subject to reflexive narration – not objective cognitive states but social facts that belong in quotation marks. We part ways, however, in seeing these artifacts relevant far beyond the cultural domain and institutional field of science (Sztompka 2007). In important ways, the social drama of climate change that people actually get to see is a story *about* trust. In this sense, it is a story not just about science or nature but about how we know *whom* to believe – artists? politicians? children?

Such a reflexive dimension with its intimations of spectatorship marks a crucial difference between Turner's theory of social drama and the dramaturgical approach of Erving Goffman. Whereas Goffman treated the entire world of social interaction as a domain of gamelike, ritualistic performance, Turner looked at crises or ruptures in the flow of mundane life. Moreover, Goffman saw the theatre of life as something experienced by individuals in strategic face-to-face interaction. For Turner, a drama could also be something overheard and observed from a distance. It enabled society to criticize itself. "Thus," as Turner (1988, 76) puts it, "if daily living is a kind of theatre, social drama is a kind of metatheatre." This does not mean that the two approaches are utterly irreconcilable. Goffmanian interaction rituals may serve as "microlevel guideposts" for actors in social dramas (McFarland 2004, 1250), cuing performances and presenting opportunities for improvisatory redirection. In the world of science, they allow actors to present themselves as trustworthy and credible, both to their colleagues (Shapin 1994) and to broader publics (Hilgartner 2000). Yet they cannot explain how complex, multiscaled, mediatized dramas such as climate change are configured into meaningful narrative wholes. Nor can Goffman's (1959) bleak vision of drama (which Geertz 1983, 24, described as "ping-pong in masks") tells us about the cultural reflexivity of climate change, its capacity to dramatize profound moral and political dilemmas and for those dramatizations to themselves be subject to meta-critique.

An isolated precedent for this position can be found in a one-off essay by the sociologist Ingar Palmlund, "Social Drama and Risk Evaluation," which draws on Douglas, Turner, and Wagner-Pacifici. Written two decades ago, Palmlund's analysis was amazingly prescient. Yet it made only a small dent in studies of risk or social drama, with only sixty-three citations on Google Scholar at the time of writing (some twenty-two years after initial publication). According to Palmlund (1992, 199), "societal evaluation of risk must be seen as a contest, where the participants offer competing views of reality" and where statements about risk serve to build solidarity. Palmlund stresses the central importance of scripted roles in social controversies over risk, especially the roles of "risk bearer" and "risk generator," whose opposing interests generate dramatic tension. She aligns Turner's four diachronic phases of public action (breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration/schism) with the conventional phases of risk (identification, assessment, and management) as well as dramatic categories of exposition, complication, crisis, and denouement (207). Breach is initiated by a sudden hazard or accident (Three Mile Island, Bhopal) or new scientific findings (Thalidomide, DDT). In crisis, "attitudes are peeled away to lay bare the underlying values and interests. The crisis appears as a menacing presence in the center of public life itself, challenging the representatives of order, who may wish to ignore it or wish it away, to confront it" (208). Distinguishing between social tragedy and social melodrama, Palmlund claims in a strongly Durkheimian vein that "our interest in social controversy over technological risk may well be

a reproduction in modern social settings of earlier generations' anxiety, pity, and excitement surrounding the sacrifice of individuals to further the strength of the group" (212).

This all seems very promising. Yet Palmlund aims too low in terms of ambition at the same time as she sets the bar too high in terms of definition. She continues to work with a restrictive, conventional definition of social drama that excludes certain diffuse and temporally extended phenomena from investigation. So climate change does not make it to the starting gate for dramatic analysis. For Palmlund the problem is that, in this case, breach is not sudden and catastrophic but an abstract pronouncement by social elites. It comes into the public realm as a consequence of "strategic planning," not as a drama "driven by fear and pity." "No victims can be shown. No strongly emotional appeals are associated with the breach. No injured group steps forward with demands or even threats to the establishment" (208). We disagree with this assessment, and not only on the theoretical grounds we laid out earlier in this chapter, as we argued for an expansive view of the social drama. Today at least, a visit to any climate conference will show these claims are also inaccurate. Agents relentlessly engage in dramatic gestures that pluck emotional and social justice chords. More interestingly, the very struggle to find appealing victims, identify villains, increase emotional intensity, and make demands for redress on behalf of nature are part of the drama itself at the level of metanarration. There is much discussion of gambits, representations, and strategy – the rise and fall, success and failure of initiatives in particular and climate change solidarity in general. Palmlund's work did not provoke a serious or sustained response. We are starting afresh by reimagining social drama in more expansive and empirically robust terms.

To offer clarity to readers, earlier we summed up Aristotle's *Poetics* with bullet points. These captured the things we might expect to see in our social drama of climate change – a plot, characters, turning points, and so forth. We are now in a position to do the same for the necessary complications we have added over the past several pages.

- The genre of romance will also be present as a narrative possibility. Themes for debate here will be ideas of cooperation, progress, and solidarity. Romantic narratives will focus on the need to overcome barriers and tests of resolve to build a better world.
- A great emphasis will be placed on the capacity of agents to make choices, the difficulty of these choices, and their causal significance within a wider plot. Commentary will focus on the quality of choices that are made, for example, whether they are good or bad for advancing the cause of climate change activism and what they reveal about inner character.
- Characters making claims on behalf of climate change will be evaluated not so much in terms of the accuracy of their technical claims but rather on their honor, sincerity, selflessness, wisdom, and capacity to generate positive sentiments in onlookers. A critically acclaimed performance will signal these things and will often be tethered to a romantic genre-outcome.

So climate change enters public life not as a set of scientific facts but rather as a set of collective representations replete with genre, plot, characters with particular attributes, and performative actions that are worthy or unworthy. In the next chapter, we focus on the first of these and show how it is a useful resource for organizing a cultural history of climate change as it emerged as a social drama. We show that representations are structured by genre. In a diagnostic mode, we also suggest that these are linked in turn to risk perceptions and to the relative failure of calls for action.

3

Narrating Global Warming

Scientists usually think of climate change as a material process that requires technology if it is to be understood. With thermometers, satellite systems, weather balloons, and consequent computer modeling, they can come to terms with the chemical and physical process through which the planet heats up. They can measure and predict shifts in rainfall, in extreme weather, and in glacial ice distributions. Scholars involved in political science and social policy analysis look closely at practical human responses to risks. For example, they might explore resource conflicts or the impact of initiatives designed to down our harmful emissions. In the previous chapter we set out another way of seeing climate change. This is to take it not only as the product and producer of social outcomes but also as a meaningful social fact. Climate change is something more than a process involving molecules, energies, oceanic currents and solar radiation, human impacts upon nature, and policy responses. It is also a complex cultural field. To make sense of this qualitatively different, non-material dimension of its existence, the approach of cultural sociology is needed.

From the perspective of cultural sociology the natural event of climate change is subject to communicative translation via binary codes, deeply grounded myths, parables, images, characters, performances, and rituals. Together they add up to the social drama of climate change in which legitimacy is contested, moral authority gained, and public opinion formed. In this chapter we begin our empirical investigations by giving emphasis to one Aristotelian theme to this process: genre. In his *Poetics* Aristotle achieved a major breakthrough by recognizing and documenting the deep structural similarities that underpin various narratives and that lead them

to constitute a recognizable genre. Recent work in cultural sociology has built on this insight in three ways that are crucial to our inquiry. First, it has shown that circulating narratives in the public sphere concerning real-world activity often display the same Aristotelian properties as the staged fictional dramas he decoded. Newsworthy events, crises, and civic traumas, for example, are represented through tragic or comic narrations (Baker 2014; Jacobs 2000; Smith 2005). Second, it has been established that these representations have consequences for legitimacy, public opinion, and civic goodwill. They provide or sap energy, sanctify or pollute, bring fatalistic or optimistic thinking. Third, it has been established that genre plays a crucial role in risk perception in times of uncertainty. One might say that it fills in the gaps between isolated facts, actions, and predictions by outlining what is at stake. These three insights come together in the *narrative genre model of risk evaluation*. First developed in the context of wars and foreign policy crises (Smith 2005; see also Ringmar 2006 for an example of theoretical convergence), this offers a systematic and comparative way of looking at the form and structure of storytelling and its consequences for human action. There are several core claims:

1. Uncertain events and real-world facts are "clues." These have little significance in and of themselves. People generally agree on these. They require a "genre guess" to have significance. This guess is vital for the reduction of information complexity, yet it carries with it deep implications for communicative and opinion process.
2. We can see things as low mimetic, romantic, tragic, or apocalyptic. Following Aristotle, the literary theory of Northrop Frye, and others, we can understand each genre as having certain properties. These define the powers of action of players (large or small); likely social outcomes (solidaristic or divisive); appropriate yardsticks for motivation and policy evaluation (pragmatic or business as usual vs. utopian and heroic); and the issues at stake (local and ordinary, or global and epochal).
3. Binary oppositions play a role as building blocks for wider storytelling activity. These are particularly important for marking out good or bad agents within our story or drama.
4. The chosen genre from this cultural repertoire provides a gestalt that retrospectively determines how the clues are put together into a more coherent picture. There is an element of path dependence at work here. Once it has been made, the genre guess works to

close off alternative interpretative possibilities even as it makes the world more meaningful.

5. Some frames escalate perceived risks while others talk them down. Struggles eventuate in which interested parties try to have their stories taken seriously and to falsify or eliminate the stories of others. The combat between frames and their sponsors for interpretative authority is a further important source of social drama. Metanarratives eventuate discussing narrative strategies and speculating on who will prevail.
6. The distribution or adoption of these frames over nations, over time, or over constituencies and interest groups in a civil discourse indirectly shapes political outcomes as well as their timing.

To make this concrete, we can think about war. In the case of the buildup to the 2003 Gulf War, for example, an apocalyptic frame took hold and was promoted in the United States and the United Kingdom. This described Saddam Hussein as a person capable of changing world history, a person of evil motivations, and as a new Hitler who had to be stopped immediately. By contrast, France and other European powers had a low-mimetic narrative in place. This saw the situation in Iraq as containable by means of "business as usual" sanctions, inspections, and diplomacy coordinated by the United Nations (Smith 2005). Fragmented and inconsistent clues about Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction" were seen as believable or as bogus according to the genre guess that was made. Diplomats and intellectuals struggled for interpretative authority over genre within and between nations. Higher-order commentators reflected on these efforts at narrative control in turn, noting the strategies that were used to try to ensure the success of contending visions that preached peril or denounced needless warmongering.

The relevance of such a template to the case of climate change is not something that we need to belabor here. Activists and journalists alike are already aware that this is a context where divergent narratives are fighting for credibility, and that these carry in turn imperatives for action. What theory brings to the table is a certain explanatory distance and conceptual order. The Aristotelian model's specification to a theory of risk perception has relatively close tolerances. It makes knowable in a more reflexive and simple way what everybody knows already. It also provides a tool for a rough and ready history of climate change in which awareness of the problem coincides with institutionalized narrative shifts in representation.

In what follows we sketch out this genre history. But before we do this, some caveats are in order. To say that climate change is storied in patterned or generic ways is not to suggest that everybody has necessarily been paying attention to this story. Nor does it demand that those individuals who do notice find the story compelling. Indeed our argument in this chapter and throughout this book will be that although the social drama of climate change has come into being, it is by no means potent or very well organized as a cultural system. It is a somewhat disorganized drama marked by incoherence, disengagement, and proliferation as much as compression, commitment, and consensus. Our later chapters capture much of these qualities. Here we focus on one particular issue that our reading indicates is pivotal to such dispersed impacts and attenuated force. Put simply, climate change has suffered rather severely from what we might think of as "genre confusion," a confusion that has blocked it from becoming a full-fledged, universal social drama that would compel decisive public action and institutional reform.

Global Warming in the Wilderness

Over the past thirty-odd years, the issues of global warming, climate change, and greenhouse gas emissions have undergone a series of transformations as they entered into public life. First, core concepts have become familiar. They have moved out of the scientific domain and become a commonplace of everyday conversation and even humor. Media sources no longer need to provide little diagrams illustrating the fundamental process, nor provide summaries of key terms, nor put these in quotation marks (e.g., "what scientists are calling the 'greenhouse effect' is caused by levels of the gas carbon dioxide"). Put another way, narrative building blocks have entered the attention space and become cognitively routinized. Second, and despite the environmentalist pushback we note later, there has been a broader narrative shift among political and social elites and within civil discourse toward apocalypticism and away from the low-mimetic forms of narration that once saw the problem as containable with routine policy solutions, or as finger-click solvable by our more technologically advanced descendants. This has translated into a weak sense of crisis and a corresponding ritualized discourse of disappointment at failures to act. Third, there has been a process of sensitization in which more and more aspects of planetary ecology and social experience are tethered in one way or another to this issue cluster. Climate change becomes a sort of master trope for building a comprehensible universe,

much as capital and social class once did in the social world (Rayner 2009, xxiii). In the natural world we might make connections so as to explain retreating glaciers, stronger hurricanes, or hotter summers all in one fell swoop. In the same way, individuals now have a new way to think about trading in large SUVs, eating meat, or following up on new gardening and angling possibilities. In governance and social policy, almost every issue has been drawn into the gravitational field of climate change, from national security to regional development to indigenous people's rights. As the discourse of climate change becomes ubiquitous, so do new kinds of ethical subjectivity and behavior come into play as moral yardsticks. We are painting with a broad brush here and admit we are gesturing toward tendencies rather than absolutes. Yet things have undeniably changed. (1) Climate change is socially "visible." (2) It is taken seriously outside of environmentalist and scientific circles and is viewed as a major challenge. (3) It has offered new cultural repertoires and new ways of making sense of the world and ourselves.

Amazingly, none of this was the case just forty years ago. We can see this when we go back and discover that the cultural nexus around climate change that is familiar to us today – the raft of images, anxieties, priorities, gatherings, and exemplary stories that we discuss in this book – was barely in existence. Unlike Marxism, feminism, LGBTQ rights, environmentalism, national identities, personal computing, or most other discursive clusters, the web of meanings surrounding climate change that we have now did not replace any prior edition of itself in public life like some 2.0 reboot that can be captured with the metaphor of waves ("first wave," "second wave," etc.). In recent years it has quite simply come into being. Although people (mostly scientists) had been worrying about the human capacity to influence climate for a very long time, the social drama of climate change had yet to begin.

Until the 1980s, global warming was a sphere-specific issue for a small number of individuals in the scientific community who talked for the most part to each other, sometimes to the governments who funded their research. As historians of climate science have shown, this is a fascinating and culturally complex story in its own right (e.g., Edwards 2010; Fleming 1998; Howe 2014; Weart 2008), some of which has made its way into the contemporary social drama, mostly in the form of prophetic warnings by tragically ignored savants. Popular retellings trace the idea back as far as 1824, when the mathematician Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier wrote on the balance of energy coming into and leaving the planet and speculated on the role of the atmosphere in preventing the loss of heat through radiation. In the late nineteenth century the British scientist John Tyndall and the Swedish electrochemist Svante Arrhenius put the topic on a more rigorous footing. Arrhenius calculated the relationship between carbon dioxide levels and temperature, suggesting that carbon dioxide fluctuations had been responsible for ice ages, and spoke of the possible role of industry and other human actions in warming the globe. Somewhat interestingly, Arrhenius saw this as potentially a positive thing, yielding a "more equable" climate that could support greater agricultural production (Fleming 1998, 82) – an early indication that a scientific theory or fact does not determine its own broader narration. Even the oceanographer Roger Revelle, who is often called the "grandfather" of global warming theory and was Al Gore's mentor, initially viewed the problem with more curiosity than concern (Howe 2014, 19).

Although there were brief moments of public apprehension about global warming in the late 1940s and 1950s (Fleming 2007, 77–79), and while an increasing number of climate scientists began to raise the alarm in the 1960s (Weart 2010, 71), most people in the developed world saw earth's atmosphere as far too vast and resilient to be fundamentally changed by human activity. With the rise of the modern environmental movement, however, people began to worry about what was happening to the skies. In the early 1970s, the idea of large-scale, human-caused atmospheric change as a looming environmental problem began to enter public debate in America, in part due to widespread concerns over the potential impacts of supersonic jets (Howe 2014, 44–66). It was also during this period that environmentalists and climate scientists began to forge an uneasy alliance, although the former were still preoccupied with "backyard," quality-of-life issues, and the latter with producing "more and better science" (Howe 2014). Still, global warming was vastly overshadowed by problems like overpopulation, water pollution, and wilderness preservation. Although the science was increasingly solid and compelling, it was not until the mid-1970s that journalists began to report on anthropogenic climate change as anything like an established fact, even as they published story after story on badly distorted projections of global cooling. Nonetheless, as the historian Joshua Howe (no relation) convincingly argues, until the 1980s, global warming "remained almost entirely within the purview of the scientific community" (95).

Our own look back at major media sources confirms this claim. A search of "global warming" in the *New York Times* index shows just six stories from before 1980. The items seem remarkably prescient, but they are presented for the most part as quick reports on the talk of scientists in

their conventions and publications. The basic science being propounded seems consistent with the one we have today. Yet the items are typically buried somewhere back in the "Science" section and are run in with other ecological stories. This was an issue worthy of being noted, but not an issue worthy of attention in the civil sphere. For example, on December 21, 1969, we find on page 46, column 4 the following compressed and hard-to-understand note:

> Physical scientist J O Fletcher warns man has only a few decades to solve problem of global warming caused by pollution, s, Amer Geophysical Union (stet.); notes warming could cause further melting of polar ice caps and affect earth's climate; oceanographic chemist E D Goldberg warns man runs risk of allowing pollution to destroy life in oceans. (*New York Times* 1969)

Toward the end of the 1970s treatments became more extended and have a contemporary feel. For example, an eighteen-hundred-word item in the *Economist* from 1977 covers all the bases that are familiar today in, say, *Economist* features on global warming. There is the difficulty of prediction ("the simplest model has to include 30 variables"); the crucial role of the Arctic and Antarctic ("the polar ice caps are what inflation and money supply are to economists"); an estimate that a "doubling of carbon dioxide" would lead to "global warming of nearly three degrees centigrade"; the possibility of flooding as "the oceans would rise nearly six meters" (*Economist* 1977, 88). The *Economist* (1979) remained agnostic as to the truth of the matter, yet it was unable to see disaster as the end of the line even if the prognostications were true. It wrote a couple of years later:

> The results could be relatively attractive: a climate something like that of the warm medieval period from 900 to 1050. There would be winners and losers: e.g., more benign conditions in northern Europe and some of today's arid African regions, but severe winters and frequent drought in eastern Europe. On balance, however, the earth would probably be more productive. (*Economist* 1979, 96)

It is tempting to see this as simply capitalist ideology. To do so would be mistaken. Similar rosy views were held by influential stakeholder institutions at the interface between the laboratory, the political process, and civil society such as the National Academy of Sciences. In 1983 its Carbon Dioxide Assessment Committee made a 496-page report that brought up the usual litany of issues and dangers but concluded:

> We do not believe, however, that the evidence at hand about CO_2-induced climate change would support steps to change current fuel-use patterns away from fossil fuels. Such steps may be necessary or desirable at some time in the future, and we should certainly think carefully about costs and benefits of such steps; but the very near future would be better spent improving our knowledge (including knowledge of energy and other processes leading to creation of greenhouse gases) than in changing fuel mix or use. (quoted in excerpts from *New York Times* 1983, 5)

Although this particular report reflected the influence of environmental skeptics in the Reagan administration (Howe 2014, 132–34), its cheerful line of reasoning was consistent with the romantic genre of risk assessment, which had found widespread favor among economists, policy makers, and many others. Based on the principles of what Aristotle termed comedy (Frye 1957), this is the plot structure in which problems appear serious but end up resolving themselves without causing enduring suffering. There was no need to panic, nor even to make a decision. Growing prosperity was not the problem; to the contrary, it would take care of the problem:

> Generally, the more well-to-do countries can take in stride what may prove to be a reduction by a few percent in living standards that will likely be greater per capita by more than 100 percent over today's. (National Academy of Sciences quoted in Shabecoff 1983)

Squeezed out by the romantic minimization of risk, a more concerned Environmental Protection Agency report released just a few days before that of the National Academy of Science struggled for attention. It was dubbed "unwarranted and unnecessarily alarmist" by President Reagan's scientific advisor George A. Keyworth III (quoted in Shabecoff 1983).

If off to a poor start, as the 1980s moved on, apocalypticism started to gain traction. To some extent, this reflects the growing influence of environmentalism in everyday thinking as well as the emergence of a broader "risk society" in which sensitivity to self-generated human harms was amplified. There were also more middle-range institutional drivers, including the entrenched antienvironmentalism of Reagan-era conservatives, which galvanized scientists and activists alike (Howe 2014, 118–46). NASA was particularly important here as a genre-entrepreneur, taking advantage of its global remote sensing capabilities to find a new relevance in the post-Apollo age. It coordinated a two-thousand-page report by 150 scientists from around the globe that was released in 1986. This was a prototype for many subsequent reports. Its language is more alarmist than that of the National Academy of Sciences, conjuring up images of unknown futures and chancy gambles: "we should recognize that we are conducting one giant experiment on a global scale by

increasing the concentrations of trace gases in the atmosphere without knowing the environmental consequences" (*New York Times* 1986, 11).

The Consolidation of the Apocalyptic Genre

Around the end of the 1980s we see even stronger ethical injunctions emerge, these fueled by growing apocalypticism. The social drama was itself now heating up. Global warming had now created new forms of civic responsibility and subjectivity, these reworking existing environmentalist tropes and converting them into categorical imperatives. The socially constructed representation of a scientific finding was starting to build its normative force in the civil sphere. Scientific projections grew more and more alarming as the decade progressed. By the late 1980s, polls showed that a majority of people in the Western world were worried about the problem, although they still tended to rank it well below other concerns. As their worries grew, so did the influence of industry-funded skeptics, who skillfully used the media and political institutions to sow seeds of scientific doubt. As the genre was consolidated, the cast of characters grew.

Thanks to the growing acceptance of this apocalyptic global warming discourse, a genre of representation that could once be dismissed as a fantasy of the Bay Area's Birkenstock-wearing classes was becoming legitimate on Main Street USA. Now we can find a guest columnist even in the middle- to lowbrow *USA Today* writing that "carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses . . . threaten a disastrous warming of the earth." Hence we needed to "change the whole way we live" with "100% recycling," "public transportation, solar powered cars, bicycles or simply walking" (*USA Today* 1989, 10). As the "problem" of global warming was ratcheted up the genre hierarchy in the next few years, decisions and outcomes became increasingly epochal. So we see a mid-1990s op-ed in the *Christian Science Monitor* setting the stage for a Kyoto environmental summit in terms similar to those we find in the Book of Revelation. One can almost hear John of Patmos intoning his visions of a Day of Judgment. "A warming unprecedented since the dawn of civilization is likely to happen in the coming decades," the *Monitor* warns. This would bring with it "destruction of entire forest systems and watersheds, rising sea levels, flooding, drinking-water shortages and the northward spread of tropical diseases . . . [there was a] looming threat to geopolitical and environmental stability" (*Christian Science Monitor* 1997, 10). From the standpoint of structural poetics, we can see here the hallmarks of apocalypticism. Greenhouse gases are given extreme powers of action, the consequences of action or inaction are immense, the future of the planet is at stake.

As we often show in this book, it was old-fashioned oratory – not new scientific data nor a sophisticated media spectacle – that helped drive this genre shift. In 1988, the worst heat waves and droughts since the Dust Bowl hit much of the United States. For the first time, journalists asked insistently whether the "greenhouse effect" was to blame (Weart 2008, 150). Then, on a sweltering hot June day, climate scientist James Hansen appeared before Congress at a carefully staged hearing. He announced that he could state "with 99 percent confidence" that global warming was happening. As a *Grist* reporter later recounted:

> Seated before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, 15 television cameras, and a roomful of reporters, Hansen wiped the sweat from his brow and presented his findings. The charts of global climate all pointed upward. "The Earth is warmer in 1988 than at any time in the history of instrumental measurements," he said. "There is only a 1 percent chance of an accidental warming of this magnitude. . . . The greenhouse effect has been detected, and it is changing our climate now." (Block 2008)

After the hearing, Hansen said it was time to "stop waffling" on climate change (Weart 2008, 150), and his testimony earned front-page coverage in the *New York Times* under the ominous headline "Global Warming Has Begun." This sweaty, anxious episode has been widely credited with putting catastrophic climate change squarely in the public eye. Not long after, *Time* magazine picked "Endangered Earth" as its "planet of the year" instead of its usual person. "This year the earth spoke, like God warning Noah of the deluge," *Time* wrote in its cover story. "Its message was loud and clear, and suddenly people began to listen, to ponder what portents the message held." While conceding that skeptics could be right to dismiss the "dreaded greenhouse effect," the magazine held, "it is far too risky to do nothing while awaiting absolute proof of disaster" (Sancton 1989, 24).

This apocalyptic discourse of global doom set high popular expectations for the 1997 meetings in Kyoto. There were vague hopes for a potlatch ceremony of selfless action in which national interests would be thrown over the cliff. This ritual validation of the apocalyptic worldview might, some hoped, provide the foundation point for a new romantic narrative, one involving sacrifice, sharing, and the pursuit of a common good. Perhaps humanity would prevail. The actual result of the conference was

a further contribution to genre confusion. In the social drama that came to surround the event we find the narration of a two cheers failed ritual. Kyoto was historic, but it had also been characterized by horse-trading. As the event continued and then ended, the word "bargaining" became used more and more frequently to describe what had happened. From the apocalyptic viewpoint, what might and indeed should have become a moment of ritual transcendence had become simply politics and bureaucracy. Possibilities for disillusioned irony presented themselves to onlooking metanarrators. A contributor to the *South China Morning Post* noted that history could have been made, but instead,

> after 10 days of circular and esoteric arguments about gas trading and forest counting that few understood, and a final dawn-to-dawn session culminating in negotiators nodding off as clauses were passed, history was on few people's minds: all most cared about was when it would all end. (*South China Morning Post* 1997, 10)

Likewise the *Jerusalem Post* contrasted the potential import of the event with its mundane incarnation:

> There are times when the conference itself seems lost in a fog of deceit and uncontrolled verbal emissions. Most parts of the conference are highly technical and conducted in a version of United Nations English few English- speakers, let alone anyone else, can understand. This in itself, rather than the inevitable disagreements, could yet be the meeting's failure... this supposedly vital 10-day conference of more than 160 nations started off infected by the numbing amalgamation of environmental sciences and UN bureaucracy. (*Jerusalem Post* 1997, 8)

Clearly there is a deflation here away from apocalypticism and high-romantic thinking. But to what? In his *Anatomy of Criticism* Northrop Frye (1957) identifies a genre of low mimesis. This involves a representation of the world that is devoid of heroic or supernatural elements and also lacking in comedic and romantic charm. This is the humdrum and uninspiring world of business as usual that Max Weber described as the Iron Cage of modernity. In Kyoto, technocracy and diplomacy, the stock-in-trade of low-mimetic politics, had emerged not only as activities but also as visible symbols that were themselves a clue to the genre at play. They were seen to have fended off ritual fusion and so prevented an emotional climax from emerging. Perhaps this reflected not only the Samuel Beckett–like dynamics of intergovernmental discussions but also the genre fragmentation of this era expressed in the scientific and technical documentation. For example, the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change itself issued a report in 1995 titled "Economic and Social Dimensions of Climate Change." Here we find amazingly little sense of urgency when compared to its more recent written outputs. The report suggests the problem could be dealt with through "a portfolio of actions aimed at mitigation, adaptation and improvement of knowledge" (IPCC 1995, 2) and draws attention to the widespread availability of "no-regrets" measures to deal with much of the problem. These are defined as "measures worth doing anyway" (IPCC 1995, 16) because they reduce energy costs or local pollution levels.

The prevalence of bureaucratic rationality and low-mimetic metanarration at Kyoto did not prevent moral evaluations of action persisting. True enough, the low-mimetic genre had ruled the roost at the event and pricked the apocalyptic balloon. Still the wider melodrama persisted. To start with, pariahs could be identified. Those who avoiding signing the protocols (the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) were widely narrated as mean-spirited free riders. These were incivil actors driven by selfish motivations such as electoral appeal, saving domestic jobs and preserving entrenched and privileged ways of life. Australia, for example, secured permission for an 8 percent increase in its emissions and for continued land clearing in the bush. Its prime minister John Howard spoke proudly of the need to "protect jobs in the coal industry" and to not "sell out Australia's interests in international forums" (quoted in *Canberra Times* 1997, 6). The angry EU environmental spokesman Peter Jorgensen called Australia's Kyoto deal "wrong and immoral . . . a disgrace" (quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald* 1997, 10). Those who signed up, by contrast, such as the members of the European Union, could undergo a status upgrade. No longer simply polluters, these were now ethically aware global citizens who respected the scientific knowledge base and who realized the time had come to go beyond free rider concerns. Furthermore, the apocalypticists insisted that something concrete had been achieved: global warming was recognized as a legitimate problem deserving of workable solutions at the international and transnational levels.

Fertile soils had been prepared for *An Inconvenient Truth* (Guggenheim 2006). This remarkably successful documentary film of the mid-2000s saw the failed politician Al Gore presenting his slide show on the need to take global warming seriously. We explain in the next chapter exactly how this film achieved its effect. For the time being we note that Gore's genius was to channel and amplify the prevailing mood rather than to create it, and furthermore to provide a utopian moment for activist hope. Scientific and technical reports on global warming make for pretty

tedious reading for the general, educated reader. They are larded with caveats, data disputes, and politically correct diplomatic talk that avoids pointing the finger. There are precious few attractive diagrams, no photographs. Warning of catastrophic hurricanes, global flooding that would swamp costal cities, horrific drought and heat, and wars; backing these up with scientific authority of charts and graphs; flashing up pictures of collapsing ice bergs, wilting trees, and flooded cities; tying this together with a sense of pragmatic possibility, Gore's film intensified the moral drama. Furthermore, it allowed Gore – a longtime global warming campaigner – to be reinvented as a self-sacrificing martyr who had transcended politics and who was prepared to swim against the tide. Caring little for public esteem, here was a pragmatic parrhesiast telling it like it was to people who supposedly didn't want to hear his message. As negotiations came into place for a follow-up to Kyoto, pressure intensified for nonbelievers to get out of the church.

Departing from their earlier moderation, scientific reports of this era became increasingly uniform in their genre-elevated storytelling. The 2006 "Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change" was the most influential such document to that date (Great Britain 2006). Commissioned by Tony Blair's British government, this sought to price the costs of action and inaction. After reviewing the available evidence in tremendous detail, Stern opted for a more apocalyptic reading of the dangers. These included threats to the water supply of "one sixth of the world's population," "declining crop yields ... (which) could leave hundreds of millions without the ability to produce or purchase food," and "200 million people ... permanently displaced due to rising sea levels, heavier floods and more intense droughts" (Great Britain 2006, Executive Summary, vi). Stern also conjured the image of mass economic collapse along the lines of the Great Depression and the World Wars.

Around this time, governments and bureaucracies that were perceived to be lukewarm in their commitment to tackling the problem were more strongly and widely vilified as mean spirited and shortsighted. More importantly, they were frequently represented as censors of the truth engaging in undemocratic behavior. Their image could be most easily juxtaposed to the image of the hard working, scrupulous, nonpartisan scientist (a representation that was later to take a severe beating during Climategate for reasons we explain in Chapter 6). Hence, in 2006, James Hansen was concerned about pressure from the Bush administration in discussions of risks and solutions. He attracted attention when he noted that speakers from the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration were followed by "minders": "It seems more like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union than the United States," he told an audience at the New School (in Eilperin 2006). Likewise, the *New York Times* accused the Bush White House of "censorship on global warming" when it edited out material on the risks of global warming from a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency report, leaving only "some pablum about the complexities of the issue and the research that is needed to resolve the uncertainties" (*New York Times* 2003, 22). The drama was expanding to include a full cast of characters. Those struggling for narrative supremacy were themselves caught up in a wider narration of motivation and morality.

Returning to the genre model of risk perception we set out earlier, we can summarize this story. Very broadly speaking, it is one in which apocalyptic readings of threat have become more strongly institutionalized, particularly among governmental policy elites. They increasingly provide the legitimate or authorized genre of public speech and evidentiary interpretation – even if not followed up by convincing policies. Backed by the authority of a growing scientific knowledge base and institutional brokers such as NASA and the UN, these have slowly edged out low-mimetic readings that envisage a cheap technological fix or that endlessly defer the problem solution until we have more information. They insist on urgent action and establish new categories of deviance. By the mid-2000s, resistance to this shift was framed more and more negatively as something other than the product of ignorance or justifiable doubt.

Apocalypticism Contested

In his landmark study *Risk Society*, written somewhat before climate change was at the center of the attention space of ecological anxieties, Ulrich Beck (1992) suggested that environmental dangers and unknown risks will lead to critical awareness and a new and more democratic global order. As we noted when we reviewed this influential book in the previous chapter, Beck claims that, spurred on by ecological uncertainty, citizens will demand more control over production and consumption processes and push for equity. What Beck missed is the way that this newly contested terrain has generated increased critical reflexivity not only over science, progress, and politics but also over public sphere representations of risks themselves. Crucially, he did not seem to be able to envisage that the emergent ensemble of beliefs, norms, solidarities, and activities he both predicts and endorses could itself become the target of such critical

reflexive activity. For example, the very hegemony of the apocalyptic mode allows possibilities for a counterdiscourse. We might think of this as a set of cultural affordances: there are opportunity structures opening up that permit contrarian meaning-motifs and dramatic structures to be taken off the peg. Environmentalists are well aware of the dangers of overreach and of failed prophesy. Their self-critical discourses predict only too well the possibilities for genre confusion as the social drama intensifies into a struggle over representational authority. Yet at the same time, their diffidence compounds the problem. This is a case where the self-imposed regime of two steps forward, one step back leads only to public confusion about the direction of travel.

How does this countercurrent play out? Highly visible skeptics exist who can point to their own "clues" and assemble a different narrative. Media norms requiring a "balanced account" and considering debate and conflict as "newsworthy" provide them with airspace and dramatic influence disproportionate to their numbers. There are qualified scientists here or there who think we are on the wrong track as well as a substantial proportion of the general public who feel the issue has been overblown. Some say global temperature change in recent decades might be due to natural factors. Others claim that global temperatures have flattened out since 1998, yet CO_2 emissions have increased, and that benchmark thermometers at airstrips and in cities are increasingly surrounded by concrete and asphalt leading to heat radiation and heat island effects. Still others claim that natural variations in oceanic circulation may well hold back global warming for decades, this making widely circulating models and predictions hopelessly pessimistic (e.g., Keenlyside 2008; Michaels 2008). The complexity of the climate system makes certainty about the rate and intensity of global warming impossible to attain. The vast majority of nonscientists must simply take what the experts say on trust. That the earth has been hotter in recent centuries – say, the medieval warm period when the Vikings were farming in Greenland – might seem quite relevant to the layperson. When the layperson hears that blizzards are projected to increase in frequency and intensity as a result of overall warming, even highly educated people cannot be blamed for scratching their heads. Such ambivalence about the core science – or at least the possibility for reasonable doubt, and the certainty of confusion – amplifies the importance of a genre selection process involving the leap of interpretative faith that is the genre guess. And even if the human origins of climate change are accepted 100 percent at some future date, this fact still does not tell us how urgent the problem is, nor how much sacrifice we should make to deal with it. Representations filtering information will still play a role in shaping societal responses to ecological information. That is why the social drama matters.

So if the apocalyptic mode is dominant, it is also contested. Narrative struggles are sometimes about data and measures, sometimes about priorities. Genre confusion follows. For example, Bjorn Lomborg (2006) charged that Stern had "cherry-picked" the more severe risks and downside consequences, or underestimated the costs of mitigation, or had imposed an incorrect discounting rate for future costs and benefits of current policy, thus moving him away from more prudent and less costly lines of action. These should include spending relatively small amounts of money in Africa to improve adaptive capacity for the truly disadvantaged. Lomborg's ability to generate genre confusion is well known in activist circles. He is a visible environmentalist and is clearly concerned with social justice. He believes climate change is a real problem, not a hoax. Yet at the same time, he resists genre inflation and intones low-mimetic mantras about cost effectiveness. Confusion could also result from the apparently absurd suggestion that global warming is a good thing. Some claimed the major downside risks we face as a civilization are global cooling and overdue mini ice ages. The climate was unstable and cool spells had wiped out civilizations in the past. In this context the release of carbon dioxide was like insurance against a more serious potential disaster: "it protects us from the unpredictable big freeze that could be far, far worse" (Steel 2002). If we can never live risk-free with a locked-in climate, then our task is to decide which risks we wish to live with. Such arguments are in effect a push for low mimesis grounded in the languages of science and technocracy. That most scientists think they are nonsense is in many ways less relevant than the mere fact that someone, somewhere is making them. What matters is their "truthiness."

Yet efforts at genre shifting need not involve just scientists and their data as they reflect on what Sartre called the practico-inert – that is to say, the material world – and its implications for society. They can also be the work of organic intellectuals speaking to the public sphere about the discursive activity of others. In other words, genre confusion can originate in a complex second-order hermeneutics where players interpret the interpretations and represent the representations. Focusing on the qualities of the words, images, and stories themselves rather than on lower-order "facts," a considerable component of the global warming cultural complex consists of efforts to ironically recast intellectual positions as culturally or ideologically shaped delusions. Hence much of the

drama of climate change is about the struggles of representations and their sponsors rather than the movements of thermometers and ice floes.

We trace this activity throughout our book in a number of spheres. For now we note that apocalypticism, as a cosmological stance, has proven vulnerable to genre deflation making use of realism and irony. Through satire, narrations in the elevated mode can be made out to be alarmist, their sponsors fanatics. A column in Ireland's *Sunday Independent* captures the extrascientific possibilities for critique quite neatly for our purposes. After noting that much science was now attributing global warming to nonhuman factors such as solar activity, the witty and cutting Eilis O'Hanlon (2007) explained that the rush of church leaders to "leap on the environmental bandwagon" was because "apocalypse was always their business." Environmentalists for their part are professional "doom mongers" who are "unable to imagine the future as anything other than famine, disease, war, ecological disaster." Human history had shown our species had the ingenuity to triumph over all adversity, yet "the green Cassandras have us all convinced that our descendants will be back in the caves munching on raw thigh bones before Al Gore can say, 'I told you so.'" We need to "all lighten up and have more optimism about mankind's continued ability to solve problems and make life better." Here environmentalism is cast as a fad or fashion ("bandwagon"), one promoted by irrational, narrow-minded individuals who ignore common sense. More accurate, O'Hanlon ventures, would be a romantic genre guess – this is why we need to "lighten up" and be "optimistic." Observe that O'Hanlon does not dispute the facts. She does not speak of sea ice nor average global temperatures. She does not even dispute at length the anthropogenic hypothesis. She simply speaks to the matter of representations, then juxtaposes these against (a particular representation of) human experience.

In his book *An Appeal to Reason: A Cool Look at Global Warming*, former British Chancellor Nigel Lawson (2008) illustrates a more strident and less waggish mode of critique than O'Hanlon. Symbolically polluting his opponents, Lawson detects a closed "eco-fundamentalism" that had eliminated critical thinking. Particularly scathing of the Stern Report, he dubbed this as alarmist. Consistent with the implicit call for genre deflation that was in his book's title, Lawson suggested we should deal with problems as they came along rather than trying to second-guess what they might be. Steady as she goes, one might say. Al Gore became another magnet for criticism. His portrayal of Hurricane Katrina as caused by global warming was denounced as simplistic, his mention of huge sea level rises without a time frame misleading. According to climate-skeptic scientist Richard Lindzen, this was "shrill alarmism" (Broad 2007).

But there is a stronger critique still lurking, one hinting at a drama about knowledge and human interests. It is one that moves beyond allegations of bandwagonism and closed thinking and that inverts the negative representation we saw earlier of climate change skeptics repressing science. Here apocalypticism is not only a bad genre guess that could be mocked but also a hegemonic and antidemocratic force. Allegations were made that climate change skeptics themselves were not being given a fair hearing, while the most negative scenarios were given excessive airtime. Lawson, for example, spoke of the truth monopoly of the UN's climate change panel. Lindzen (2006) wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* alleging that scientists who failed to follow the creed were having their funding cut. Anthropologist and outspoken climate change skeptic Benny Peiser suggested that widespread representations of scientific consensus on the anthropogenic origins of climate change were misleading. Furthermore, he argued that Wikipedia editors had incorrectly written that he had changed his mind on this point and were refusing to let him edit his entry to reflect his still skeptical views (Newman 2008). The Climategate scandal of 2009 proved to many that leading climate change scientists were doctoring their evidence with statistical trickery and censoring opponents through the peer review process. We have a drama involving nefarious human forces as much as climatic ones.

So where are we now? It would seem that the narration of global warming is taking place at two levels. One is the assembly of clues from science and everyday experience into a narrative that includes agents, causes, and consequences and future projections. This discourse is about the relationship of the human and natural worlds. Here we find what the German thinker Niklas Luhmann (1989) calls "ecological communication" being not only shaped by the binary codes he speaks of but also filtered by genres with their consequent narrations of natural process. Technical information becomes storied, and with this colorful storying it becomes relevant to a wider society. The second level of narration is a metadiscourse over and upon that narration. It asks who is doing the narrating, whether we have the right genre, and whether there are costs and consequences to particular collective representations. At both levels, global warming is the theme at the center of a moral and social drama. This is a story where there are good and bad actors, tragic and unintended consequences to action and inaction, foolish and wise choices to be made. Climate change, then, is a complex and layered social fact, both

material and ideal, where the cultural translation of scientific information lives alongside reflexivity over those very representations. More than just a series of thermometer readings, it is also a reading of thermometers and then, again, a reading of those readings.

So at the time of writing, climate change activism enjoys a curious and hollow victory. The wine glass is half empty. We have seen that the apocalyptic modality stands as the most legitimate form of public discourse. It carries a certain normative force to talk of the planet as being in peril and of a "we" that must do something urgently about this. For example, heads of state routinely speak in this way. Yet the triumph is somewhat shallow. As we have seen, critical voices can also be heard. The resulting genre confusion has arguably prevented concerted action. Hence a substantial minority believe climate change either does not exist or is not a big problem. Climate change advocates are themselves vulnerable to deflationary interpretations of motivation and rationality. More important still, there seems to be a mismatch between discourse and action. Governments tinker around the edges with their energy policies but seem unable or unwilling to engage in any draconian restructuring. Likewise, most individuals who believe climate change is a real problem do surprisingly little to change their lifestyles or engage in collective action. This failure is remarkable when contrasted with other global threats, notably, in response to terrorism, nuclear proliferation, toxins, or virus outbreaks like SARS and swine flu. Indeed, in many American households, defending against these kinds of insidious, invisible threats has become a whole way of life, especially among self-identified environmentalists (Szasz 2009). Here we see what might be understood as a far stronger correlation of speech and action. If affluent Americans spent half as much time and energy on reducing their carbon footprint as they spend on protecting themselves from trans fats or perfectly clean tap water, climate activists would have a reason to cheer.

What are the possibilities for a breakthrough in which climate change becomes a more coherently organized cultural system with more deeply transformative potentials? On the basis of this chapter, it is tempting to suggest that a deeper institutionalization and discursive dominance of the apocalyptic genre would light the fuse. Yet the genre that would seemingly lead to the most decisive intensification of cultural will is also the most problematic and easily contested. The apocalyptic frame is widely fingered for putting off the public. Indeed, bemoaning its chilling influence has become a cliché in both academic and popular discourse about climate change. Headshaking over "scare tactics" and "doomsday scenarios" has become automatic outside environmental circles. Certainly mainstream apocalyptic environmental rhetoric has been toned down since the "eco-catastrophist" heyday of the late 1960s and 1970s, when green Jeremiahs like Paul Ehrlich and the Club of Rome warned of imminent socioecological collapse. Their neo-Malthusian reverie was undermined by the Green Revolution, female education, and miraculous technologies even those savants and polymaths could not begin to envisage – such as the pill and the condom. Yet the temptation to revert to the (arche)type is ever present. After all, writes Lawrence Buell (1995, 285), "apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal." Ecocritics and communications scholars have thoroughly covered this history, and we will not rehash it here (see, in particular, Buell 1995; Foust and O'Shannon 2009; Garrard 2001, 2011; Killingsworth and Palmer 1996; Skrimshire 2010). Suffice it to say the realization has sunk in that the more the apocalyptic card is played, the more it loses value. The genre also has faced critique from critical theory for its abdication of political responsibility. Erik Swyngedouw (2010), for example, asserts that the apocalyptic turn is not merely populist; it also plays into a more general postpolitical condition. By invoking the image that the whole of humanity is threatened, it obfuscates inequality in risk and "forecloses a proper political framing" (219) in which matters of economic redistribution and social trajectory could become issues for debate. Instead, there is a seeking of pragmatic and consensual options that tend to reproduce inertia.

Our principal reservation differs from these and lies in the fact that apocalyptic genre is itself marked by internal genre confusion. The rhetorician Steven O'Leary (1994) provides a very useful framework for understanding this condition. Drawing on Kenneth Burke's (1984) Aristotelian notion of "frames of acceptance," O'Leary shows how tragic and comic frames differ radically in their construction of time and evil:

> The tragic plot conceives of evil in terms of sin or guilt; its mechanism of redemption is victimage, and its plot moves toward the isolation of the evildoer in the "cult of the kill" [cathartic violence]. The comic plot conceives of evil in terms of error, misunderstanding, or ignorance; its mechanism of redemption is recognition, and its plot moves toward exposure of the evildoer's fallibility and his incorporation into society. (200)

Although we do not fully agree with O'Leary's characterization of tragedy (see the previous chapter for what we think is a more nuanced understanding), he makes a good point. When fused with apocalyptic visions

of earthly catastrophe, two paths open up. According to O'Leary, the tragic-apocalyptic mode imagines a temporal horizon "beyond which human choice is superfluous" (84), often in the form of a specific date. In the world of climate change, this function is served by parts per million of atmospheric carbon dioxide, where iconic numbers – 350 ppm, 450 ppm, 500 ppm – serve as symbolic shorthand for the "locus of the irreparable." Here we see ecocatastrophist visions of an anti-Edenic afterworld: James Lovelock's notorious image of humanity's last "breeding pairs" huddled in the Arctic, for example. The comic-apocalyptic mode, conversely, makes "the End contingent upon human choice" and "assign[s] to humanity the task of ushering in the millennium" (84). In a rhetorical analysis of press coverage of climate change, communication scholars Christina R. Foust and William O'Shannon Murphy (2009) convincingly argue that the tragic framing of climate apocalypse is more likely to lead to resignation and paralysis, whereas comic framings create space for collective action and social mobilization. Others have reached similar conclusions (e.g., Hulme 2009, and in the sphere of democratic politics, Jacobs and Smith 1997). What is needed, then, is not only a sense that the world is in peril but also a more romantic sensibility that empowers action and generates solidaristic emotional energy. Call it a postmillennial frame. To stitch together doom and hope, one must first thread a very fine needle.

4

An Inconvenient Truth

The Power of Ethos

In 2006, a London-based liberal think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research, issued a paper arguing that the case for climate change needed to be made more effectively (Ereaut and Segnit 2006). Written by two public relations and marketing specialists, *Warm Words* suggested that the battle for public attention was being lost thanks to mixed messages, contradictory scraps of information, and contending expert opinions in the mass media. Climate change discourse in the United Kingdom was "confusing, contradictory and chaotic" (7). Every argument was met with a counterargument, apocalyptic scenarios were confronted by cheery visions of an emergent British wine industry, and the overall story the public got was that "nobody really knows." It suggested a new strategy was needed by climate change advocacy groups. This would treat "climate-friendly activity as a brand that can be sold" (28). There would be less reference to a top-down "message" from experts and authority sources with the implication of "rational argument." Rather, it urged that "we need to work in a more shrewd and contemporary way, using subtle techniques of engagement" (28). These would include getting the issue onto the "emotional radar" and constructing a myth of "ordinary heroism" in which everyday folk could take on a huge task (8).

It was perhaps imprudent to publish a document, which amounted to an own-goal by activists (we review other clangers in Chapter 6). Critics pounced on it as evidence that the climate change camp is characterized by patronizing and sneaky spin doctors who wish to replace an ongoing rational debate with insidious and patronizing propaganda. The pain of the self-inflicted wound was redoubled by the fact that there was no need to publish. Although far more respectful of science and of the need for

debate than *Warm Words*, by the time of the cultural strategy document's appearance, Al Gore's efforts to get climate change taken seriously had already made use of myth, emotion, and those "subtle techniques of engagement."

It is generally agreed that the 2006 film *An Inconvenient Truth* featuring Al Gore and directed by Davis Guggenheim (2006) was a pivotal moment in the history of global warming discourse. Put simply, the bulk of the film consists of extracts from Gore's well-rehearsed auditorium presentation warning of the dangers of climate change. This core is intercut with scenes shot elsewhere. Here Gore talks to camera about his biography and motivation. Such personal themes also appear briefly from time to time in his slide show as asides during the presentation of scientific information. *An Inconvenient Truth* did more than bring attention to an ongoing issue; it persuaded many that the problem of climate change was (1) real, (2) urgent, and (3) solvable. So we might reasonably understand *An Inconvenient Truth* as an effective intervention, production, gesture, or performance. Just how was this impact achieved? We argue here that Aristotle's insights in his *Rhetoric* provide many of the answers. It is so obvious that it can escape observation that this is a film in which one man makes a case to an audience using powers of persuasion. This is a classical scenario with which Aristotle would have been very familiar. He would no doubt have concluded, as we do, that the upshot is a compelling demonstration that *logos* is subordinate to *ethos*. This film is in fact a study of the power of character.

The success of *An Inconvenient Truth* was remarkable and somewhat unexpected, even for its backers. At the Sundance Film Festival release, the producer Laurie David confidently predicted that "none of us are going to make a dime" (quoted in Booth 2006). The prognosis was not unreasonable. In the year 2006, Gore was widely typecast as a political has-been, a man noted by many for blowing his one and only chance to be U.S. president in 2000 when he was narrowly defeated by George W. Bush. After being a sore loser who could not concede defeat with grace, he dropped off the radar. Some Democrats saw things differently. For them Gore was a talented individual who had actually won the popular vote. He had been cheated of the presidency by legal shenanigans and a dubious and partisan Supreme Court ruling that had prematurely halted efforts at a transparent recount (see Dershowitz 2001). Yet even for this group, Gore was a figure of the past at the time of the film's release. They were looking elsewhere for their next intellectually gifted president and were to find him soon thereafter in Barack Obama.

So much for the fading star. As for the film itself, this was a reasonably low-budget documentary lasting ninety-four minutes. As the failed politician thumped his tub, he put up slides showing maps of soil evaporation and cross sections of ice cores. Why would anyone want to watch this? But watch it they did. The film took around $50 million at the box office. It won the Academy Award for best documentary as well as numerous other awards globally. A companion book by Gore reached number one on the American best-seller lists. La Scala, Milan, commissioned an opera based on the film. In 2007 Gore was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on climate change. The Prize Committee singled him out as the "single individual who has done the most" to generate understanding of the issues. Speculation was soon widespread that Gore would make another run for president.

Other films on global warming have fared poorly by comparison. When an anti–global warming film titled *The Great Global Warming Swindle* (Durkin 2007) was aired on television in the United Kingdom, it generated little interest or controversy, even though it offered a provocative account of a "global warming industry" with a vested interest in fueling alarmism. It saw only a DVD release. One might reasonably have expected this film to become iconic for its latent audience of skeptics and conservatives. It did not. There was also the Discovery Channel documentary *Global Warming: What You Need to Know* (Brown 2006). From the same year as *An Inconvenient Truth*, this was hosted by the avuncular news anchor Tom Brokaw. As we would expect from a Discovery Channel production, this featured high-quality reportage and footage from around the world. The stories presented were said to illustrate the impact of global warming: dying coral reefs in Australia, retreating glaciers in Montana, and so forth. Who remembers this? As for climate maverick Bjorn Lomborg's documentary feature *Cool It* (Timoner 2010), this disappeared almost without a trace beyond the blogosphere, despite its progenitor's basic performative competence and his well-thumbed Rolodex of media contacts.

So how do we explain the extraordinary and unanticipated triumph of *An Inconvenient Truth*? One might think that as a "documentary," *An Inconvenient Truth* has impact because of its use of reason and evidence, its *logos*. On this score, most scientists praised Gore for getting the big picture right, although he was taken to task for mistakes on points of detail and for alarmist tendencies. Others questioned whether there really was the scientific consensus that he depicted (Broad 2007). The evaluation of evidence, however, is not the real game in town here, and we can put

this debate aside. The power of the film and the talk lies elsewhere. Gore, remember, did not simply persuade. He got a large number of people interested in a problem in a seemingly effortless way. How? Because Gore and Guggenheim enacted the Aristotelian recipe for effective public speaking. Remember what Aristotle wrote in the *Rhetoric*:

> We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. . . . His character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. (1.2.1356a)

It is the combination of these dimensions, the performative fusion of *logos* with *pathos* and *ethos*, that explains why audiences would spontaneously stand and applaud after screenings. Let's explore this further.

We have already noted that Gore's presidential run in 2000 had ended in bitter failure. It had also cemented a particular understanding of Gore that had been growing in the 1990s. There was a perception of "a stolid, capable Vice-President" who was also "a wild exaggerator, ideological chameleon, and total, unforgivable bore." Gore's "monochromatic reputation" as a man without passion included a persona as a "computer nerd." He was one of the "Atari Democrats" who had overhyped the Internet before the dot.com crash of 2000 (Klein 2006). Polls had long reported him as the most boring person in America, with pundits speaking of his near-complete inability to energize crowds (Merinda 1999). Worse than being as soporific as Mr. McGregor's lettuce, Gore had famously insinuated that he had invented the Web itself. Here was a boastful know-it-all who could alienate listeners merely by displaying his formidable historical and scientific erudition. The loss to George W. Bush was often ascribed to the "beer buddy syndrome" (Shapiro 2008) – most voters would prefer to have a hypothetical backyard barbeque with the more genuine and nonelitist Texan than with the wooden, pompous, and overly rehearsed vice president.

The single most important feature of *An Inconvenient Truth* is that it recast Gore, in effect showing a person the public did not really know existed. Viewers at the Sundance Film Festival were amazed to see a Gore who was amusing and entertaining. As the website Real Climate enthused at the time, "this isn't the 'wooden' Gore of the 2000 campaign" (Steig 2006). But there is a little more to it than just being lively and energetic. The conventions of film as a commercial format and as a viewing experience led to a necessary intensification of his personal dimension above and beyond the snippets and asides that Gore already had in his slide show. Gore explained in an interview that the biographical sections of the movie were not his own idea but rather that of director Davis Guggenheim:

> [Guggenheim] said that one of the huge differences between a live stage performance and a movie is that when you're in the same room with a live person who's on stage speaking – even if it's me [laughs] – there's an element of dramatic tension and human connection that keeps your attention. And in a movie, that element is just not present.
>
> He explained to me that you have to create that element on screen, by supplying a narrative thread that allows the audience to make a connection with one or more characters. He said, "You've got to be that character." (Roberts 2006)

Guggenheim himself noted elsewhere that global warming was too big and abstract for people to connect to (we disagree; see Chapter 1). He hoped that "if I could tell Al's story in the movie, that perhaps, if we learned about him and learned how he became so invested, then maybe we would too." Interestingly, Guggenheim did not look at other environmental films but rather struck on this strategy by "instinct" (Steffen 2006). Being an outsider to Discovery Channel conventions turned out to be a blessing, for intersubjective identification starts to emerge with this extra, and to some extent off-topic, biographical material. Cinematically, the centrality of Gore-the-protagonist allows *An Inconvenient Truth* to key to some of the key conventions of Hollywood realism and so to become understandable or familiar to the audience. In realist cinema (as opposed, for example, to experimental film), events are generally driven forward in a logical sequence by characters armed with consistent internal motivations acting in more or less predictable ways. Audiences can comprehend what is taking place because they are aware of the reasons for action, perhaps looking back on clues in the early narrative of the film to come to terms with later outcomes and choices. Placing the slide show in the wider biographical context offers a way to answer the otherwise problematic question that would hang over the film: why is he doing this? In *An Inconvenient Truth*, the character-driven story of personal motivations is one that appears intermittently. There is something of a tease going on. The full answer, one that combines duty, hope, and tragedy, is revealed only by the end of the film. The thrust of the cumulative character disclosures is to achieve leveling and yet, paradoxically, also to affirm Gore's status as a privileged interpreter. He is one of us and yet also somehow a chosen one who is above us. As Northrop Frye (1957) pointed out, this kind of actor, who is subject to the laws of nature (unlike the mythical hero) and yet superior to the rest of us, is

to be found in the high-mimetic genres of a heroic tenor, notably in romance.

What is curious is that Gore's persona becomes elevated in this way thanks to displays of affability and modesty, which project honesty and humility. This is a character who levels himself down. A crucial moment comes at the beginning of the film. Gore introduces himself to his audience: "I used to be known as the next president of the United States. . . . I don't find that particularly funny." The structural similarity of his global warming talk to a presidential stump speech offers a foundation for this self-deprecating irony. No longer a contender for high office, the failed Gore now has a reduced status, and he admits it. He implicitly admits to having been hurt by the experience of failure. It is tempting to interpret the success of this play in terms of a contemporary pattern in celebrity culture. This is to reboot a failing career by admitting to emotional trauma, humiliation, or victimhood – say, sexual abuse as a child, or drug or alcohol dependency. True enough, audiences today are often attracted to celebrities who are flawed or who have faced defeat. Yet we would insist here on the classical foundations of this rhetorical move. To present oneself as challenged and perhaps as not worthy of an occasion or task, even when possessing great talent, was a standard feature of ceremonial and political oratory in antiquity. It is found, for example, in that most celebrated of all examples, the Funeral Oration of Pericles. He says, "I wish that the reputations of so many brave men were not to be imperiled in the mouth of a single individual, to stand or fall according as he spoke well or ill," before going on to give the greatest speech in history. It is present too in its leading clone/competitor, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, where the president laments, "We cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here."

The leveling theme continues throughout in the many sections where Gore reveals his past. These are shot away from the lecture. Talks to camera are characterized by technical and aesthetic devices that decrease audience distance and suggest informality and authenticity. Gore is sitting in a car or in a barn or on a plane. He looks a little hot and is not wearing a suit. It turns out that Guggenheim and the film production process were again instrumental. Gore later said he was fatigued by a barrage of questions from Guggenheim and became "so exhausted that I didn't care what I said anymore" (quoted in Roberts 2006). The footage is somewhat low grade, perhaps 16mm or camcorder. The camera work is somewhat rough and ready. There is almost no dolly work, panning or zooming, or excess lighting; there is no music. We might think that high fidelity in representation is the bearer of authenticity. Yet often the reverse is the case. In film, low production values have long been associated with truthfulness and witnessing. One thinks of Roberto Rossellini's Italian neorealism in *Roma, Città Aperta* (Rome Open City) (Rossellini 1945), for example, which made use of nonactors, unlit, bombed out street settings, and scavenged, somewhat degraded film stock. One thinks too of the handheld video camera footage from 9/11. For all the talk of the 9/11 attacks being "just like" a special effects sequence in a Hollywood film, viewers could see that the visual surface was in fact very different. The witnessed reality of the events was anchored in the camcorder aesthetics of their representation. The lesson was reinforced with the 2004 Asian Tsunami, an event for which there is no professional footage. We can note also that Guggenheim's location sequences make use of long takes, depth focus, and minimal editing. Each of these characteristics is a feature endorsed by film theorist André Bazin (1967) in his seminal analysis of realism. For Bazin, this representational mode is austere and inherently democratic. It hands over power to viewers. Leveling again.

An Inconvenient Truth skillfully evades mention of Gore's birth into a political dynasty, his privileged upbringing in elite schools and at Harvard – items of information that might have undercut leveling. Instead, as the film unfolds its account of motivation and biography, we discover early on that as a student, Gore was influenced by the pioneering and prescient work of the earth scientist Roger Revelle. He was a man who had predicted and tracked growing levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Gore remembers:

> Like a lot of young people, I came into contact with intellectual ferment, ideas that I'd never considered in my wildest dreams before. He showed our class the result of these measurements [of CO_2] after only a few years. It was startling to me. He was startled and he made it clear to our class what he felt the significance of it was. I soaked it up like a sponge. He drew the connection between the larger changes in our civilization and this pattern that was now visible in the atmosphere of the entire planet.

He returns to the formative experience again at the end of the film:

> There is nothing unusual about what I'm doing. What is unusual is that I had the privilege to be shown it as a young man. It is almost as if a window opened through which the future was very clearly visible.

Now mythopoetics sneakily joins the Aristotelian orator's tool kit. Here we have the classical myth template of early initiation into great mysteries, the sense of calling and an understanding even then that the future of the globe was at stake. At the same time, we have a denial of personal talent. Next we have a litany of failure. Profane worldly forces thwart Gore's uncontaminated ecological vision. These failures can also be understood mythopoetically. They are functional equivalents to the trial or ordeal that tests the resolve of the carrier of a mission, be the carrier Jesus or Hercules.

> When I went to the Congress in the middle 1970s I helped organize the first hearings on global warming.... I thought that would have such a big impact we'd be well on the way to solving this problem, but it didn't work out that way.
> I actually thought and believed that the story would be compelling enough to cause a real sea change in the way Congress reacted.... I thought they would be startled and they weren't.

In the world of traditional myth the hero meets and defeats serial challenges. Gore, by contrast, is a failure. Here we have a brilliant coup. By failing, he is a person we can pity (leveling again) and recognize in our culture of confession. Yet, by rising above failure, he becomes also a person we can admire. When Congress shrugged off his message, this simply led to an existential crisis followed by renewed resolve: "It just turned my whole world around. How should I spend my time on this Earth?" Even the presidential election defeat might have been ordained. It "brought into clear focus the mission I had been pursuing all these years. I started giving the slide show again."

From each challenge Gore had emerged stronger and with a clearer ethical vision. The bearer of bad tidings, his job had become clear. It was to tell an "inconvenient truth" without worrying about the personal consequences. The mission is followed against the odds.

Cutting against the narrative of Gore the battler and loser is another story that works almost subliminally. This is of Gore the achiever. There is fleeting reference to high-status institutions. The social theorist Edward Shils (1975) argued that there was a "sacred center" to American society consisting of core geographical locations and symbols. These were carriers of a certain charisma. Furthermore, charismatic status could arise by contagion through contact with them. We find Congress, the Senate, the White House, and the presidential election are all mentioned en passant as Gore speaks of his long-standing efforts to get global warming on the political table. Furthermore, we have the backdrop of the family farm as Gore talks to camera. Implicitly, Gore looks at once like part of the center and as an everyman from the periphery.

Mythopoetics helps us to understand the structure of the life narrative that Gore presents and the way that this might appeal to audience sympathies. It also does something else, however, which is to underwrite the truth of his words. We must remember that Gore is situated in a particular rhetorical context vis-à-vis his audience – the one that Aristotle identified as that of "political oratory." He is a person trying to persuade those to whom he is talking about the best course of future action. In so doing, Gore comes to assume or inhabit or speak from the classical position of the parrhesiast (on a closely related character type with an important role in the social drama of climate change, the "whistleblower," see Hamblyn 2009). In the world of social theory we have become familiar with this term thanks to the work of the French thinker Michel Foucault (1983). During his last years and in his final lectures at Berkeley and the College de France he came to see parrhesia as an important resource for the autonomous ethical subject. The parrhesiast can be identified through a number of characteristics. Emerging in the culture of the ancient Greeks, and in particular in the plays of Euripides, this figure is a person who speaks truth to power. Driven by internal psychological forces, they see this truth-telling as a duty or obligation. Often they speak at some risk to themselves from endangering or enraging their interlocutor or the wider community with an unpopular message. The bringer of bad tidings from battle is one kind of parrhesiast. Importantly, the parrhesiast tries to avoid rhetorical tricks. They speak "naturally" and as if the facts of a matter should be allowed to settle the case without the intervention of poetic phrase and emotion. Yet paradoxically from our contemporary perspective, the truth of the parrhesiasts' speech is underwritten by their moral being, not their *logos*. As Foucault (1983) puts it:

> When someone has certain moral qualities, then that is the proof that he has access to truth – and vice-versa. The "parrhesiastic game" presupposes that the parrhesiastes is someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and secondly, to convey such truth to others. (3)

Courage is the most important of these qualities. To access the subject position of the parrhesiast, something has to be seen to be at stake: perhaps one's life, but also the loss of esteem, friendship, or popularity. Looking just at the title of *An Inconvenient Truth* should be enough to convince that parrhesia is being cited – he is telling us what we don't want to hear. We might hate or mock Al Gore even more than we did after he

lost the 2000 election. Courage also has another dimension. According to Foucault, the courage involved is not only in telling the truth to others but also in being able to challenge and question the self, or put another way, to disclose to oneself the truth about oneself through a kind of ascetic discipline and rigorous self-interrogation. Often cited here are the bodily and mental techniques used to cultivate parrhesia by adepts, most often Stoics such as Epictetus, Seneca, or Marcus Aurelius but also some of the Cynics. There is a requirement for relentless self-scrutiny and self-questioning and the need to develop the capacity for endurance and perseverance. Never complacent, the parrhesiast struggles incessantly to separate fact from value, interpretation from what is impressed on the senses involuntarily as brute fact.

According to Foucault, it was an ongoing and practical problem for the Greeks to recognize truth-telling. We might understand the cultural template of the parrhesiast as a set of practical guidelines or instructions for identifying such a person. It is a template that has endured into this day, one that Al Gore and director Davis Guggenheim use citationally to construct a recognizable subject position from which he can speak. The biographical interludes offer up a portrait of endurance, of interior struggle and rigorous self-reflection, of a man telling us the message that we don't want to hear – a portrait of the parrhesiast.

Of course, there are limits to this parrhesiast subject position. For the parrhesiast game, the truth of an utterance is strongly bound up in the character of the speaker. Gore takes a bet each way by also supporting a more positivist discourse in which the self is partially effaced. In the norms of science, the question of who is speaking is rigorously separated out from the truth of what they say. Obviously, this norm does not always hold, as we see in the discussion of Climategate in Chapter 6. However, there is an obligation to "perform" invisibility and deference to objective realities. For this reason, Gore tries to show facts speaking: glaciers are retreating, the hottest years on record are all recent, CO_2 levels are increasing in the atmosphere, and so forth. He speaks of the consensus in the scientific community, in a way distancing his own personal identity from the truth of his utterances.

The parrhesiast moment is also compromised by the specifically prophetic qualities of Gore. As Max Weber (1967) showed long ago in his brilliant analysis of Judaism in biblical texts, the prophet has certain identifiable traits. These are liminal individuals who are part of society and yet outside of society. They spend a period of time in the wilderness. They answer to a higher and sacred calling rather than to worldly masters. They tell people of the error of their ways, identify sinful behaviors, allocate blame, and call in a more hopeful way for spiritual purification and renewal. Earlier we saw Gore receiving a direct revelation of the truth of global warming. It was as if a window had been opened on the future. We also know he has been a wilderness figure. By analogy, the prophetic mode is an easy fit. And so it is that we find Gore speaking as follows (the words in italics are markers of the prophetic voice):

We are still by far the worse contributor to the crisis. I look around and look for *really meaningful signs* that we are about *to really change*. I don't see it right now.

There can be a *day of reckoning* when you wished you had connected the dots more quickly.

It is *our time to rise again* to procure our future.

Each one of us is a cause of global warming, but *each one of us can make choices to change*.

I have faith that pretty soon *enough minds are changed* that we *cross a threshold*.

Although the concept of parrhesia is not in common use, that of the prophet is part of the familiar lexicon. To underscore our analysis, we might note the extreme frequency with which the term is applied to Gore. In newspaper headlines and captions, for example, Gore is often dubbed a "Global Warming Prophet" or "Climate Change Prophet" when alternatives are available, such as "activist" or "campaigner." Gore is also happy to play up to the role when required. For example, at the New Baptist Covenant Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, Gore was introduced as a "Baptist Prophet" and presented with a green Bible at a special session titled "Stewardship of the Earth" (Roach 2008). Gore's subsequent speech was larded with the prophetic mode of oration ("The signal is on the mountain. The trumpet has blown") and biblical quotations, a performance suggesting that for him this is a familiar cultural template that he has adapted to more secular uses.

In a way, then, we might think of the Al Gore we discover as a hybrid character. He is a failure and an everyman, a mythopoetic hero and a parrhesiast, a prophet. The genius of the film is to construct all of this from just a few minutes of material.

An Inconvenient Truth is a ninety-four-minute film. We believe that most of the heavy lifting for persuasion belongs to about ten of them. Now subtract the credits. What of those remaining eighty minutes? These are less important, but it is useful to quickly review some other features that made for an effective act of communication.

Images

Lectures are often boring. As Davis Guggenheim realized, filmed lectures are even worse. This explains why much vaunted university initiatives with distance learning and remote audiovisual hookups run into problems. Who wants to watch a person behind a podium on television? An effective advantage of *An Inconvenient Truth* is its ability to retain interest through frequent visual switching taking place on top of a monologue that offers continuity. As Gore speaks on any given topic, we are offered long-range, middle-range, and close-up images of Gore. There is also the option to abandon Gore and simply show the slides, again with the talking beneath. A sense of movement and dynamism results from the rapid shifting between these four options. It is enhanced by the possibility of a slow zoom from the back to the front of the auditorium.

Turning to the images, although Gore modestly suggests the film is being made of his "slide show," there is much more to it than that. He uses a range of techniques, including stills, videos, and animations. These subtly shift and mix so as to illustrate or dramatize claims Gore is making as he lectures, often with accompanying voice-over or sound. This sophisticated melange, which moves well beyond the standard PowerPoint presentation, was in fact the product of a makeover by a professional organization, Duarte Design, which often works for major corporations and nonprofits to jazz up the company presidents' keynotes or assist with product launches and campaigns. In 2004 Gore in effect gave them his slides, many dating back to the 1970s, and asked for a refresh. The slick presentation we see, then, is the result of considerable expert work at incorporating narrative with visuals (Quinn 2008).

Many of the most striking still images offer pictures of apocalyptic disorder. Global warming is associated with Dali-esque melting icebergs, crazily tilting trees, and freak storms. These operate at the level of connotation to situate climate change as the bringer, not of civilization (vineyards and beach time), but rather of the unpredictable, bizarre, and catastrophic. It is something about which we might feel anxious and that, in a gothic move, is making nature itself "unnatural." Thanks to human interference, nature is turning against itself in perverse ways. Other presentational features are also important. One is the barrage of these images. Somehow audiences never felt overloaded by the amazing 266 slides Gore uses in his presentation. Looking closely at the images, we find that many are weak in terms of cognitive content. They are primarily illustrative in their functions. Graphs and maps are in the minority.

The rapid succession of illustrative slides suggests the ubiquity of global warming processes and visible evidence. Furthermore, it allows the tempo of the documentary presentation to be speeded up in the manner of an Eisenstein montage. The rhythmic properties of such activity mimic those of ritual, bringing about a sort of entrainment. The technique of redundancy is also relevant here. For example, multiple pictures of melting glaciers are popped on screen in quick succession. Each image is slightly different from the others, yet each time the same point is drilled home – the pictures form a set, but each individual image can be approached with the same narrative as explicandum. Repetition gives a sense of scale and ubiquity, but each image becomes poignant through its particularity. It is not just the case that glaciers are melting but also that this or that particular glacier is doomed. Finally, we note that because the images are mostly free of text, such as the bullets we find in typical PowerPoint presentations, Gore is able to slip rapidly from one to the next without having to wait for the audience to complete the task of reading or interpreting. The use of a remote allows Gore to move around, to get away from the podium and connect with his audience. He appears relaxed and familiar with the material. He chats rather than lectures. He does not rely on a written text but, having delivered the talk hundreds of times, has the lecture hardwired in his brain (Paradi 2009).

The brief animations Gore offers play with emotions – or, better put, conjure them into being. This is most obviously the case with the low-tech animation of the polar bear swimming in search of solid ice, faced with the prospect of drowning. Gore's other images are generally of inanimate objects and landscapes. They generate feelings such as surprise and anxiety and, perhaps when he speaks of flooding and hurricanes, low-level fear. Yet the bear allows for significant intersubjective projection and identification with suffering. As one of the handful of species that have been described as charismatic megafauna, the bear is enabled to be the carrier of *pathos*. This possibility, needless to say, is founded on cultural shifts that have seen sentimental and anthropomorphic views of wildlife becoming widespread. The terrifying Darwinian polar bear – one of the few creatures to stalk humans – is nowhere to be seen.

Audience Subject Positions

An important way in which culture can work is to allocate subject positions or identities to individuals. We have already seen how Al Gore made use of this potential to situate himself. What of his audience? In

his discussions on ideology the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (1971) famously noted that subjects are "interpellated" by language. This means that they are called out or named by others and so able to identify themselves in terms of a repertoire of roles and social locations. Aristotle made much the same point when he spoke of *thymos* – which in Greek means "life," "heart," "spirit," and "courage" (Olmsted 2006, 13), and which we discuss in greater depth in Chapter 5 as the emotional basis of civil solidarity – and of *ethos* as products of the communicative process.

We find that *An Inconvenient Truth* works in subtle ways to shape subjectivities such that believing becomes a logical and ethical consequence of understanding. A major problem for Gore, as for all global warming activists, is to explain why certain people deny the problem. After all, if the evidence is really as clear as they say it is, then only a fool would be in denial. Yet to call people foolish violates a key rule of Aristotelian rhetoric, which is to respect the adversary. To attack an adversary is to generate negative sentiment. This in turn reflects back on the character of the speaker and erodes *thymos*, or collective spirit.

To get around this problem, Gore makes use of analogy – a technique Aristotle recommended as an oblique and yet colorful mode of persuasion. Backed by another somewhat cute animation, he explains that a frog placed in boiling water will jump out. A frog placed in cold water that is slowly heated will cook to death. Importantly, we do not see the frog boiling. It jumps out of the water, there is no harm done. Yet the implicit argument remains that those who deny global warming are somewhat like that frog. They are not evil, simply insufficiently attentive to small signs and gradual change. Thanks to this analogy, the audience to his talk is offered a hidden incentive to believe. It can enjoy an epistemological advantage over skeptics.

Conversion experiences also permit analogy. In one confessional Gore tells us that coming from the South, his family had grown tobacco even after the dangers were widely known from the Surgeon General's Report of 1964. Then his elder sister, a heavy smoker, had died of lung cancer. His father decided to stop growing tobacco: "whatever explanation that seemed to make sense in the past, just didn't cut it anymore." Put another way, there had been a wake-up call to ethical responsibility and an admission of guilt. Another analogy is to history:

> There was another storm in the 1930s of a different kind, a horrible unprecedented storm in Continental Europe. Winston Churchill warned the people of England that it was different from anything that had ever happened before, and they had to get ready for it. A lot of people did not want to believe it.

Both these analogies have emotive content relating to death and sacrifice. The resulting *pathos* creates a sense of an ethical rather than simply scientific issue. What is also happening here is a skillful deployment of what Aristotle called the *enthymeme* to lead from premise to consequence. The root of *enthymeme* is *thymos*. Unlike syllogism, which simply leads to a logical conclusion, enthymeme goes "into the heart" of an audience (Olmsted 2006, 13). It works best when making use of shared knowledge and common sense rather than through logical steps being spelled out laboriously. Aristotle writes:

> Thus we must not carry its reasoning too far back, or the length of our argument will cause obscurity: nor must we put in all the steps that lead to our conclusion, or we shall waste words in saying what is manifest. (*Rhetoric*, 2.22.1395b)

So Gore leaves it to the listener to join the dots. There is an implicit or hidden induction (*logos*) relating, not to the truth of the dangers of climate change (which is by this point in the film assumed), but rather to the necessity for ethical action. The analogy first indicates that a known or agreed-upon attribute exists in one situation and in another. The transmission of another, more controversial attribute is underwritten by this shared property. As we move through the enthymeme, the statements become more controversial. Anchoring to the original statement allows an inferential sequence to be drawn:

A: The scientific evidence on tobacco harm was strong and not facing up to this was wrong. (Consensus statement to get us started.)

B: The scientific evidence on global warming is a lot like that on tobacco. (Common property asserted. Consensus less certain, but agreement is assumed by this point in the film.)

C: We must stop being in denial and take immediate steps to stop global warming, just as Gore's family did for tobacco. (This is the more controversial and painful consequence.)

And,

A: Denying the evil and danger of Hitler's Germany in the 1930s was foolish.

B: The dangers of climate change are similar to those of Hitler's Germany.

C: Denying the danger of climate change is foolish. Disaster will strike if we are complacent and do not act now.

The power of the technique comes from this ability to combine commonsense, logical inference with the less fully rational symbolic resonance that comes from invoking symbols of evil (Hitler, tobacco) in the course of making an argument. Having made the subject positions for climate change denial uncomfortable (appeaser, tobacco profiteer, frog), Gore sets out a positive identity for the believers. This revolves around themes of common humanity, civilizational achievement, and shared vulnerability. This is anticipated very early in the film when Gore shows a noted picture of the earth taken on the Apollo moon missions. Later he shows a space panorama taken from the Galileo probe in deep space.

GORE: You see that pale, blue dot? That's us. Everything that has ever happened in all of human history, has happened on that pixel. All the triumphs and all the tragedies, all the wars all the famines, all the major advances – it's our only home. And that is what is at stake, our ability to live on planet Earth, to have a future as a civilization. I believe this is a moral issue, it is your time to seize this issue, it is our time to rise again to secure our future.

Let's analyze this. Set against the image we have the conjuring of an apocalyptic scenario (the "ability to live on planet Earth"), a sense of common identity ("our only home"), the translation from fact to value ("a moral issue"), and the emergence of a heroic and enabling subject position ("its our time to rise again"). So as the slide show concludes, Gore offers an uplifting identity for his audience. In contrast to the doom-laden vision he has spent much of the film setting out, he now explains how the problem is fixable. The light at the end of the tunnel involves some political will, some popular pressure, some small sacrifices, and some bold decisions. Many of these will involve increasing the self-restraint and reflexivity of individuals in line with a long-term ecocivilizing process (Rohloff 2011). But there is also a transcendent moment. Gore uses the terms "we" and "us" to generate a sense of collective identity and common purpose. He asks, "Are we as Americans capable of doing great things even though they are difficult? Are we capable of rising above ourselves and above history?" There follows a litany of noncontroversial American triumphs akin to those of the American civil religion that Robert Bellah (1979) has written about: founding a new nation, abolishing slavery, ending segregation and communism alike. Here we see the narrative of the "everyman hero" emerging, the very one urged by the maligned *Warm Words* with which we started this chapter.

Looking closely at *An Inconvenient Truth* provides useful lessons in how culture works when it comes to the consciousness of a "risk society." As Ulrich Beck used it, this term stands as a gloss for a generic set of dispositions, knowledge sensitivities, and anxieties that are scattered throughout a population. This risk awareness is largely the result of a cognitive process of information retrieval, even if that information can sometimes do little more than suggest that "we don't really know" how dangerous something is. The case of Al Gore and the film we have considered in this chapter suggests that something different is going on. Distributed scientific information on dangers plays an incomplete or partial role in this process. As the climate change scientists themselves complain, growing consensus in the science community is only weakly matched by changing public opinion. Sometimes remarkable performative gestures are required for "facts" about "risks" to have meaning or impact outside the academe. Furthermore, our analysis of this one gesture uncovered a surprisingly complex layering of image, narrative, and identity formation – a layering that is unlikely to be decoded by laypeople as they are caught up in watching the film the first time through. We had the luxury of a transcript, the ability to watch the movie multiple times, and the assistance of luminaries such as Aristotle and Foucault. All things considered, we have a film whose power comes from the mobilization of character. This is a triumph of Gore's *ethos*, albeit with some help from other textual and visual elements. This flight from *logos* is a little sneaky given the movie's "documentary" tag. It is also an irony because science has always valued transparency in method. It also tells us that the facts should speak for themselves. If the rules of that game have to be abandoned to get a message over about those facts themselves, this is an irony. We might also say it's an inconvenient truth.