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Filmmaker Seeks to Temper the Message of ‘An Inconvenient Truth’

By MICHAEL CIEPLY

LOS ANGELES — At the Sundance Film Festival four years ago, the global-warming debate took center stage with the premiere of an alarming work, the director Davis Guggenheim’s documentary “An Inconvenient Truth.”

This year Ondi Timoner, a judge in the festival’s United States documentaries competition — in which Mr. Guggenheim’s “Waiting for Superman,” about the failures of public education, is an entry — is taking a break from a directing project of her own. Titled “Cool It,” Ms. Timoner’s partly completed film, based on the work of the environmental writer Bjorn Lomborg, aims to quiet the global-warming alarm bells that Mr. Guggenheim and his narrator, Al Gore, set ringing.

The documentary world, rife with impassioned advocacy, may now be poised for some genuine debate.

By and large, the most prominent issues-oriented documentaries have leaned left, as filmmakers like Michael Moore (“Capitalism: A Love Story”), Alex Gibney (“Taxi to the Dark Side”) and Eugene Jarecki (“Why We Fight”) lined up behind progressive causes and points of view.

“Historically, yes, that’s the voice,” said Deirdre Haj, who was recently named the executive director of Full Frame, an annual festival in Durham, N.C., devoted to documentaries.

But if “Cool It” is now threatening to complicate the picture with an alternative and perhaps more conservative viewpoint, the festival circuit should ultimately embrace films like it, Ms. Haj said. That assumes that they are as effective, for instance, as Ms. Timoner’s past documentary work, including “Dig!,” about the Dandy Warhols and the Brian Jonestown Massacre, and “We Live in Public,” about the Internet’s impact on human interaction. Both films won major awards at Sundance.

“We should own that dialogue,” Ms. Haj said.

Alice Zou, a publicist for Mr. Guggenheim, said this week that he was not available to discuss Ms. Timoner’s involvement with Mr. Lomborg on a film that challenges his own, or to say whether he thought she could judge “Waiting for Superman” fairly. In the festival’s first major deal, “Superman” was acquired this week by Paramount Vantage, which distributed “An Inconvenient Truth.”

Ms. Timoner, about to leave Los Angeles for Park City, Utah, where the Sundance festival takes place, said she was a fan of Mr. Guggenheim's work, and looked forward to his new film. "I hear it's wonderful," she said.

"Cool It," Ms. Timoner said, was intended not so much to correct "An Inconvenient Truth," which raises the specter of devastation caused by climate change, as to temper its message with an appeal for practical solutions. Mr. Guggenheim's climate film left in its wake "a certain amount of hysteria that is not realistic," Ms. Timoner said.

That a Sundance award winner is making a movie that questions core assumptions of a festival hit — "An Inconvenient Truth" went on to win an Oscar for best documentary feature, and took in \$50 million at the worldwide box office — is partly the work of Terry Botwick and Ralph Winter.

The two are partners in a production company, 1019 Pictures, that is named for the longtime Beverly Hills street address of Mr. Botwick's mother-in-law, the singer Rosemary Clooney.

Mr. Botwick has a history in television production, including years as a programming executive for the Family Channel. Mr. Winter, with a background in film production, made his mark as a producer of the "X-Men" films, including "X-Men Origins: Wolverine." He is also a producer of religious-theme films like "Left Behind: The Movie," which starred Kirk Cameron, and has served as a mentor for aspiring Christian screenwriters.

After encountering Mr. Lomborg at a Los Angeles lecture in 2008, Mr. Botwick persuaded Mr. Winter to join him in producing a documentary that would advance that environmental writer's message.

Mr. Lomborg has opposed demands for what he calls devastatingly expensive reductions in carbon emissions. He has also advocated an array of engineering feats and technological fixes to hedge against problems like rising sea levels in the short haul, and to make green energy an economically attractive alternative in the long run.

Interviewing children in the slums of Kenya, Mr. Lomborg said he found that an almost universal dream among them was to own an automobile.

"They're not going to let go of that dream," Mr. Lomborg said in a telephone interview on Wednesday. "We have to allow them good lives."

Ms. Timoner was not an obvious choice for a project that wades into the climate change debate. Her previous works are noted more for their intimacy than for their sweep. "We Live in Public," for instance, chronicled an attempt by the Internet pioneer Josh Harris to live under 24-hour surveillance.

And by her own description, Ms. Timoner is a liberal Democrat who worked as a page for former Senator Tom Daschle, Democrat of South Dakota, and at 16 was happily photographed with Mr. Gore, then a Democratic senator from Tennessee.

Still, Ms. Timoner said, an initial four-hour conversation with Mr. Lomborg left her convinced that Mr. Gore's bleak narrative in Mr. Guggenheim's documentary had overstated the immediacy of the global-warming threat, without proposing practical solutions.

"If he were absolutely correct, we'd be frying on the sidewalk by now," she said.

In search of solutions, Ms. Timoner has been shooting in various parts of the world, including low-lying cities like Rotterdam, the Netherlands, and New Orleans, and some of the poorer parts of Africa. She plans to finish with sequences about Mr. Lomborg's personal story, which has involved ferocious challenges to his academic work as a statistician in Denmark and his writings in books like "The Skeptical Environmentalist," as well as validation by the likes of Time magazine, which named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

Mr. Botwick and Mr. Winter said they expected "Cool It" to be ready by September, in time for the Toronto International Film Festival — and also in time to provoke discussion in the fall's Congressional campaigns. "Hopefully, we can stir the pot," Mr. Winter said.

Reached by telephone on Wednesday, Lawrence Bender, a producer of "An Inconvenient Truth," said he was not sufficiently familiar with the new project or with Mr. Lomborg's work to judge them.

"If it's something that's going to help us figure out how to combat global warming, I'm all for it," said Mr. Bender, who has helped lead a campaign to reduce carbon emissions by using energy-efficient fluorescent light bulbs.

"But if it's going to say carbon reduction isn't something we should do, they're working against the good of the whole world," he added. (Mr. Bender's latest documentary, "Countdown to Zero," about nuclear arms proliferation, is showing at Sundance but is not in competition.)

Ms. Timoner said she expected her documentary to end with a call to action — though its proposals might not entirely please Mr. Bender. "Changing a light bulb is not a plan," she said.