



Health & Science

The Great Invisible: The BP Deepwater Horizon Disaster and its invisible legacy

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Movies

by [John J. Berger](#) - May 29, 2015

Margaret Brown's documentary film The Great Invisible asks if the BP Oil Spill is a prologue to future disaster

SAN DIEGO, May 29, 2015 – The story of British Petroleum's Deepwater Horizon is a cautionary tale about the dangers of offshore drilling to people and the environment. It was the nation's worst oil disaster and its scrutiny illuminates some of the industry's darker corners.

"The Great Invisible," a new documentary on the BP disaster by filmmaker Margaret Brown, was screened May 12 at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco by the Boston-based nonprofit Ceres.

[Ceres Conference focuses on signs of progress in clean energy](#)

The film tells the sad tale of the Deepwater Horizon explosion that killed 11 workers in 2010 and, by one government estimate, disgorged 210 million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. "The Great Invisible" documents the devastating impact of the spill and its ongoing lethal legacy. BP, of course, has mounted an energetic public relations campaign to show how well it has done by the Gulf since the accident and how clean it now is. But millions of gallons of oil remain in the Gulf, and it has not fully recovered. Perhaps it never will.

"The Great Invisible" amply documents the ongoing nightmare that survivors of the BP disaster have endured. It captures the banal suffering and impoverishment left in the spill's wake as well as BP's dishonest claim that everyone would be made whole financially after the disaster.

That notion is put to rest, however, when we hear from destitute claimants who were unable to jump through BP's bureaucratic hoops. The film also effectively drives home our dependency on oil, especially for transportation, but the documentary has serious shortcomings.

[Approval to drill in the Chukchi Sea threatens Arctic Seas](#)

Though these are important scenes to get on the record, ultimately, “The Great Invisible” provides viewers next to no answers to the oil dependency it decries.

“The Great Invisible” was presented by Participant Media, which has brought us truly exceptional, high-quality documentaries, such as “Merchants of Doubt,” “Good Night, and Good Luck” and “An Inconvenient Truth.” “The Great Invisible,” however, falls far short of these marks, and the inherent dramatic potential of its powerful subject is lost.

Participant Media says that it “seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference,” but “The Great Invisible” leaves the audience feeling depressed, impotent and guilty, rather than empowered to make change. It does come with a very useful discussion guide for classroom use, however, so a good teacher might be able to compensate for this shortcoming.

Freelance environmental documentary filmmaking is hard and generally poorly remunerated work—often a labor of love and thus commendable—but this film badly needed a good story editor. Its structure and organization are fuzzy, and the slow-paced tale is told without suspense or drama.

Worse, in an effort to share the oil industry’s viewpoints, the documentary affords a smug group of wealthy oil industry executives a lengthy opportunity to assert their own indispensability and to spout misinformation about renewable energy alternatives, without offering the audience any rejoinder. The case for getting off oil is thus muddled by the film’s unanswered fallacies.

The ghosts of past spills loom over oil blanketing Santa Barbara’s beaches

Finally, when it comes to describing the ecological impacts of the oil spill on the Gulf ecosystem and to putting the reckless behavior of BP into historical context, the film is wanting and just does not provide viewers adequate scientific insights about the spill or historical perspective on BP.

For contrast, see Greg Palast’s hard-hitting, no-holds barred oil industry expose “Vulture’s Picnic,” which contains little-known background about an alleged BP oil well blowout in 1992 and its nefarious dealings in Azerbaijan.

Other important aspects of the BP drama that did not make it into the documentary can be gleaned from some of the references below this review, including, “The Best Writing on the BP Oil Spill,” a brief compilation of excellent and readily available journalistic reports about the aftermath and implications of the BP oil spill by [Treehugger’s](#) Chris Tackett,

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For some of what "The Great Invisible" omits, see: "[The Best Writing on the BP Oil Spill, a brief compilation](#)" by *Treehugger's* Chris Tackett of excellent and readily available journalistic reports about the aftermath and implications of the BP Oil Spill spill.

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