



Chasing Ice director Jeff Orlowski: climate change is “pretty damn definitive”

By [Adrian Mack](#), November 15, 2012

In a field already crowded with great work like [The Island President](#), Jeff Orlowski's [Chasing Ice](#) could be a game-changer. Orlowski's film depicts the phenomenon of climate change in a way that's never been done before, all while seducing the viewer with astoundingly beautiful pictures and an engrossing human story. You're left to struggle with a very conflicted response.

Chasing Ice follows acclaimed nature photographer James Balog's mission to document the melting of mammoth glaciers through time-lapse imagery. This involved the invention of super-robust hardware that could weather the most inhospitable areas of the planet (specifically parts of Greenland, Iceland, Alaska, and Montana), and multiple, extremely dangerous treks by the photographer and his team to those same locations—even as Balog's body disintegrates from the wear-and-tear.

The result of his work is indisputable, and profoundly shocking. Seeing the accelerated disappearance of an ice-shelf the size of a village, sometimes in just six months, leaves no doubt that something very significant is happening to our planet. Orlowski also got lucky, to say the least, when he was dispatched by Balog to wait out the splitting (or “calving”) of the inconceivably huge Ilulissat glacier in Greenland—something that he actually captures on camera, and which surely stands as one of the most terrifying and awesome images ever committed to tape.

The *Georgia Straight* spoke to Orlowski from his home in New York, just hours before he was set to join a panel conference with Al Gore (“I heard he likes the film,” he said).

Georgia Straight: What were you feeling as you stood there watching that glacier fall apart? How big was it again?

Jeff Orlowski: It's the size of lower Manhattan but much taller. We spent a month out there waiting for something like that to happen. The two of us, me and Adam, we maintained a 24 hour vigil. When it actually was happening, it was a very interesting set of emotions, because there's a juxtaposition between the beauty of the images and the horror of the images. We were so excited to capture it, but when you look back at what the footage represents, what it means, it's not a happy prospect. It's a pretty sad reality. So that was interesting—that balance of emotions between us as image-makers and us as human beings.

GS: Were you frightened?

JO: We were safe where we were, but the biggest emotion Adam and I felt was how special and how weird it was for us to be the only two people observing this historic event; this massive, massive event. We were far enough away that we were pretty safe by a long margin, but we had spent a lot of time hiking right down to the side of that glacier. I mean, I was standing on some of that ice just the day before. I think one of the other shocking things was there were many places where we'd spent time climbing on the ice, and we would learn later that the landscape that we were on had completely disappeared. It's hard to find a good analogy. It's like: imagine going back home one day after work and discovering that all the homes on your block just aren't there, there's just ocean.

GS: What was the worst location, and why?

JO: Greenland in the winter time was brutal. It was just unnecessarily cold. It was also one of the riskiest trips because of the danger associated with the cold. But we wanted to check the cameras at the soonest possible opportunity, so it was March that we went, just after the harshest part of winter when daylight was kinda back in action for seven or eight hours a day. You have to look at how much light there is in a way that I'd never thought of before.

GS: You kinda think as you watch the film, 'How did they all come out of this alive?' Werner Herzog sure has a lot to answer for.

JO: I really have to give a lot of credit to James, in part because he has lost a lot of friends out in the wilderness, on photo assignments, on climbing trips, and he's one who's very much learned from the lessons of others, and he takes safety very, very seriously. We spent a lot of time training. James says the only reason he's still alive is because he thinks 15 steps ahead in those scenarios.

GS: Did you have any close calls yourself?

JO: In retrospect there were half a dozen times when we could have been in a near life threatening situation. We all had dog sled crashes, and some of them were pretty bad. Those dog sleds are one of the most dangerous modes of transportation that we use, because that's a very heavy, bulky, wooden sled, and you're strapping thousands of pounds of gear to it, and if you hit

a bump the wrong way, it throws you off, and in some cases the sled can even run you over. It's far more dangerous than one thinks.

GS: Which is more shocking to you—the rate of glacier recession or the magnitude of “skepticism” that’s still out there? Which is greater?

JO: They're both pretty jaw-dropping. There is a lot of skepticism out there still, but fortunately we've been seeing it start to shift. Year after year, with record-breaking temperatures, and record-breaking droughts, and record-breaking crop issues, followed by monumental storms—people are starting to recognize more and more that this is a reality. We're at a point now we're it's really just down to our political leadership acknowledging that there's an issue and wanting to prioritize it as an issue. I've also seen less skepticism from the pundits, and I think it's virtually impossible to make comments about it on the heels of Sandy.

GS: On the other hand, the *National Post* ran an interview with you and the comments that follow are all *ecofascist* this and *ecozealot* that. I understand that your approach with *Chasing Ice* is sort of neutral—you want the images to speak for themselves—but there are still plenty of people, wittingly or otherwise, trying to sow enough doubt to keep the “debate” alive. How frustrating is that?

JO: It's massively frustrating, for sure. It's called the FUD campaign—fear, uncertainty, and doubt—and it is in fact the same exact people that were doing it for the cigarette industry in the '70s. They're using the same techniques that they used then to delay progress and to maintain the status quo. And for them it's all financial. If the fossil fuel industry did what the scientists say we need to do to mitigate climate change, they would have to sacrifice 20 trillion dollars of known assets in the ground. We're trying to fight it by showing people evidence. Ninety-seven percent of scientists are in accord that it's happening, it's man-made, and we need to do something about it. And that's not just a majority—that's pretty damn definitive. And when you have such significant accord with regards to the science, the Heartland Institute, the Cato Institute, those kinds of organizations, they find people who are willing to say anything about the issue in some cases, and they also find people who are not experts in climate science, who are in some cases physicists or economists who are talking about what is or isn't happening when they're not the right authority to speak about the issue. It's interesting to look back at the big picture and study how all of this has evolved. Really, what it comes down to is that our political leadership needs to recognize the trajectory that we're on from a scientific perspective and know that we need to do something about this regardless of what the public thinks and regardless of what the fossil fuel industry tries to say.

GS: Assuming that we can extract our governments from the corporate death grip?

JO: I agree with you completely about that.