



## The Corporation

Pip Lakewood

**Film title:** The Corporation

**Director:** Jennifer Abbott, Mark Achbar

**Screenplay:** Joel Bakan, Harold Crooks

**Distributor:** Films Transit International

**Cinema Release Date:** 29 October 2004

**Certificate:** PG (UK); Unrated (USA)

[Image]

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Documentary films have become very popular in the last couple of years, with Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* and Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* among others achieving international success. This has prompted Jennifer Abbott and Mark Achbar to direct *The Corporation*, a documentary made in Canada that examines the rise of the corporation in the US. *The Corporation* is based on the book *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power* by Joel Bakan, an internationally recognised legal scholar and professor of law at the University of British Columbia. The film is compiled of interviews with a range of individuals including CEOs, university professors, environmental activists, the Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman and Michael Moore, who all comment on the problems the corporation has caused for American society and the wider world.

The corporation is a clever US nineteenth century legal invention that has risen from obscurity to become the world's dominant legal entity. The

corporation was originally created in the fourteenth Amendment after the American Civil War to protect the rights of freed slaves. Ingenious commercial lawyers used this to transfer many different businesses into an 'incorporated unit', making them legal persons with a full range of legal rights. Corporations therefore have quasi-human freedoms and privileges, but cannot be punished by traditional methods such as imprisonment, and therefore can act recklessly without regard for those around them, driven by the desire to make profit. Indeed, the film uses a consultant who helps the FBI profile its suspects to analyse the personality of the corporation. He concludes that they have a personality disorder that means they can be categorised as psychopathic. They single-mindedly pursue their own aim of profit without consideration for other people and without reference to any moral standards. The film argues that it is in a corporation's nature to be evil.

The film then goes on to give many examples of how corporations both past and present have acted with blatant disregard for humanity and our planet because of their unbridled self-interest. It asks whether these examples are just bad apples, or whether this is common market practice; the filmmakers seem to clearly believe there are more than a few bad apples. *The Corporation* explores the exploitation of workers in China who work to produce shoes, shirts and all sorts of clothing for only a few dimes an hour. It takes a lengthy look at the environmental damage that corporations have inflicted and continue to inflict. It blames the petro-chemical era for the huge increase in cancer rates, examines the impact of Agent Orange, and discusses the use of hormone injections in cows to increase the production of milk. *The Corporation* then looks at the aggressive way that businesses target young children to persuade them to buy their products, and the role of corporate advertising in society more generally. Many other corporate abuses of power are also explored during this documentary that is almost two and a half hours long. The film clearly suggests, as Joel Bakan's book does, that the corporate domination of society cannot continue indefinitely as it will only lead to scandal and ruin if corporate power goes unchecked. The audience can't fail to reconsider the role of big businesses in our society after they've seen this film, whether they are in North America or

elsewhere in the world. How long these thoughts will last once they have walked out of the cinema and are confronted with massive amounts of advertising is debatable!

Of course, corporations are not really human at all, but they are run by humans who control a corporation's actions at every level. The film seems to suggest that a corporation has a mind of its own, and that its CEO does not have that much control over all the things that a corporation does. However, this cannot be strictly true as the decisions that are made by a corporation are of course made by its human employees. The corporation must essentially be the product of the will of the people who work for it. The filmmakers seem keen to blame and scandalise corporations, but do not look at what makes a corporation behave like a psychopath. The desire for profit motivates the corporation. It is the human owners of the corporation – the shareholders – who demand that profit, and as the directors and CEO are answerable to the shareholders, they will act in a way that maximises profit, even if that involves compromising on ethics. Therefore to remove the blame for what corporations have done from humans seems artificial.

The real question of the film for me is why the owners of corporations want to make so much profit, and why they are prepared to allow the corporation to behave in an unscrupulous way to achieve it. The answer has to be human greed. One of the film's contributors puts it in simple terms: 'people want money, that's the bottom line.' The owners of huge clothing retailers are not concerned about tiny wages for its factory workers in China because it means that they will make more profit for themselves. The owners of IBM and Coca-Cola were prepared to operate in Nazi Germany because they didn't care about the morality of the situation; they just wanted to maximise their profits. Michael Moore calls it the 'greed flaw' in capitalism, which comes out of the fact that we each as individuals have our own greed flaw.

The owners of corporations will never be the poor of society; they represent a very small minority of the population who already have lots of money to start with. What is it that causes us as humans to want more money for ourselves, even when we already have plenty? The Bible teaches that 'the

love of money is the root of all kinds of evil' (1 Timothy 6:10 – NIV). Profit in itself is not a bad thing, but when we are driven to seek it over everything else, selfishly and with no regard as to the effects that our profit has on others, it becomes something evil. We behave like this because we have all rejected a relationship with God in our hearts and we have put ourselves at the centre of the universe; we are all self-absorbed. In this frame of mind, we may well exploit others, on a big or small scale. The Christian faith does not end on this note of gloom, however, but rather it offers a great hope. If we recognise that we have rejected this relationship with God, we can come back to God and ask for forgiveness, and this relationship will be restored. Then we will be able to serve God and seek his glory over our selfish desire for profit, and serving God will mean having a great regard for others as well as ourselves. This message of selflessness needs to be heard by our society to counteract our world of greed, to show that there is another way to live that does not ruthlessly desire profit. This new way of living could, through its human employees, completely transform the way a corporation acts, and if a whole group of corporations decided to take their social responsibility seriously, there could be a transformation of society as a whole. There is no doubt that this is what both the film and Joel Bakan's book are calling for; *The Corporation* is a timely warning that the corporate abuses of the past must not continue.