

OUR DAILY BREAD

Nikolaus Geyrhalter's 2005 film *Our Daily Bread* has no plot, no characters, and no talking heads. Every scene has been shot with a fixed camera, focused to an unchanging depth of field. And it is one of the greatest movies I have ever seen.

Who would have suspected that a documentary about food production could evoke eternal themes? Man and nature, good and evil, the quotidian and the sublime—they're all here, in the artificial life and mechanized death of chickens, pigs, sunflowers, and tomatoes.

Our Daily Bread works through a series of visual anecdotes: two- to three-minute clips that fade to black but eventually coalesce into a coherent cycle. The film ebbs and flows through sudden and extraordinary acts of violence visited upon a world that has been pulled and stretched into eerie unrecognizability. As we witness the horrors of chickens hatched on conveyor belts and bulls pummeled by the high-speed spray of their feed, we know that somewhere an abattoir awaits. In the meantime, what about that fig tree being ravished by a robot?

Forget the cant about sustainable agriculture and artisanal cheese. By showing how food *happens*, Geyrhalter makes it clear

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Stills from *Our Daily Bread*, 2005, directed by Nikolaus Geyrhalter.

Courtesy First Run/Icarus Films

that we are all guilty: everything that lives, eats. And picking lettuce on your knees behind a mechanized harvester turns out to be as mind-numbing as slaughtering pigs. As for the wonders of birth, in this postnatural world, every piglet is born to be castrated. Here a cow can stand tranquilized, munching hay, as a bored Dr. Caligari reaches his rubber-gloved hands past a bloody incision into the deepest cavity of her being. He pushes and prods a bit then extracts the gruesome form of a mucus-swathed calf—which the good doctor summarily dumps into a wheelbarrow.

In hazmat gear, replete with gasmasks and pink rubber gloves, workers spew lingering mists—nutrient or insecticide?—then exit. Others spend their waking hours among bulls as overmuscled as Arnold Schwarzenegger, gathering fresh semen in centrifuge-ready condoms. On a work break, the humans sip coffee, smoke cigarettes, chew peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches, and their eyes express the haunted burden of their collective knowledge. These working stiff's have witnessed horror, and their portraits emerge like those of Sebastião Salgado's world-worn subjects.

And so we watch the daily rounds of eighty-foot-wide threshing trucks; we gaze in awe at flashing razors, the fabulous mechanisms that cut and feed and kill and milk, exotic and outlandish and terrifying. After a while, the animal, the plant, the machine and the human blur into a single mass. But for the most part, the

humans in their cobalt jumpsuits and cerulean hairnets exist as aliens in the landscape. Beneath the pale washes of fluorescents and mists of disinfectant, robots rule.

These are cinematic landscapes never seen before: greenhouses transformed into plant penitentiaries; sunken pens of murky water where a black hose sucks salmon from the dark and silent confines of their aqua-farm; a utopia of perfectly cloned strawberries. In one scene shot ten thousand feet beneath the surface of the earth in a salt mine immediately recognizable as the valley of the shadow of death, two hard-hats contentedly eat bananas.

The colors of *Our Daily Bread* alone are worth the price of admission. Here are the exalted greens and nail-polish reds of zucchini on steroids and cloned peppers. Potatoes extracted by enormous wheeled robots glow yellow and brown. Endless plains of grayish grains stretch beneath black skies. In one ominous sequence, a yellow crop-duster vomits a cloud of insecticide out toward the audience's heads.

Geyrhalter's camera lingers over the desiccation, the aftermath of all that fumigation and power-washing. The audience sees what no one was ever supposed to witness: pensive pigs on the train to their Auschwitz; hog farmers in masks, wielding shock prods. When Geyrhalter returns to the chicks we watched emerge from their shells, they are now full-grown, and the bird vacuum sucks them

back onto that conveyor belt, from which they will be dumped onto plastic pallets, boxed and shelved with a precision and economy IKEA would admire. Under blue lights the chickens die and bleed and hang in yet another circle of hell. As the livid poultry swing upside-down on their chains, Hieronymus Bosch meets Farmer John.

By the time we get back to the pigs they have entered porcine Hades, which we witness in a single exquisitely framed shot of sheared legs and industrial hoof scissors. This dance of death may be hard to stomach, but it is mesmerizing, and the film's climax arrives soon thereafter, with the greatest of the beasts. As the bulls enter their death chamber we see their minds register that something is not right—too late, of course.

Movie review clichés were made for films like this: “powerful,” “astounding,” “horrifying,” “shocking,” “eye-opening.” “Everyone should see it.” “Don't miss it.” In our age of hyperbole and overload, such words die as they are born—much like those chickens, who pay a heavy price for being so perfectly identical. But in the case of *Our Daily Bread*, you can believe the hype. Through discipline, simplicity, and understatement, Geyrhalter has moved beyond photo-muckraking and documentary naturalism into a realm of awareness, re-evaluation, and self-reckoning usually reserved for the highest forms of philosophy or art. ☉

—Frederick Kaufman

