



OUR DAILY BREAD by Nikolaus Geyrhalter

Interview with Nikolaus Geyrhalter, director

What moved you to make this film?

Basically I make films that I'd like to see myself. I'm fascinated by zones and areas people normally don't see. That was the case with both PRIPYAT and ELSEWHERE, and the production of food is also part of a closed system that people have extremely vague ideas about. The images used in ads, where butter's churned and a little farm's shown with a variety of animals, have nothing to do with the place our food actually comes from. There's a kind of alienation with regard to the creation of our food and these kinds of labor, and breaking through it is necessary.

OUR DAILY BREAD, like all your films, doesn't have voice-over commentary, but in this case, there aren't any interviews either.

I imagine my films mainly in continuous tracking shots which also contain scenes with interviews. In this case worlds of work which can stand alone are shown. The people work in spaces which are otherwise empty, and there's not much talking while they work. At the beginning we conducted a number of interviews. During the editing, which Wolfgang Widerhofer started while shooting was still going on, it turned out that these interviews tend to disturb, and interrupt, the perception of the film. We then decided on the more radical form as it's more appropriate for the way the footage was shot. The intention is to show actual working situations and provide enough space for thoughts and associations in long sequences. The viewers should just plunge into this world and form their own opinions.

There's no information about specific companies or data.

It's irrelevant for this film whether a company that produces baby chicks is located in Austria, Spain or Poland, or how many pigs are processed every year in the big slaughterhouse that's shown. In my opinion that's done by journalists and television, not a feature film. I also think that things are made too easy for me as a viewer when I'm spoon fed information. That moves me briefly, gets me worked up, but then it can be put into perspective quickly, and it works like all the other sensational news that bombards us day after day because that kind of thing sells newspapers - and it also dulls our perception of the world. In this film a look behind the structures is permitted, time's provided to take in sounds and images, and it's possible to think about the world where our basic foodstuffs are produced, which is normally ignored.

Was getting permission to shoot difficult?

In a few cases it was very easy, because the companies are proud of what they do, of innovations and work processes, product safety, and they wanted to participate in the making of a film. Being able to refer to previous works definitely made this easier. There were also some people at these companies who see the consumer's alienation from food production as a problem because consumers have no idea about their concerns. On the other hand lots of companies are afraid of publicity and what a film like this could show. After all, there are constant scandals, and they might think: If it's going to create a scandal, then they should do their shooting at the competition!

But the point of this film isn't to uncover scandals.

I wanted to collect and make accessible images from this branch, this world in as objective a manner as possible. What makes it fascinating are the machines and the sense of what's doable, the human spirit of invention and organization, even at close quarters with horror and insensitivity. Plants and animals are treated just like any other goods, and smooth functioning is extremely important. The most important thing is how the animals can be born, raised and held as efficiently and inexpensively as possible, how to treat them so they're as fresh and undamaged as possible when they arrive at the slaughterhouse, and that the levels of medications and stress hormones in the meat are below the legal limits. No one thinks about whether they're happy. If you want to call that a scandal, which is more than justified, then you have to take your thinking one step further. Then it becomes the scandal of how we live, because this economic, "soulless" efficiency is in a reciprocal relationship with our society's lifestyle. There's nothing wrong with saying, "Buy organic products! Eat less meat!" But at the same time it's a kind of excuse, because we all enjoy the fruits of automation and industrialization and globalization every day, which affect much more than just food.

Do you intend the film's title, OUR DAILY BREAD, to be understood with the religious association?

The title refers to our cultural history, and because of the religious association the effect's even more crass considering how people treat their resources and fellow living beings. I always take the thought further, and the next line would be: And forgive us our sins. But it also refers to earning our daily bread, the normality of this life, the question of how people do their jobs, and how this has changed. Who runs the machines, who controls the processes - and who digs in the ground with their bare hands or picks the cucumbers? How is our daily bread distributed in contemporary Europe?

Does the film also represent a bit of contemporary history?

I think so. I also regard my films as archival material, which people will dig out in 50 or 100 years, watch, and think, "They already did it like that back then," or "They were still doing it like that." That's how something started or stopped. Formally I try to be as timeless as possible, the intention isn't to say, that's what films looked like back then. It's important to me that a film captures a certain point in time, a little bit of history. That's especially true of this film.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter in an interview with Silvia Burner