What’s for Dinner? You Don’t Want to Know

By MANOHLA DARGIS

Late in his indispensable book “The Omnivore's Dilemma,” Michael Pollan suggests that one way to change America’s lamentable eating habits is to build slaughterhouses and egg factories with glass walls. “If there’s any new right we need to establish,” he writes, “maybe this is the one: The right, I mean, to look.”

Embedded in this elegant, seemingly simple statement is a curious notion: that Americans, though increasingly bombarded with streaming images, are missing the picture. The sheer visual overload of everyday life, after all, can make you feel a lot like Malcolm McDowell’s character in Stanley Kubrick’s “Clockwork Orange,” who is forced to watch a cascade of images, including those of atrocities, with his eyelids pried open. But while we may feel visually overwhelmed, much in everyday life, as Mr. Pollan notes, remains strategically out of view, including how our food winds its slow way to the dinner table. If we could see the living animal and not just the supermarket package, see the labor and the waste, we might change how and what we eat.

In his superb documentary “Our Daily Bread,” the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter does exactly what Mr. Pollan proposes: he looks. Much like “The Omnivore’s Dilemma,” and much like Eric Schlosser’s book and Richard Linklater’s film of “Fast Food Nation,” this documentary is an unblinking, often disturbing look at industrial food production from field to factory. Mr. Geyrhalter has said that he is fascinated by “zones and areas people normally don’t see.” His fascination is our gain. “Our Daily Bread” can be extremely difficult to watch, but the film’s formal elegance, moral underpinning and intellectually stimulating point of view also make it essential. You are what you eat; as it happens, you are also what you dare to watch.
Mr. Geyrhalter, who shot the film himself in high-definition digital video (since transferred to 35 mm film), takes us inside worlds of wonder and of terror in “Our Daily Bread.” Between October 2003 and October 2005, he and his crew traveled across Europe recording scenes from what Mr. Pollan terms the industrial food chain. We can only guess where we are on the continent at any given point, however, since Mr. Geyrhalter has dispensed with many of the familiar tropes of documentary filmmaking, including naming the locations. Just as radically, he doesn’t supply a narration that steers us in any obvious direction; nor does he even translate the snatches of German and Arabic we hear, probably because these voices soon melt into the pervasive mechanized whir.

Considering the homogeneity of industrial agricultural practices, these strategies make sense. The opening scene of a uniformed man hosing down a floor flanked by two rows of gutted pigs could have been shot just about anywhere in the modern world, as could the image of live chickens being scooped up by a machine and then loaded by hand into small processing trays. The man slamming one of those trays closed on the head of a chicken frantically bobbing its head could be French or Austrian; nationality here is as irrelevant to the animals as to the consumers who will later buy that chicken after it has been killed, plucked and cleaned, all of which Mr. Geyrhalter shows us through one precisely framed shot after another.

The scenes on the killing floor are predictably brutal, though not for all the obvious reasons. Mr. Geyrhalter doesn’t flinch from showing us the panic of the animals as they head toward the killing floor or the barbarism of their deaths. There’s a haunting scene of a woman, seated seemingly alone and cutting the necks of the chickens that survived the initial kill room. Hers is actually an act of mercy. If she does her job properly, the birds will be dead by the time they are cleaned and butchered, which isn’t always the case in industrial slaughterhouses. The image of this woman with these dead creatures and her knife, her apron covered in blood that flows onto the floor where it forms a watery pool, makes any narration superfluous. We aren’t introduced to this woman, but her humanity and the dreadfulness of her job are transparently visible. There is something incredibly pitiful about her aloneness, which is accentuated by the sterility of her work environment, with its queasy lighting, metal surfaces and mechanical droning. Equally stirring is an image recorded far from the killing floor, in a dusty field in which a handful of enormous combines relentlessly advance toward the camera. As he does throughout the film, Mr. Geyrhalter holds the image for a relatively long while, which gives you ample opportunity to scrutinize everything inside the frame in real time, including the surprising revelation of the small human figure seated inside the combine cab, a speck of life encased in machinery.

It’s hard to imagine what a voiceover could possibly add. Part of the film’s brilliance is how it lays out the images and their wells of meaning with such cool deliberation, showing rather than telling through the long tracking shots of which Mr. Geyrhalter is a master and which underscore the ongoing, mechanized flow of work. Much like his scrupulous use of perspective, which directs your gaze toward the center of each image, the tracking shots reveal the filmmaker’s artistry as well as a deliberate ethics. In “Our Daily Bread” Mr. Geyrhalter wants us not only to look at the world we have made with care and with consideration, but also to contemplate a reality newly visible that is all too easy to ignore and just as impossible to look away from.
Watch What You Eat, if You Dare

THE NEW YORK TIMES / WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 22, 2006

THE NEW YORK TIMES / WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 22, 2006

MODERN MEALS A scene from "Our Daily Bread," a new short, floating page on the food processing industry.

"Our Daily Bread," a new short, floating page on the food processing industry.

THE NEW YORK TIMES / WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 22, 2006

by CHRISTINE MULHOLLAN

THE NEW YORK TIMES / WEDNESDAY NOVEMBER 22, 2006

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The Soft Machine

TOM VANDERBILT ON NIKOLAUS GEYRHALTER'S OUR DAILY BREAD

IN ONE EARLY SCENE of Upton Sinclair’s 1906 novel The Jungle, the Lithuanian-born protagonist reflects on his new job in Chicago’s Packingtown: “Jurgis had,” Sinclair writes, “slept with the rest up in the gallery and watched the men on the killing beds, marveling at their speed and power . . . if they had been wonderful machines; it somehow never occurred to one to think of the flesh-and-blood side of it—that is, not until he actually got down into the pit and took off his coat.”

A century later, in Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s documentary Our Daily Bread (which was screened in October at the New York Film Festival and goes on limited release in the United States this month), the “flesh-and-blood side of it” is similarly occluded, only this time most of the “wonderful machines” actually are machines: humming assembly lines that send pigs to their finely calibrated slaughterhouse; whirling sorters that whisk peeping yellow chicks to some unseen destination; elaborate instruments that saw open and scoop out the intestines of upside-down fish that are trolling by like targets in some macabre carousel shooting game.

Welcome to the jungle, circa 2006. To make Our Daily Bread, Geyrhalter, an Austrian filmmaker whose previous credits include the documentaries Pripjat (1999) and Elsewhere (2001), gained remarkable access to a wide range of European outposts of the secretive arena of globalized factory food—ranging from pigs, cows, and chickens to tomatoes, olives, and salt. The film consists exclusively of long, unnarrated, eerily static shots in which Geyrhalter documents environments and processes that seem more akin to the clean rooms of semiconductor fabrication plants than way stations in the journey from farm to table.

Our Daily Bread is quite shocking, though not, as might be expected, for scenes of horrific carnage and the squeals of dying animals; nor for the plight of the workers, who do not seem to suffer unduly, but rather for the bloodless sterility and antiseptic haze that prevail. In sterile, climate-controlled environments—even the lettuce-pickers work in the comfort of a kind of traveling greenhouse—the mostly voiceless humans in the film seem to do the work of some alien intelligence that operates on a vast, depersonalizing scale. In the realm of the wordless visual essay, Geyrhalter is the anti-Godfrey Reggio: instead of sweeping shots of epic, backbreaking human labor set to an urgently pulsating minimalist score, he gives us confined shots of clinical work enveloped by a claustrophobic silence.

Geyrhalter’s stated goal is merely to chronicle the means by which we now feed ourselves. Yet a particular horror is evinced by the combination of the assembly line and the slaughterhouse that occurs in many scenes, a horror whose character was strangely anticipated in a disturbing claim made by philosopher Martin Heidegger in 1949: “Agriculture is now a motorized food-industry—in essence, the same as the manufacturing of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same as the blockade and starvation of the countryside, the same as the production of the hydrogen bombs.” For the corporate and governmental interests that determine how food is produced, however, this is progress: clean, well-lit rooms, ruthlessly swept and washed, presided over by men and women in white coats and hairnets. The myriad structural problems of industrial monoculture—the degradation of taste and variety, higher bacteria counts than at old-fashioned “dirty” farms, or the epidemiological hazards recently encapsulated in the absurd specter of a national recall of organic “prewashed” spinach tainted with E. coli—are outside the purview of this film.

Killing is killing, one might argue, whether it takes the form of a single free-range chicken having its throat cut on a sustainable farm or a pig winding its way on a gleaming stainless steel conveyance toward a killing machine. But there is a yawning philosophical and practical divide. In his magisterial book The Omnivore’s Dilemma (2006), Michael Pollan chronicles a visit to a small-time organic poultry producer on “processing” day. An outdoor “killing station” has been set up, with scalding tanks, “killing cones,” and other implements: There is an assembly-line logic at work here, too, but there is also a group of people, joined by a sense of purpose, in a place on a human scale, where food has lived real lives and been part of an actual natural cycle. The scene is not far removed, in spirit or actuality, from the harvest festivals depicted in sixteenth-century paintings.

Still, after the morning’s work, Pollan announces that he wouldn’t want to kill chickens every day. The farmer responds: “Nobody should . . . That’s why in the Bible the priests drew lots to determine who would conduct the ritual slaughter, and they rotated the job every month. Slaughter is dehumanizing work if you have to do it every day.” What if you have to do it every minute for eight hours a day? In one stunning scene in Our Daily Bread, a lone woman, in the midst of a sprawling industrial building, wearing bulky headphones and desultorily chewing gum, severs pigs’ feet with a pair of pneumatic clippers (hiss, hiss, hiss) goes the device, almost in rhythm with her gum-chewing) as the swaying, suspended carcasses move past.

There is no sense of ritual on display in Our Daily Bread. It has been lost, just as the ritual meanings of food itself are being lost under the flags of convenience and cost. Food is gathered by machine, processed by machine. Any aspect of nature is ruthlessly suppressed. There is no sun, there is no grass. There is no birth, there is no death. There is no flesh, there is no blood. There are only wonderful machines to monitor, production targets to meet, mouths to feed.
REVIEW

Painterly, unsettling look at the food we eat

‘Our Daily Bread’

★★★½

Michael Phillips, Tribune movie critic
November 24, 2006

Shooting all over Europe, Austrian-born filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter casts a calmly unsettling spell with this documentary reverie on what we eat, and how it’s processed in an overwhelmingly mechanized age designed to make the concept of the family farm seem like a nostalgic joke.

There's no narration and no music, and you don't miss either. Geyrhalter and his partner, Wolfgang Widerhofer (who edited and established the "dramatic structure"), take us inside slaughterhouses, chicken farms, a greenhouse where row upon row of peppers are picked by a solitary worker and--from a thresher's-eye-view perspective--a wheat field.

Geyrhalter's eye is painterly, but it's more than that: The intuitive flow of the images is wholly cinematic, even though individual vignettes often unfold before a motionless camera. Other shots track either left or right, revealing another startling panorama of human and machine, or machine and nature, or countless animals playing their anonymous role in the assembly line of industrialized food production. If "Our Daily Bread" is political, it's blessedly indirect and happily devoid of thesis points. The images recall Kubrick in their extreme, head-on formality and tight, obsessive control. This is "Fast Food Nation" envisioned, "Koyaanisqatsi"-like, on a grand scale: "Fast Food Planet."
Coming to America!

Stuart Klawans

Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Our Daily Bread* is a science-fiction film of sorts--the *2001: A Space Odyssey* of modern food production. It is wordless, stately, disquieting, disorienting. Also, it's a documentary. Shot in direct-cinema style, the film takes you into a series of European industrial plants, where gleaming steel tubes spray out baby chicks, robotic hoses cruise through aisles of vegetation, giant wheels rotate with cows strapped to their arms. Every so often you see a human being tending the equipment in mechanistic silence. A worthy selection of the 2006 New York Film Festival, *Our Daily Bread* is now beginning a well-deserved theatrical run, starting in New York at Anthology Film Archives.
Alienation is more difficult to dramatize than horror. *Our Daily Bread*, a documentary by Nikolaus Geyrhalter, provides a different perspective on the mass production of food. Geyrhalter’s viewpoint is programmatically detached. Opening with an endless row of trussed pig carcasses, neatly hanging by their hind legs, *Our Daily Bread* (showing next week at Anthology Film Archives) is a cool, nearly wordless succession of scenes from the European food industry.

When not hitching a ride on a tractor or crane, Geyrhalter’s camera is static, contemplating an infinite expanse of chicken coops, a hangar-sized greenhouse of hydroponic cucumbers, or the vast vista of a crop-dusted field. Machines rule, whether milking cows or gathering olives. Humans aren’t necessary; the assembly line sprays cattle with feed, guts pigs, and processes live chickens. Scenes of workers chewing their cud or sitting docilely on the bus supply human interest. (That everyone and everything is drugged is suggested by the C-section performed on a totally passive cow.)

Geyrhalter’s fastidious, symmetrical compositions match these clean, orderly spaces. *Our Daily Bread* gives the sense of an empty, highly regulated planet populated by a relatively few number of workers. (It’s a happy version of *Metropolis*.) As with *Pripyat*, Geyrhalter’s 1999 survey of the contaminated zone around Chernobyl, information is subordinate to visual ideas. Yet the clarity of these ideas provokes all matter of philosophical questions—they’re food for thought. At what point during the industrial procedure do the animals actually die? The film’s title obviously refers to work as much as food—does it also ask forgiveness for our sins?

Like Linklater, Geyrhalter saves the spectacle of stun-gun cow slaughter and blood geysers for last—next-to-last actually, in that he ends with someone hosing out and scrubbing down the killing floor. That erasure is part of the horror. What’s harder to forget is the sight of live chicks being processed in handfuls or masses of fish vacuum-sucked out of the sea. This may be more “humane” than the system mapped by *Fast Food Nation*—but that is because it is a more efficient technology of death.

As *The Jungle* is the literary paradigm for *Fast Food Nation* and *Our Daily Bread*, so their filmic precursor is Georges Franju’s poetic documentary *Blood of the Beasts*. Like the surrealist films Franju admired, his 20-minute investigation of Paris’s municipal slaughterhouse is an assault on the spectator—rubbing the viewer’s nose in butchery. But, filmed only a few years after the end of World War II, *Blood of the Beasts* not only asks what it means to be a carnivore but what it means to be a political collaborator—even providing a visual analogue for images, like the Nazi death camps, that are too terrible to behold.

There’s almost nothing we can’t look at now. Where *Fast Food Nation* ends with a crescendo of allegorical violence, *Our Daily Bread* uses factual material as a means to interrogate metaphor. Without needing a word, Geyrhalter gives new meaning to the species paranoia dramatized in those gore-soaked scenes of human harvesting in *War of the Worlds* or *The Matrix*. *Our Daily Bread* is quietly radical in showing creatures whose existence is solely and inexorably a preparation for death.
Our Daily Bread (Unser taglich Brot)

★ CRITIC’S PICK

Release Date: 11/24/06 (Future Release)

Director: Nikolaus Geyrhalter

NEW YORK VIEW

Fast Food Nation’s got nothing on Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s strangely incisive documentary, which eschews any and all context (no interviews, talking heads, or narration), and instead presents a series of disturbing, sometimes even beautiful images of the high-tech means by which food-livestock, fish, produce, you name it—is harvested today.

CINEMASOURCE SYNOPSIS

This film is a near-silent documentary about food-manufacturing factories. Splicing between unnamed men in space suits spraying peppers to surreal landscapes where soft yellow chicks shoot out of slides by the hundreds and orchards of apples bob in a titanic swimming pool, we come to learn that eating starts in these curious robotic dreamscapes.
Even if everyone said a heartfelt grace before each meal, there’d be a strong chance that food — and how we obtain it — would still get taken for granted. Two outstanding new works at the fest show the lengths man goes to to not starve…

Hard to pigeonhole is Austrian director Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s Our Daily Bread, a non fiction look at food preparation that reads more like an art-house experiment than a documentary. Exquisitely lensed in 35mm and Hi-Def digital by Geyrhalter, this eccentrically lovely and frequently horrifying film presents a series of minimalist tableaus from within farms, fields, salt mines, and packing plants to show naked truths about how we get our eats. "Heifer whines could be human cries," or so sang the Smiths, but this isn't merely about the food chain and those living things that must be destroyed so we may subsist. Gory blips of slaughterhouse footage are less explicitly shocking here than in Georges Franju's notorious short Blood of the Beasts, Barbet Schroeder's Maitresse, or even fellow NYFF selection Insiang, whose very first shot is a pig dissection in close-up. This is more about the mechanical indifference to this necessary job (such as the aproned drone who casually chats on his cell phone out of earshot while a hanging cow's skin is messily shed behind him), where animals look like caged men, human workers have the demeanor of mindless robots, and mechanical instruments seem almost organic and alive. But is that what it's really about? The film's ultimate strength and weakness are the very same, which is that Geyrhalter refuses to edito rialize his findings nor subtitle the workers' probably banal discourse (barely audible, their words may as well be the muted trumpetings of Charlie Brown's teachers), outwardly stating in the film's synopsis that the intention is to let viewers draw their own conclusions. It's a brilliant concept and a bit of a cop-out, considering how much control he and editor Wolfgang Widerhofer show by contrasting sequences against one another chronologically, or depicting a factory worker methodically chewing her lunchtime morsels. Some will find a strange splendor in the cold technology that indirectly keeps us warm, others won't see the point without a conscious message, and still more will be outraged by seeing chirping baby chicks shot out of an engine like a fastball at the batting cages. This critic found much to digest (pun barely intended), with thoughts of FDA politics and standard practices, the ritualism and sacrifice of our own species, why baby animals are considered protectable innocents (and inversely, grown steaks-to-be just a fact of life), plus, on a meta level, how people's dietary philosophies will inform their reactions to the work. Aesthetically speaking, anyone who can pan, track, and offer wide-lens symmetry this provocative (the best crop-duster image since North by Northwest; a conveyor belt of processed chickens that looks like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre as a Busby Berkeley chorus line) deserves to find an audience of hungry cinephiles.
November 24, 2006 -- GIVE us this day "Our Daily Bread," a thought-provoking documentary that would go well on a double bill with Richard Linklater's fictional "Fast Food Nation."

Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter takes us on a tour of the nightmarish world of high-tech food production. The days of family farms are over; now most of the food we eat comes from anonymous industrial plants.

"Our Daily Bread," which screened earlier this year at the New York Film Festival, opens with the jarring sight of two cows trying to mate, and goes on from there.

Pigs are gutted by a giant machine, a plane dumps a load of pesticide on a field of sunflowers, thousands of chicks are jammed into horribly confining spaces, and all sort of products move down giant conveyor belts.

Geyrhalter avoids narration, music and talking heads, allowing beautifully composed shots and thoughtful editing to tell the story.

Occasionally, the camera lingers on workers (yes, there are some humans mixed in with the machines) taking a break from their conveyor-belt jobs. They show no emotion, as if they know they’re trapped – with no way out.

You can't help but wonder if 10 years from now there will be a need for any humans at all in the highly mechanized, depersonalized world of food production.
Beyond the Multiplex

Dig into Salon's list of the best independent films of 2006 already out on DVD. Now that's something to be thankful for.

By Andrew O'Hehir

Fast forward: Varda's amazing "Cléo From 5 to 7"; "Backstage" with the bitch-goddess; in quest of "Our Daily Bread," the charming "Opal Dream"; Robert Altman signs off

What with Richard Linklater's "Fast Food Nation" and Nikolaus Geyrhalter's near-silent new documentary "Our Daily Bread," upscale moviegoers may never wish to eat again. Stuart Klawans, the Nation's excellent film critic, has compared "Our Daily Bread" to Stanley Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey," whereas I was reminded of "The Matrix." A generational difference, I suppose. Whatever your choice of science-fiction comparatives, Geyrhalter's film is a chilling, commentary-free, widescreen study of industrial food production. (He's Austrian, and the film was shot in various countries of Western Europe.)

Yes, much of it is upsetting: We see cows, pigs and chickens slaughtered, as well as sunflowers harvested, farmed salmon sucked through a huge hose, tomatoes and peppers picked via robotic conveyor belt. Whatever your conclusions about that stuff, the really troubling part is the presence of human beings -- almost expressionless in their astronaut suits, rubber boots and goggles -- as they wander through this perfect, antiseptic landscape of death. I was reminded of the late-Marxist philosophical notion that the most important product of industrial capitalism was not the commodities but the workers themselves, and the sense of space and time to which they are conditioned. (Opens Nov. 24 at Anthology Film Archives in New York and Facets Cinematheque in Chicago, with more venues to follow.)
Nikolaus Geyrhalter thinks we know too little about the food we eat and how it gets to our tables, so he’s made a film to show us, amongst other things, how tomatoes are picked, how chicks are hatched and how salt is mined. He also shows us how animals are raised and slaughtered. Yet despite its unappetizing aspects, Our Daily Bread is a fascinating film, not least of all because it’s the last thing you’d expect in a tell-all documentary about automated food production.

The film tells nothing, but shows everything: There is no narration, no dialogue, no talking-head interviews, just image after compelling sci-fi image culled from the world of high-tech agriculture and animal husbandry. Who knew, for example, that there’s a machine made especially for shaking olives off of their trees, another for picking them up off the ground? Or that vacuums are used to suction chickens off of coop floors and into cages? Or that a cow can be skinned in under 10 seconds?

Visual surprises like these are not all that Our Daily Bread has to offer. Unlike other non-verbal “docs”—Baraka and the ‘Qatsi trilogy, to pick the most obvious examples—Geyrhalter’s film doesn’t use a musical soundtrack to cue our emotions. The awe, dread and occasional boredom we experience watching it is underscored not by Philip Glass compositions, but by the whirring, banging and droning of machines, the monotonous white noise of grow lights and the barely audible chatter of alienated assembly-line workers.
These are inspired directorial gambits, but they have their drawbacks. For example, given viewers’ genre expectations, especially as they’ve been shaped recently by blockbusters like Fahrenheit 9/11 and Super Size Me, it’s fair to ask if the film really qualifies as a documentary. If so, what story is it telling? What, if anything, is it advocating?

Given its sumptuous static shots and rhythmic editing, Our Daily Bread could just as easily be seen as experimental art cinema. For that matter, a slight shift in context is all it would take for the film to be used to promote the very practices it supposedly condemns. Kraft, Monsanto or a government proud of its agricultural economy could all spin this film easily enough to their purpose. That’s the problem with cleaving so closely to a policy of non-committal documentation: to leave a slate blank is to invite all and sundry to fill it in however they like.

**Spurning spoon-feeding**

But Geyrhalter insists the risk was worth taking. He specifically eschewed Michael Moore’s methods, the political gains of which, he claims, are lost as easily as they are won. “I didn’t want to spoon-feed audiences,” he says. “I wanted them to work a little bit, to come to their own conclusions about what they were seeing.”

Most viewers, and certainly most critics, have tended to see in Our Daily Bread only the condemnation side of the equation. The New York Times called it a “devastating” revelation of the “barbarism of factory farming.” The Amsterdam International Documentary Festival, in awarding the film its Special Jury Prize, called it “a vision of hell.” And animal rights groups and organic food activists in Europe are championing the film as an important breakthrough.

“What’s interesting about that,” Geyrhalter hastens to add, “is that the first few times we screened these films, we invited everybody—activist groups but also the people from these large companies. Both sides agreed: the film was accurate. What I showed was true. That was important to me, because I didn’t want to betray anyone’s trust, especially those companies that gave me access to their factories and farms.”

Still, when pressed, Geyrhalter admits the film does advance a political agenda—“It’s clearly there. You just have to read between the lines”—but he insists that he didn’t embark on the project with one in mind. “I was just curious, you know? How can you not be, when you go to a supermarket and it’s all there for you, so easily accessible. Our grandparents used to spend 30 per cent of what they earned on food. We spend eight. How is that possible?”

Geyrhalter may be like that guy—we all know one—who’s worked in too many restaurant kitchens and suffers from a need to share with you all the unsavoury details of what he’s witnessed. Except for this one important difference: Geyrhalter doesn’t take delight in disgusting us, nor does he try to rouse our indignation. Instead, slyly and with zero affect he asks in the most matter-of-fact way, “Can you live with this? Fine. But at the very least you should know.”
Tip of the Week
Our Daily Bread

Ray Pride

Process makes me happy like almost nothing else: to watch work, as I would when I worked on training films, asking someone to reassemble, then disassemble again, after taking apart a steam turbine engine. Fiction filmmaking doesn't afford many opportunities to demonstrate work as work; watching paint being painted is not the same as watching it dry; but still, watching a writer write is not the same as what a writer feels while writing and after the task has unfurled. While Richard Linklater's ambitious "Fast Food Nation" ends with a shot-in-three-days on-the-killing-floor slaughterhouse scene, reminiscent of Georges Franju's great short documentary, "Blood of Beasts," Austrian documentarian Nikolaus Geyrhalter's "Our Daily Bread" (Unser täglich Brot) is another creature: deeply rooted in landscape and duration, it is hypnotic and magisterial, about moment and passage, about the industrialization of food and the necessity of nurture. Geyrhalter shot and directed, and his eye for the reality of the highest tech of industrial farming is monumental and surreal, wordless, a collation of clean, bright images of supernal calm and contains the most striking cropduster scene since "North by Northwest." An experimental non-narrative epic, featuring rushing rivulets of peeping chicks, floating apples, tomatoes sorted by roving, unmanned machines and fish-gut-sucking devices of metronomic efficiency, "Our Daily Bread" is a strange look at one of the many worlds behind our accepted world. 92m.

"Our Daily Bread" opens Friday at Facets for a week.

(2006-11-20)
Our Daily Bread
Directed by Nikolaus Geyrhalter

*By Michael Joshua Rowin*

An otherworldly counterpoint to *Fast Food Nation*'s grounded subversion, *Our Daily Bread* documents the odd environments of enormous industrial farms and food manufacturing plants by casting a cold, clinical lens on the strange practices that take place therein. *FFN* emphasizes the human cost (economic, social, and political) of the capitalist system; Geyrhalter's wordless opus (the minimal dialogue spoken by plant workers goes untranslated) creates a purposeful distance between the viewer and the image and yet, in a seeming paradox, makes alien the contents, generating a fresh-eyed look at the grotesque acts we collectively approve to maintain our standard of living. Symmetrical, static compositions, complimented by roving tracking shots, survey the systematic carnage of slaughterhouses and the uprooting of land, while workers toil insignificant under greenhouse tents and through labyrinths of systematized slaughter. Certain images fail to surprise in their powerful violence, while still affecting disgust, such as the mandatory cow butchering sequence, but others come as stunning revelations: chickens and their baby offspring shuttling through conveyor belts and then getting sorted by rapidly dispensing pieces of machinery; bundles of hay dumped indiscriminately on caged multitudes of bovine beasts. Any aesthetic “beauty” that could be recuperated from the off-putting and bizarre becomes affectively disturbed and unsettling. Bordering on alien absurdity, Geyrhalter’s work in *Our Daily Bread* might be considered Vertov revised. In *Kino Pravda* the Soviet legend filmed a slaughterhouse sequence in reverse to bring a cow back to life. Geyrhalter, as methodically and unhesitatingly as the processes he details, pays respect to linear time and reality by allowing the cow to die, yet in so doing appeals to our sincerest humanity.

*Opens November 24*
Film Review

By Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat

*Our Daily Bread*

Directed by Nikolaus Geyrhalter
First Run/Icarus Films 10/06 Documentary
Not Rated

We take for granted all the time, hard work, and even pain that has gone into the creation, packaging, and delivery of the food we eat. There’s a story behind every apple or orange, chicken, or salmon we savor. Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter has made a thought-provoking documentary about our daily bread that features no voiceover or interviews. He gives us a behind-the-scenes look at the agricultural industry across Europe using only sound and images.

High tech farming is a big business that uses the latest machinery and pesticides in gigantic spaces. But, in most cases, laborers still have to do the back-breaking work of picking the crops. The men and women who work in the slaughterhouses for pigs, cows, and chickens have very repetitive and difficult jobs on assembly lines sorting body parts. In one scene, a person walks through a cavernous enclosure housing chickens that looks like it goes on for miles.

At lunchtime, the filmmaker sits us down with the workers who are trying to take a break from their arduous labors. But we cannot get out of our minds the massive nature of all this work just to provide us with vegetables, fruits, meats, and salt. Geyrhalter does not make any value judgments on the companies involved in this profitable enterprise, the cruel treatment of animals, or the popularity of organic foods. Each viewer can make his or her own evaluation of the material presented in the images and sounds of *Our Daily Bread.*

Screened at the 44th New York Film Festival, October 2006.

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by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat