

Introduction

Our Daily Bread and Dark Water Rising: The Truth about Katrina Animal Rescues address the bleak existences of nonhuman animals in the world today. Both films mourn the decline of human responsibility and address the rise of indifference, whether that shift stems from the churning of an industrial machine or compliance with a government order. Bread does not limit itself to nonhuman animal issues but participates in a growing awareness of food production techniques, such as factory farming and the use of petrochemicals. Water is more centrally about nonhuman animals and follows a plot of search and rescue to touch on issues such as the contrast between the idyllic image of suburban companion animal quietude and urban uses of animals for status or protection.

Our Daily Bread

In the direct cinema tradition of works such as Frederick Wiseman's Meat (1976), Our Daily Bread adopts an observer position to expose the machinations of an agriculture-industrial complex. Bread rejects the dominant narrative that omits all but the human consumption of animal products and undermines the nostalgic image of happy cows frolicking in fields or contented chickens scratching in the barnyard. Modern agriculture has manipulated nature in the extreme and food production has become a hell, as in a scene of hog butchering where flames play in the background. Humans and nonhumans alike find themselves trapped in the unrelenting bondage of machines. What the restricted, direct cinema point of view cannot reveal, however, is that industrial agriculture is now the rule rather than the exception.

Throughout Bread, nonhumans attain the same limited personhood as do humans (Porter, 2006). Bread witnesses the loss of personhood in industrial agriculture as it details the disassembly of nonhuman bodies and reveals a lack of self-guided action for both humans and nonhumans. Shots frame nonhuman faces and bodies as well as human ones and scenes typically open on nonhumans caught in an industrial machine that also ensnares the humans who operate it. Bread revels in compositions that reveal the symmetry of machines and the restricted movement of those, both nonhuman and human, trapped by them. In this regard, its images are reminiscent of the more restful moments of Koyaanisqatsi (Reggio, 1979), which is similarly concerned with the decline of personal liberty and dignity in industrial society. Bread evinces a gruesome directness seldom seen outside of animal rights videos and includes footage that many will find difficult to watch. As Bread was shot in Europe with full awareness of those depicted, however, no overt acts of cruelty mar its prevailing impression of ruthless efficiency. Lack of pretense is the ruling aesthetic as many scenes, such as a cow caesarean birth and the stunning
and hoisting of a bull for butchering, play out in single shots. At other times, *Bread* cuts to detail a process, such as the movement of chicks from incubator to battery cage or the production of hogs through artificial insemination, gestation crates, teeth clipping, and castration.

*Bread* refuses to accept the ignorance cultivated by industrial agriculture, a position that it implies by opening and closing with images of cleaning. Between these moments of purging, it insists that we witness the mechanical and inhumane processes that supply our tables. Scenes of food production processes often break for, or end in, scenes of workers eating. Excepting one scene set in an orchard where lunch seems like a jovial time, food production workers in *Bread* eat as we too often eat, for sustenance only and without passion. Such moments support the view that committing harm to animals diminishes those who commit it. Their passivity matches the detached observer position of *Bread* and suggests the limited ability of the filmmakers, allowed entry into a usually covert process, to intervene as anything more than witnesses.

Animal advocates can only hope that films like *Bread* will undermine the projection of The United Nation’s Food and Agriculture Organization that total meat production will double from 2001 to 2050 (United Nations News, 2006). Upbringing, habit, and convenience being such powerful determinants of behavior, it is doubtful whether any one film will persuade its audience to eschew animal products. Conforming to a culture saturated with eating rituals involving animal death and conditioned to believe in a human need for flesh foods, despite ample evidence to the contrary, those on a western diet see little reason to change. Even *Super Size Me* (Spurlock, 2004) addressed portion size rather than the effects of consuming animal products. *Bread* is unlikely to transform omnivore humans into herbivores, but what single film could? Instead of a panacea, *Bread* offers a warning as its images play out like a science fiction caution tale cast in the present. Unhappily, it is no fiction and its world is our own. As it is our world, however, it is ours to change. *Bread* rejects our ignorance, leaving us to insist that nonhuman and human alike be treated as persons instead of as machines.

**Dark Water Rising**

*Dark Water Rising: The Truth about Katrina Animal Rescues* opens by quoting Gandhi: “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.” The sentiment conditions all that follows, from efforts to rescue abandoned dogs and cats to the closing titles that herald pending laws that would allow companion animals to accompany evacuees. Any achievement is decidedly equivocal, however, as closing titles announce the dismal results of the rescue effort: “50,000-100,000 pets were stranded in New Orleans. 80-90% (40,000-90,000) pets died. 10,000-15,000 were rescued. Of those rescued: 2,000-3,000 were reunited with their owners. 8,000-12,000 were adopted or are awaiting adoption.” As Irvine (2007) points out, estimates vary because several organizations were involved in rescues. By comparison, various estimates put the human death toll in New Orleans at 700 and the total Katrina human death toll at at least 1,836—and this rescue effort was widely condemned as inadequate.