



## Watching What We Eat

A look at *Our Daily Bread*.

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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 nonfiction 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 *Maîtresse*, 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 editorialize his findings nor subtitle the workers' probably banal discourse (barely audible, their words may as well be the muted trumpeting 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.