



## Arts and Letters

### A World's Worth of Trouble on the Screen Movies

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For the last two years, the New York Film Festival came complete with a ready-made Molotov cocktail in the form of a Lars von Trier film, suitable for hurling at your dinner companions. As this year's festival enters its second week, headlined by the centerpiece film "Volver" from the exhaustingly beloved Pedro Almodóvar, there's no easy political-historical flashpoint like "Dogville" or "Manderlay."

But this year's filmmakers are far from aloof, tackling well-established economic and religious legacies of the past with a firmness of purpose distinct from facile provocation.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter's "Our Daily Bread," a documentary exploring how the food we eat is harvested, slaughtered, quartered, and packaged teleports us to an efficiently whirring future of conveyor belts, robotic knives, and tarped-over countryside. But the future is, as they say, now: Mr. Geyrhalter's stunning documentary is a near wordless tour of hypermodern farms and slaughterhouses that feed Europe. The director once journeyed into Chernobyl's post-meltdown badlands and ghost towns to see who or what was living there ("Pripyat," a 1999 festival selection), and here he brings us just as unreal a reality, a clockwork chronicle that confronts us with the terrible beauty of our modernized civilization.

You'll learn that thousands of chicks can be poured and diverted on those conveyor belts like a peeping river, that the gutting of cows can be automated, and, rather more comically, how olive trees are harvested. Mr. Geyrhalter's measured takes avoid polemic, framing his material with neatly squared-off compositions and using tracking shots reminiscent of the machines on view that render jump-suited workers just another kind of sprocket.

"Our Daily Bread" isn't meant to scare the squeamish with a Franco-German "Fast Food Nation" — these places are far too clean for that (though there is some blood and guts). The film instead moves us along from fascination, to a kind of spectatorial automation, and finally to a visceral but almost existential feeling of numbness. This soulless world of pure function lays bare the industry behind reality, take it or leave it, and though everything works perfectly, it's still a film that makes you hope karma doesn't exist.