



# Our daily bread

**Director: Nikolaus Geyrhalter**

**Country: Austria**

**Date: 2005**

***What's for Dinner? You Don't Want to Know By Manohla Dargis  
This review was published in the New York Times on 24 November 2006***

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.

### ***Extract from an interview with Nikolaus Geyrhalter, director by Silvia Burner***

*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.