

Film Review

***King Corn*, A Film by Aaron Wolf, Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis, Dir. Aaron Wolff, 2007, ITVS/Mosaic Films, ISBN (DVD): 1-59458-701-9, 88 min. (Distributed by Bullfrog Films)**

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This documentary follows two post-collegians who move to Iowa to try to grow an acre of corn. They become interested in the subject after finding out that corn has made its way so deeply into our diets that scientists can find molecules of it in our hair. The film follows the two – Ian Cheney (who, in the interests of full disclosure, was a high school classmate of this author) and Curt Ellis – through the ups and downs of seed-sowing, pesticide-spraying, and receiving checks from the federal government. Along the way, Cheney and Ellis make friends with many local farmers, and take side trips to interview professors and other experts on issues that arise around farming. At the end of their journey, when they finally get to eat their corn, they are disappointed – they have grown industrial corn, and it's inedible. The film covers much of the same terrain as Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) and, indeed, Pollan appears as one of the documentary's talking heads. But the accessible presentation and likeable protagonists may render the documentary more pedagogically useful than the book.

Like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and like Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* (2001), *King Corn* is interested in looking at the problems surrounding the industrial food system as a holistically understood entity. Questions of environment, politics, labor, health, community and policy are addressed. Additionally, the film has a fine sense of history. The two protagonists' great-grandparents both came from the same town in Iowa, although they met each other at college in Connecticut. The documentarians use this device to talk about the history of agriculture in Iowa from the beginning of the twentieth century, through the age of Earl Butz's¹ expansionist policies, up to the present day.

Possible topics for discussion after a viewing of the film are various. A discussion could be structured around the history of farm technology – one of the great-grandfathers was involved with the local tractor manufactory, and there are lots of neat pictures of old tractors, which are directly compared with the contemporary monster tractors that townspeople drive in the town parade. The film also examines tractors' relationships to the daily schedules of the farmers, who now spend so little time on farming that they can farm thousands and thousands of acres as a single operation, and still remain idle for large periods of time. A class could discuss the technological imperative that leads to continuous growth in the size and capacity of machines, as well as in the complexity of the food system as a whole.

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The film deftly addresses the question of how the change in farming technology and farming in general has made some farmers feel alienated from their labor. It includes, for example, an interview with a farmer who says that what he is growing is “crap.” The viewer gets the sense, from other comments made by townspeople, that the town has lost respect for agriculture, as it is now practiced, and that they hang on because they love the place where they live. I wonder if this is an incorrect interpretation of the town’s actual mood. Students from rural areas may have had different experiences, and find this depiction to be erroneous.

The film covers issues of obesity with a sensitive touch. The documentary links obesity to the rampant use of high fructose corn syrup, especially in soda (that beloved drink of the collegiate set). There is a scene where the young men interview a taxi driver in Brooklyn whose entire family has been affected by diabetes. This man used to drink two liters of grape soda a day, until he was told he had to stop. There isn’t much of a chance to look at this man’s obese body (the film shows only one snapshot), and so the attention remains on the human dimension of the story.

For a college audience, this film addresses key issues of generational identity. One of the first lines has Ian Cheney describing how the two conceived of an interest in the subject of food because “we are the first generation ever whose life expectancy is lower than our parents’.” This fact, of which many in a college classroom may not be aware, sets the tone for a constant interrogation of generational differences in approaches to the environment. The interview with Earl Butz, which the film places near its end, is played as sort of a cathartic moment. The scene presents one of the first opportunities for the movie to slide downward into hostile Michael Moore territory. The viewer believes wholly that the boys, who up until now have maintained affable fronts, may move to savagely interrogate Butz about his role in the present state of agriculture. However, Ellis and Cheney maintain their politeness in favor of allowing the interviewee to discredit himself, and the result is that Butz comes off as a naively well-meaning, but terribly wrong, grandfather figure who clings to the outdated belief that his reforms have made everything better. An interesting discussion could be had of the environmental debts that older generations may have placed on the young in light of this footage.

The protagonists are light-hearted, and they evince a certain friendly and interested attitude that seems to win over the people that they encounter. In one scene, they discover that hemp, which had been planted in their field during the short period of time when it was grown for the war effort in the forties, has popped up as a “weed” between their corn rows. “The first weed we found was...weed!” they joke. They josh around with an old farmer about the possibility that the hemp may actually be its more potent cousin. “Oh, I’m not going to tell you that!” he laughs. “You boys will be out in the ditches looking for it.” This exchange, along with an understatedly funny scene in which the two try to make high fructose corn syrup in their home kitchen, humanizes the two protagonists. College viewers may identify with their sense of humor, and those who, for whatever reason, are defensive about the potential for an overblown critique of the food industry will view this film as the resultant work of interested and responsible citizens, not bombastic or simplistic denounciators.

Overall, this documentary has high potential for classroom use in instigating discussions about a range of issues surrounding contemporary industrial agriculture.

Notes

¹ Earl Butz was a scandalous Secretary of Agriculture under Nixon and Ford known for industrializing agriculture and making corn a staple commodity of commercial farms (see Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Earl_Butz).