Arguments without words in *Unser täglich Brot* (Geyrhalter, 2005)

Abstract

*In this article I discuss the film Our Daily Bread (Geyrhalter, 2005) as an almost wordless film, asking why the decision not to include interviews, intertitles, or commentary, and to use carefully composed, often symmetrical framing, appears to have led reviewers to see it as an unusually democratic documentary. In my discussion I refer to I.A. Richards’ four kinds of meaning in poetry (1930), and Sperber and Wilson’s model of inferential communication guided by the principle of relevance (1986/95), as a means to explore how authorial feeling about the subject is suppressed in the film, and how this might encourage the belief that the viewer makes up his/her own mind about what is made visible or ‘mutually manifest’. Sperber et al’s (2010) work on ‘epistemic vigilance’ and on the links between argumentation and communication is also drawn on in order to understand how separate kinds of reasoning involved simultaneously in the interpretation of the film create a dynamic ambiguity or ambivalence, which itself is the basis for the use of formal aesthetic devices in political art cinema.*

Introduction: a wordless film about food

Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s *Unser täglich Brot* (Austria, 2005), a film about the highly developed technologies involved in food production processes in Europe, presents visual and acoustic images of the production of beef, pork, chicken, fish, eggs, milk, wheat, potatoes, olives, apples, tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, lettuce, sunflower seeds, and salt. The photographic images and ambient sound are not accompanied by a commentary, and there are no intertitles or interviews with people involved in the industry or commenting on the industry during the course of the film. Besides the credits, the only words in the film are those of its title at the beginning and those of a title at the end of the film stating that it was shot in Europe from October 2003 to October 2005 followed by a list of participants and businesses included. This means that the viewing experience is of an intense, often very quiet sequence of moving images showing workers and specialized machinery involved in food production in Europe.
Over the last two decades food production has become a significant subject in various contexts, particularly concerning cultural identity, social justice, health risk, and environmental degradation. At the beginning of the new millennium the makers of the Australian television documentary *A Million Acres a Year* (2002) broke new ground by interviewing the farmers who had been drawn in to destroying vast swathes of bush in Western Australia only to be hit by environmental disaster when drought and salination transformed the cultivated landscape into desert. (Rijavec, 2002) This film continued the trend started in the 1990s in which documentary filmmakers turned to local people rather than experts to discover more about the impacts of government policy on agriculture. (Heller, 2004) The rise of participatory activist documentary has been analysed by several commentators, (Aufderheide, 2002) (Christensen, 2009) (Cox, 2006) (Whiteman, 2002) (Whiteman, 2004) and the interviews carried out for the film *A Million Acres a Year* were analysed by Rogan et al for the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* turning the process of making documentary film itself into a powerful research tool (Rogan, O'Connor, & Horwitz, 2005).

In the second half of the decade, however, a number of feature documentaries on topics relating to food production focussed not so much on the producers and their perception of the issues as on the consumers as part of the vicious circle of supply and demand increasing production, driving down prices, promoting waste and environmentally unsound practices. These films have managed to come through film festivals and have achieved limited release in cinemas despite the difficult task they set themselves of demonstrating to general consumers the error of their ways. Several of these documentary films develop arguments for better distribution (Wagenhofer, 2005), for organic farming (Kenner, 2008), for a wider diversity of food stuffs (Woolf, 2007) for the protection of endangered species, particularly fish, (Murray, 2009) or better public dietary management (Spurlock, 2004). *Our Daily Bread* differs in that it appears not to offer any arguments at all in relation to its images of rarely seen production processes edited into a pattern of cycles of production.

While the film has achieved an audience of machine enthusiasts, of experimental film followers, and also those interested in contemporary food production, it remains an ambiguous artefact with respect to what it represents even though film reviews and articles written in the context of contemporary debates about the food crisis manage to construct definite views on the basis of the film. What I would therefore like to explore here is the
aesthetic exploitation of the relevance of the theme and its appeal to niche and politically concerned audiences as a means to experiment with an idea of democratic filmmaking alternative to that of the participatory. It seems that the display of food production, played out in *Our Daily Bread* in the wider context of UN, EU, and NGO campaigning, and aimed at changing policy by influencing consumer behaviour, is appropriate in a particular way for a particular kind of European audience wary about the overt pedagogical or propagandising tone of the activist film. Instead the attractiveness of the produce together with the brutality of the production process in the documentary film presents and represents without comment the ambivalent position of wealthy European consumers in particular. The thoughtfulness required of the consumer is, however, complex. As Guy Debord points out in *Society of the Spectacle*, the more surplus is created by an increasingly mechanised and automated society, the more likely it is in a mass society that the consumer is merely the producer at leisure. The consumer must thus reflect not only on the source of the products consumed, but also on the system of production and consumption in which the producer/consumer is involved. (Debord, 1987, p. paragraphs 42 and 43) The promotion of reflection through documentary film is itself problematic, however, given its own position in the system of the reproduction and consumption of images. It is only the tendency for formalist approaches to trigger self-reflexive, or metacritical responses in filmgoers that allows for the possibility of a political or activist interpretation. Exactly how and whether this is actually achieved is a point of contention and historically such films have been criticised for their focus on the surface of things and failure to engage in the politics of the image.

**Documentary and the formalist aesthetic**

The debate about the politics of formalist aesthetics in documentary filmmaking is a long-running one, going back to John Grierson’s critique of Walther Ruttmann’s *Berlin die Sinfonie der Grosstadt* (Berlin Symphony of a Great City, Germany, 1927). Ruttmann (Ruttmann, 1927) celebrated his film for its ‘rhythmic organisation of time with optical means’, the avoidance of acted scenes, inclusion of only ‘stolen’ images of people (taken without their knowledge) and the exclusion of all intertitles – ‘everythings speaks for itself – so no intertitles!’ ¹ Grierson, in *First Principles of Documentary*, complained about the self-

¹ Walter Ruttmann’s article for the *Filmspiegel* was reprinted in: Georgen, Jeanpaul, *Walter Ruttmann: Eine Dokumentation* (Georgen, c.1989, p. 79) and reads in the original: Ich sehe die wichtigsten Faktoren meines BERLIN-Films in: 1. Konsequente Durchführung der musikalisch-
same things, worrying about the transformation of places which he himself appears to experience as unpleasant into sequences of formal beauty.

The symphonists have found a way of building such matters of common reality into very pleasant sequences. By uses of tempo and rhythm, and by the large-scale integration of single effects, they capture the eye and impress the mind in the same way as a tattoo or a military parade might do. But by their concentration on mass and movement, they tend to avoid the larger creative job. What more attractive (for a man of visual taste) than to swing wheels and pistons about in ding-dong description of a machine, when he has little to say about the man who tends it, and still less to say about the tin-pan product it spills? And what more comfortable if, in one’s heart, there is avoidance of the issue of underpaid labour and meaningless production? For this reason I hold the symphony tradition of cinema for a danger (Grierson, 1966).

A similar critique might be levelled at Our Daily Bread which clearly demonstrates the sheer visual interest of the spectacle of industrial food production but omits to comment on it. It does not refer to the conditions of work or to the environmental or ethical problems associated with issues such as the origin of the seeds used, the nature and origin of the pesticide sprayed or show the impact of pesticides or animal waste from intensive farming on the environment.

Grierson acknowledges that there are means through which the symphony films manage to create drama and engagement, but argues that they fail to ‘apply ends to their observation and their movements’ (Grierson, 1966). His statements on what the ‘ends’ might be are somewhat cryptic, however, but chime with contemporary social and environmental documentary filmmaking. He is looking for ‘the best ends of citizenship’, for a ‘sense of social responsibility’. His remarks on the difficulties of what he calls ‘realist documentary’ demonstrate his own attitude towards the urban, where the documentary movement ‘has given itself the job of making poetry where no poet has gone before it, and where no ends sufficient for the purposes of art, are easily observed.’ (Grierson, 1966)
Grierson’s attitude towards documentary filmmaking has of course been superseded by a history in which the poetry of the city has been very evident and his narrow view of the purpose of documentary has been critiqued in productive ways for contemporary documentary filmmakers by writers on the form such as Brian Winston (Winston, 1995), Bill Nichols (Nichols, 2001), and more recently by Michael Chanan (Chanan, The Politics of Documentary, 2008) and Keith Beattie in his celebration of ‘documentary display’ (Beattie, 2008). Common to all these critiques is the argument that formalism does not exclude politics and history and, in the case of Beattie, that a significant tool in documentary filmmaking is showing. In the case of Our Daily Bread, a particular aspect of showing concerns ‘the shock associated with the visual presentation of otherwise proscribed sights’ (Beattie, 2008, p. 21) which Beattie links to Georges Franju’s film on animal slaughter in Paris, Le sang des bêtes (France, 1949), an important precursor to Our Daily Bread.

Although these critiques demonstrate the limitations of Grierson’s documentary preferences, the more important point concerns a broader understanding of spectatorship and the cognitive - including affective - processes involved in the reception of the film. Our Daily Bread is an example of filmmaking that relies on the audience’s subjectivity, on its interest in the image itself, what it shows, its framing and perspective, to justify itself as a film. There is an implicit assumption that there is an audience that is curious, that does want to see inside the factory farm, that the image will be revelatory to audiences who have not had the opportunity to see such images before, and that the revelation will be meaningful in a wider sense.

The Critical Response

In Projecting a Camera: Language Games in Film Theory Edward Branigan (Branigan, 2006) analyses the language use of various writers on film in order to understand how the camera is understood differently in different contexts rather than systematically as part of an identifiable grammar. In the following analysis I will use the writing of film reviewers in order to analyse the response to a formal film which is understood to have a political context. My analysis is more straightforward than that of Branigan in that I will put forward the idea that the critic goes through three separate processes of (1) interpretation, (2) scrutiny and (3) argumentation and that these constitute consistent responses to material communicated as part of a context designed to challenge the viewers understanding of the world. My argument follows
Branigan’s in that I do not suggest an alternative grammar of political filmmaking but that contemporary documentary filmmaking entails the exploitation of the interpretive strategies of a twenty-first century audience.

As an audience critics are often separated out from the general audience as specialists in their field with an unusual knowledge of film form and film history. Just as psychologists, linguists, and sociologists prefer naive subjects for their research, so too do analysts of film audiences prefer subjects who are not professionally involved in the field. (For a more wide-ranging discussion of documentary audiences see Thomas Austin’s work (Austin, 2007).) In this case, however, film critics represent a useful group in that they tend to be based in urban centres and not to have professional involvement in agriculture. Their knowledge of film aesthetics is useful in that they are able to offer a response to the formal aspects of the film that acknowledges its difference from the norm, allows the possibility for reflection, but also requires them to have seen the film through. Their role also requires them to formulate considered responses to the film taking account of information provided by press packs and adapting comments to the expectations of the vehicle for which they are writing. It is the formulation of the review in particular that is useful to my analysis here (1) in terms of the information it gives about how members of such a group arrive at the idea that it is their responsibility as an audience to respond to the issues represented in the film and (2) in terms of some possible personal responses to the images themselves.

In the film press critics and analysts have almost universally commented on the lack of words, the formal beauty or the sublime, symmetry, and distanced nature of the images, the implication of the viewer in the subject of food production represented and the opinion that Geyrhalter transfers responsibility for responding to the images on to audience members. The following table gives an overview on such statements in the seven different English-language film reviews taken mainly from the film press although the last in the table differs by being taken from a journal with a particular point of view on animal rights. The comments show that the reviewers, on behalf of the audiences for whom they are reviewing, demonstrate varying attitudes about the use of voiceover, the significance of aesthetics, and the acknowledgement of personal involvement, and have varying levels of acceptance of the idea that it is the responsibility of the viewer to come up with a response to the film. Behind many of the reviews it is possible to hear, often in explicit quotation marks, approaches to the film promoted by the press pack, which perhaps explains why the reviews read quite strikingly as
variations on a similar set of themes. In this way words from outside the text itself take on the role of supplying direction for interpretation, a process which in itself can be accepted or resisted by a reviewer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sicinski, Cineaste</th>
<th>No words</th>
<th>Formal beauty</th>
<th>The implication of the viewer in the subject</th>
<th>Responsibility transferred to the Viewer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘No commentary, no direct-cinema bobbing and weaving; just razor sharp camera set-ups down the middle.’</td>
<td>one very quickly admires the rigor and elegance Geyrhalter brings to his documentary observation. [Geyrhalter] dabbles in rigor and distanciation, and in this respect <em>Our Daily Bread</em> is a formidable and frequently beautiful esthetic object.</td>
<td>Our own cognizance of our place in the food web is the supplement <em>Our Daily Bread</em> calls forth, and Geyrhalter’s clinical approach seems to be largely about clearing a space for us to patch ourselves into the network on display.</td>
<td>The film’s imposition of distance is, in its finest moments, the heart of its interventionist potential. But at the same time, Geyrhalter hedges his bets, adopting a fashionable quietude while refusing to abjure more conventional, reassuring manipulations of cinematic time and space. His filmic disengagement transfers its moral quandary onto the viewer, and, through its serene formalist exactitude, seems to magically absolve itself.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Dox | It is completely without dialogue, voice-over, music, any information in the form of texts or anything, consisting only of pictures and natural sounds. | To watch this incredibly beautiful flow of images with such nauseating content has a strong effect. | The whole stylistic approach of Geyrhalter provokes our emotions. It is staring at us, saying: ‘Look! This is how your food is being made.’ | Then it is up to us to decide what we want. |

| Hobbes, Vertigo | There is no voiceover, there are no interviews, and there is no obvious angle that the filmmakers are taking. In its stance it appears to be studiously neutral. | even if they do reveal locations and routines jolting in their unfamiliarity to most viewers, in many cases scenes look like promotional films advertising the companies’ cleanliness and smooth operations. | As consumers, we are the end users of the natural products that travel through these processes, so it is valuable to make a few connections; between the crunch of lettuce in a sandwich for example and the figures kneeling behind a machine inching through the night across a field, between the anonymous sliver of beef and the half-ton of beast, stunned, turn and hung in an abbatoir, and between the salt for a savour and the 90 seconds of rapid descent in a mine shaft to caterpillar truchs that wait in the earth. | As Wolfgang Wederhofer – credited with editing and dramatic structure – says, he edited to create an open space onto which our thoughts could be projected. As Geyrhalter says “viewers should just plunge into this world and form their own opinions”. |

Director Nicolas Geyrhalter describes his film as ‘a widescreen tableau of a fest which isn’t always easy to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corless, <em>Sight and Sound</em></td>
<td>More conventional earlier works such as <em>Pripyat</em> and <em>Elsewhere</em> included interviews and character portraits; for this latest – a sobering look at today’s mechanised, industrial scale food production plants – Geyrhalter started out down the same route but quickly discarded that material, preferring a more distanced, minimal aesthetic which feels perfectly adapted to his subject-matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felperin, <em>Variety</em></td>
<td>Stripped of voice-over, interviews or obvious editorial stance, questing helmer Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s evocative docu “Our Daily Bread” looks at the agricultural industry across Europe through sound and images alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porton, <em>Cinema Scope</em></td>
<td>Our Daily Bread, like <em>Pripyat</em> and his following documentary, <em>Elsewhere</em> (2001), shuns voicover narration and the pontifications of talking heads. The tone of these documentaries is nevertheless far different from the pseudo-objectivity of classical cinema vérité.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porter, <em>Society and Animals</em></td>
<td>direct cinema point of view</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>digest – and in which we all take part.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geyrhalter’s striking compositions are often a discomfiting mix of alien, even awful strangeness and spellbinding beauty, giving them a pronounced charge which to some extend shields them from accusations of aestheticisation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the farming system’s gargantuan scale and inhuman efficiency does incite some form of grudging acknowledgement, especially given that we all to varying degrees rely on it and are therefore implicated in its ethical standards Notwithstanding the next line of the Lord’s Prayer (“and forgive us our trespasses”) from which the title is lifted, it’s difficult to discern any explicitly political or moralizing stance in <em>Our Daily Bread’s</em> calculatedly dispassionate gaze.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>precisely composed lensing and painstaking sound design create moments of sublime beauty, even when showing the production-line slaughter of animals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>almost every sequence showing a different agricultural process tends to end with shots of the labourers having a meal or beverage break – moments that underscore the humanity of the folk shown and the fact that all this is ultimately about creating sustenance. Although George’s Franju’s harrowing 1949 documentary short on slaughterhouses, “Blood of the Beasts,” represents one obvious touchstone here, this is not an infomercial for vegetarianism. Geyrhalter lets audiences draw their own conclusions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Termed surreal by certain critics, hyper-real is probably a more apt adjective; the lengthy takes and graceful tracking shots employed by Geyrhalter (who shot the film himself) almost possess the florid intensity of a Ralph Goings photorealist painting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Even vegetarians and vegans are complicit with the banalization of the Western diet that is graphically delineated in <em>Our Daily Bread</em>. Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s documentary on European factory farming has been widely praised for avoiding heavy-handed didacticism and assuming a critical distance that refuses to grab its audience by its lapels. For once, critical boilerplate about a film enabling audiences to make up their own minds is more or less true.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>No comments on beauty or aesthetics</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instead of a panacea, <em>Bread</em> 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.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although somewhat undermined by the needs of promotional and marketing activity, the minimal use of words in the film is clearly appreciated by critics as demonstrating an intelligent approach towards both the subject and the audience. This interpretation of the film’s strategies in itself represents part of the film’s achievement as an example of documentary film as public communication. The decision to use words minimally represents an attempt to match the film aesthetic to the footage, recognizing that the audience’s focus on creating their own mental representations of the objects represented in the image is in itself the most meaningful goal. The tendency towards the symmetrical, the estranged, the detached or the sublime in the framing of objects in scenes can be understood as a means to understand the filmmakers’ approach to the objects as an attempt to find the most effective angle from which the audience can form its representations, while the recognition of communal personal involvement is the realization of a sense of intimacy or common cause between filmmakers and viewers.

That the audience is free to make up its own mind is, or at least ought to be, a given in any form of public communication in a democracy and yet audiences worldwide are fully aware that media representations are about influence (Chanan, 2010, p. 152). Nevertheless, the oddity of the critics’ particular perception of such freedom in a formalist documentary film needs to be appreciated. The complete withdrawal of commentary and the focus on the aesthetic of the image has not in itself been analyzed as a form promoting democratic communication in the documentary, which is the unusual claim that is proposed here. Following on from the critical response tabled above, the intention here is to understand and analyze what is meant, in the case of this film by ‘making up your own mind’. Before analyzing the critics’ response further, the aim is to analyze, in terms of poetics or aspects of cognition, what might be understood by this phrase.

Sense, feeling, tone and intention

In his groundbreaking analysis of readers’ responses to poetry published in the book *Practical Criticism* I. A. Richards (1930) identified four levels of interpretation which readers need to account for in understanding a poetic text. What is still useful about Richards’s approach, particularly because he is dealing with a special kind of text rather than ordinary
conversation, is his division of understanding into categories which capture the relationships between people involved in poetry rather than the issues of the relationship between signs and signification. In this way his work not only fits in to contemporary ideas about the nature of human communication developed by linguistic pragmatists and cognitivists but also provides useful categories for characterizing how communication incorporates relationships into the interpretive process.

He labelled his categories: sense, feeling, tone and intention. ‘Sense’ is described, rather than defined, as ‘We speak to say something, and when we listen we expect something to be said. We use words to direct our hearer’s attention upon some state of affairs, to present to them some items for consideration and to excite in them some thoughts about these items.’ (Richards, 1930, p. 181) This couching of sense in terms of the expectations of partners in communication is consistent with Sperber and Wilson’s theory of communication and cognition which develops the ‘principle of relevance’, from one of William Grice’s ‘maxims of discourse’ developed in his William James lectures in 1967 and published in Studies in the Way of Words in 1989. Similarly, Richards’s account of ‘feeling’ as an integral part of what is communicated is consistent with current approaches that focus on the affective. Richards writes:

We also, as a rule, have some feelings about these items, about the state of affairs we are referring to. We have an attitude towards it, some special direction, bias or accentuation of interest towards it, some personal flavour or colouring of feeling; and we pick it up, rightly or wrongly; it seems inextricably part of what we receive; and this whether the speaker be conscious himself of his feelings towards what he is talking about or not. (Richards, 1930, p. 181)

In addition, Richards’s account of ‘tone’ anticipates Sperber’s exploration of the levels of metarepresentational ability displayed in human communication, which he links importantly to the idea of ‘epistemic vigilance’ and a theory of the role argumentation in communication which I shall return to later in this article when discussing the motivation for independent interpretive activity on the basis of the experience of viewing the film. ‘Tone’ is explained as:

Furthermore, the speaker has ordinarily an attitude to his listener. He chooses or arranges his words differently as his audience varies, in automatic or deliberate
recognition of his relation to them. The tone of his utterance reflects his awareness of this relation, his sense of how he stands towards those he is addressing. Again the exceptional case of dissimulation, or instances in which the speaker unwittingly reveals an attitude he is not consciously desirous of expressing, will come to mind. (Richards, 1930, p. 182)

Finally intention is the speaker’s

aim, conscious or unconscious, the effect that he is endeavouring to promote. Ordinarily he speaks for a purpose and his purpose modifies his speech. The understanding of it is part of the whole business of apprehending his meaning. Unless we know what he is trying to do, we can hardly estimate the measure of his success.

The decision to exclude verbal forms of communication from the film, aside from the title at the beginning and the information on shooting locations at the end, is testament to the energy and focus that human beings give to the process of verbal communication. Sperber and Wilson argue that as verbal communication automatically comes with a guarantee of relevance human beings tend to focus primarily on it in any given context where information is available from several sources. The film essayist Chris Marker demonstrated how words dominate images in his film *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957, France) in which the same footage of road workers doing repairs is shown three times each with a different voiceover commentary. This sequence expresses the basis for deep suspicion about voiceover commentary in documentary filmmaking in particular, but it also demonstrates the extraordinary power of words to direct the attention of the audience to the image in ways that make clear feeling, tone and intention. The decision to exclude words of various kinds – commentary, interview and titles – deals with the problem of distortion, but at the same time it loses the energy and focus which words also bring.

Mind reading or the representation of other’s and one’s own mental states

In my characterisation above, of the critics’ understanding of the filmmakers’ intention, the action expected of the audience is one that involves making mental representations involving the viewing of the film.
The filmmakers intend
That the audience should believe
That the filmmakers want
The audience to make up its own mind about industrial food production

This formulation does not involve an injunction to do anything outside the cinema and is one way in which the film can be critiqued as formalist and apolitical. It does, however, put the focus very strongly on the experience of viewing the film and on the scrutiny of one’s own responses, both emotional and rational. Characteristic of all the critics’ responses is the acknowledgement of personal involvement in food production through the consumption of food products, as indicated in the table above. This is generally read as part of the interpretation of the film through its portraits of agricultural workers having their meal breaks. The further step, however, has to do with whether the viewer accepts the challenge to form an independent opinion and what status the position taken up has in relation to the film.

What comes out of the reviews here is the importance of ambivalence, of the possibility that a number of reactions are possible and permissible. It is here that a further step in the process of responding to the film can be introduced which goes beyond interpretation to a different aspect of human cognition involving ‘epistemic vigilance’ (Mercier & Sperber, 2011) and reasoning (Sperber, et al., 2010). In their paper ‘Epistemic Vigilance’ Sperber et al make the claim that ‘humans have a suite of cognitive mechanisms for epistemic vigilance, targeted at the risk of being misinformed by others’ (Sperber, et al., 2010, p. 359). What is significant about their argument for the discussion here, is the idea that alongside the capacity for understanding the intentions of others, and the possibility of communication that brings with it, a mechanism for testing those intentions must have evolved at the same time to protect individuals from the errors of others or from breaches of trust (Sperber, et al., 2010, p. 360). What I would like to argue here in the case of the film Our Daily Bread is that the viewer’s response to the film, and reasoning about it, in response to the interpretation that the audience should make up its own mind, involves a process of scrutiny of the film and argumentation about it in relation to that interpretation. That is, these thoughts expressed about the film go beyond interpreting it towards a process of individual and institutional testing. Sperber et al argue:
Human social life (with some cultural variability) provides plenty of inputs relevant to the development of psychological mechanisms for epistemic vigilance. Moreover, interaction among epistemically vigilant agents is likely to generate not only psychological but also social vigilance mechanisms (Sperber, et al., 2010, p. 361).

The following table looks at how the reviewer’s comments might be seen as testing the source (Geyrhalter himself, the production company, the companies involved in the film), the content (in terms of background knowledge, here particularly personal experience), and, briefly, in terms of the reasoning used in relation to the idea of making up one’s own mind.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reviewer</th>
<th>Trust in the Source</th>
<th>Checking the Content against personal knowledge</th>
<th>Reasoning about the conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sicinski, Cineaste</td>
<td>Although <em>Our Daily Bread</em> is a German coproduction (it has some ZDF money behind it), this film is Austrian to the marrow.</td>
<td>If we were asked, most of us could articulate the basic structures of agribusiness; we know that pigs are slaughtered with machines, that a mostly immigrant work force toils in the fields, that our local grocery store is stocked by means of cruelty and the economic exploitation of a migrant underclass.</td>
<td>Perhaps the best way to explain what <em>Our Daily Bread</em> does and does not achieve is to consider Geyrhalter’s film alongside some recent experimental films by James Benning. […] <em>The comparison concludes that</em> ‘Benning’s formal procedure lays bare this question of systematic relationship and faux raccord,’ while Geyrhalter’s film ‘reflects the limitations of traditional humanist documentary filmmaking from Flaherty forward.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dox</td>
<td>Curiously, two feature docs have been released in Austria at the same time dealing with the same theme: modern industrialized fishery and agriculture – and both films were supported by the Austrian Film Institute and the Vienna Film Fund. [no comment on integrity of this film, but the other,</td>
<td>No personal experiences of knowledge mentioned.</td>
<td>Of course it is not just an observation; the whole stylistic choice of Geyrhalter provokes our emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[in comparison Wagenhofer’s <em>We Feed the World</em> ‘is engaging, feeds your brain while also showing the nauseating consequences of our, the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: Wagenhofer’s We Feed the World (2005) is described as ‘thorough and convincing’.</td>
<td>Consumers, demand for low prices and a wide assortment on our shelves.’</td>
<td>It was made between 2003-2005 in Europe ‘with the friendly support’ of the companies involved. This seems right; even if they do reveal locations and routines jolting in their unfamiliarity to most viewers, in many cases scenes look like promotional films advertising the companies’ cleanliness and smooth operations.</td>
<td>Anyone who has caught, killed, scalded, plucked and drawn just one chicken will know that to replicate it only any large scale, in a calm and efficient manner, requires another method entirely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: Hobbes, Vertigo</td>
<td>No personal experiences or knowledge mentioned</td>
<td>It’s that subtle eliciting of shaded, even contradictory responses, its stringent open-endedness as much as the meticulously double-edged compositions, that are the source of our Daily Bread’s lingering, unsettling effects.</td>
<td>Pic offers a tabula rasa in which some auds will see a horrifying indictment of the industry’s cruelties, others a realistic depiction of mechanized farming, and some a soft-spoken tribute to manual labor. Meanwhile precisely composed lensing and painstaking sound design create moments of sublime beauty, even when showing the production-line slaughter of animals. “Bread” should make rich food for thought at further fests before being digested by upmarket TV stations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: Corless, Sight and Sound</td>
<td>No personal experiences or knowledge mentioned</td>
<td>The birth of a calf in a huge food processing factory reminds us that family farms, where such births were once commonplace, are rarely glimpsed by most of us—except in old Hollywood movies.</td>
<td>We can only admire the nearly Martian-like gaze focused on industrial food production and conclude, with great resignation, that, for the foreseeable future at least, there is no way out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: Felperin, Variety</td>
<td>No personal experiences mentioned.</td>
<td>Geyrhalter’s reputation as an introspective poet of ecological crisis was established with Pripyat (1999), a starkly empathetic assessment of the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source: Porton, Cinema Scope</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Porter, Society and Animals

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.

What the restricted, direct cinema point of view cannot reveal, however, is that industrial agriculture is now the rule rather than the exception.

Bread rejects our ignorance, leaving us to insist that nonhuman and human alike be treated as persons instead of as machines.

Sperber et al argue that epistemic vigilance takes place in parallel with the derivation of relevance using the same background information and is not necessarily conscious.

Reasoning on the other hand is discussed by Mercier and Sperber as a deliberate and conscious process ‘a very special form of inference at the conceptual level, where not only is a new mental representation (or conclusion) consciously produced, but the previously held representations (or premises) that warrant it are also consciously entertained’ (Mercier & Sperber, 2011, p. 57). Both epistemic vigilance and arguments are useful to discuss in relation to films like Our Daily Bread considering the claim that such films play a role in raising awareness about issues and in promoting citizenship and political debate.

Looking at vigilance about the sources of information first, each review of course presents factual information about the film and its production as part of its function as a review. In the table above I have referred to places in the text where reviewers have mentioned sources of the image – the participants and the director – in terms of their legitimacy. Geyrhalter’s previous reputation plays a role in the acceptance of the film as a valuable contribution while the information about the willing participation of the companies contributes to an understanding of the film as overt and up-front rather than under cover. However, the lack of presence of the director, or a presenter, or the owners of the companies, means that there is no possibility to assess the people in terms of the personal impression they make. Nevertheless, the fact that the images are taken openly is interpreted by the author of the review for Society and Animals as indicating that the full facts are perhaps not revealed by the film, while the reviewer for Vertigo writes ‘this seems right.’ Confirming Sperber et al’s finding that people have a tendency to accept communication and not to spend too much effort on confirming the sources unless there is a good reason little space is actually given to the question of the accuracy of the portrayal in the reviews. Only the reviewer, for Animals and Society, points to the possible limitations of the point of view offered in terms of its factual portrayal, motivated by the issues of animals rights raised.
Only one reviewer makes reference to personal experience against which the images of the film might be checked. In the same year that the film came out the European Union did a survey of attitudes towards farmed animals across the 25 member states and 69% of respondents had visited a farm (in the UK the average was the same as for the whole of the EU). (TNS Opinion and Social, 2007) Nevertheless, the reasoning about the film, which centres on the task of making up one’s own mind, is not based on personal point of view. Two reviewers actually make up their minds – for Animals and Society and CinemaScope – interestingly one for and one against. One reviewer critiques the premises on which the question is based (Cineaste), others see the emotional response (Dox) and ambivalence (Sight and Sound) as the point, while the trade magazine Variety comments on the kind of distribution the film is likely to attract based on its open-endedness and its high production values. The response to the challenge is thus varied.

None of the reviewers puts forward the possibility however that the audience may not in fact be engaged by the film or the questions it poses. The lack of words and expert opinion is not seen as a barrier to engagement. One reviewer does question whether everyone has the stomach for the film (see the discussion below) and the reviewer for Variety suggests the film is suitable for festivals and upmarket television channels (rather than for prime time TV and general cinema distribution), but characteristic for all reviewers’ responses is the decision to pick out and list a number of striking scenes. ‘Particular shots and scenes linger in isolation in the memory afterward — for instance, of a mechanical arm that shakes all the olives from a tree in seconds, huge hangar-like spaces lined with shelves full of battery hens or rows and rows of tomato plants, receding to a vanishing point in the distance, or the sight of a cow caught in a holding contraption who in its panic tries to avoid the fatal bolt to its head as its dead herdmates trail away into the distance on a conveyor belt.’ (Felperin, 2006)

While comparisons with other films or the insertion of references to thinkers such as Heidegger or Marx are incorporated into the interpretation and the argument about the film, descriptions of scenes tend to be detached and illustrative. This points to an aspect of the film that is not discussed in these articles. While there is a real possibility of disengagement for many viewers, the film encourages forms of identification that substitute for a presenter or interviewees or active human subjects. In his account of an integrated emotional and cognitive response to film viewing, Torben Grodal writes of the tendency to look for
engagement with a point of view that will allow the viewer to respond as if in a simulated environment, a strategy that is less mentally exhausting than cognitive activity. One reviewer of *Our Daily Bread* describes a process of adapting to the film:

Watching these animals meet their mechanized deaths, I found myself moving from admiration for the film into a state of increased agitation. But eventually I got used to it, and that’s a large part of Geyrhalter’s accomplishment here. As you watch (presuming you don’t turn away—I know many avid filmgoers who wouldn’t last ten minutes with this film, and I intend no slight to them, nor do I mean to cast my own moral decision to stick it out as some sort of macho bravado), Geyrhalter’s formal control and somewhat fugue-like repetition structure conditions us to accept what we’re seeing. It becomes social content, and as we witness the abattoir workers slitting throats and then eating their lunch, we realize that they are doing their jobs (no revelation there), but we spectators are doing ours as well. Everybody’s settling in, allowing horror to atomize into a dissipated tinge, a grim nod.

In this passage various possibilities for identification are visible – first with the filmmakers (admiration), then with the animals (agitation), then with the workers (witness), before finally the role of spectator is located in preference and then critiqued. It is worth looking at the ways in which the formal aspects of the film work both with and against identification and towards acknowledgement of the position of the spectator. In general documentaries use narrative and/or commentary and/or a presenter in front of the camera to elicit engagement from a viewer with the material. (Grodal) Cinéma vérité documentaries use handheld techniques which tend to create a sense of inclusion in the narrative, turning the idea of the camera into a personification of a point of view that is in the midst of the action. Observational documentary, sometimes referred to as ‘fly on the wall’ approximates to the technique used here but has not historically involved framing for aesthetic or formal effect.

The cinematography in Geyrhalter’s film cannot be categorized as either a ‘fly on the wall’ or as a ‘fly in the soup’ approach. It could be called ‘the fly in the best seat in the house’ perspective, inverting the tendency of observational cinema to adopt what David MacDougall refers to in *Transcultural Cinema* as the ‘unprivileged camera style’ (MacDougall, 1998, pp.
In Our Daily Bread the camera position is overtly privileged. It has gained access to places the general public does not enter. Unusual camera positions in spaces above or below the floor signify that a process of finding the optimal position from which to see the object of interest has taken place no matter how high, or low, how oblique or well timed that positioning has to be. As MacDougall describes the privileged camera position in the fiction film:

there is no acknowledged observer, and in any case one cannot imagine an unknown person being given such access to other people’s lives. These films posit an invisible observer with special powers that merge the consciousness of the author and audience. The viewpoint is rarely that of a character. Frame enlargements from fiction films make it evident that most point-of-view shots are in fact only analogues of the viewpoint of a character. The eyes of the actors rarely look directly into the camera as they would if it were substituted for one of their interlocutors. Because of this, documentary films can adopt the shooting style of fiction without the contradiction that the camera has actually “become” a nonfictional person’ (MacDougall 1998, 205).

In the documentary the positioning of the camera for optimal viewing creates a restful, accepting relationship between the audience and the objects of contemplation, minimizing the possibility of an interpretation equating camera position with the feeling of the filmmakers towards their subject. The images that clarify the consequences of the rationalised, utilitarian treatment of animals in factory farming convey cleanliness, order, and control so that the culture of the high-tech agricultural industry represented does not conflict in any way with that of the image making or highlight the intervention. Although it would be possible to argue that this congruence indicates that the filmmakers in fact ally themselves with the position of the factory farmers – a position that can also be asserted from comments made by Geyrhalter and his editor Wolfgang Widerhofer (Icarus Films, 2006).

This style of image making with its long takes and often still camera is the same as that of the ‘deadpan aesthetic’ adopted by some art photographers during the 1990s. Charlotte Cotton describes it thus:

The adoption of a deadpan aesthetic moves art photography outside the hyperbolic, sentimental and subjective. These pictures may engage us with emotive subjects, but
our sense of what the photographers’ emotions might be is not the obvious guide to understanding the meaning of the images. The emphasis, then, is on photography as a way of seeing beyond the limitations of individual perspective, a way of mapping the extent of the forces, invisible from a single human standpoint, that govern the man-made and natural world. Deadpan photography may be highly specific in its description of its subject, but its seeming neutrality and totality of vision is of epic proportions (Cotton, 2009, p. 80).

The elimination of authorial feeling is also a way in which the significance of the image can be seen as scientific or as historical even at the time when its source is present. It can be perceived as a lasting artefact that is a product of a particular time and place, something that can be returned to when the world it represents has changed. In this way it develops the practice established by the pioneering German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. The Becher’s work documenting the industrial era in Europe and America is described by Suzanne Pagé - in words that are also relevant for images showing industrial agriculture - as documenting an era when ‘a universal “technical” architecture grew, rarely with any claim to aesthetic value; but, owing to the overriding functionality and the kind of scale this imposed, [...] acquired such an extraordinary monumentality and effect that these engineers’ pieces often dominated their environment no less than the cathedral dominated the medieval city’ [my emphasis]. She describes the Bechers’ work as designed ‘to salvage testimonies of past developments in the shape of “readable” documents for posterity’ (Becher & Becher, 1985, p. 11).

Geyrhalter’s images are of the architecture and machinery created for the purposes of industrialised agriculture. Like the Bechers he takes great care in placing the subjects, adapting the position of the camera and the framing to suit the functionality of each machine and its associated process. Sometimes both the camera and the object are still, as in the case of vast greenhouses shown at night. In this case different angles on the subject give a sense of space and scale. In other cases the camera remains still as the subject moves slowly across the frame as in the case of the milking cows in stalls designed to move the animals along as they are milked. Slow tracking is used to explore further the relationship between space and process, particularly where it involves movement along rows of produce for quality control, harvesting or cleaning.

The colouring of the images is also manipulated to bring out the use of colour within the industrialised environment to create clarity within the space. The relationship between order,
control and aestheticism is frequently brought out where the images echo the icons of nineteenth century realist painting. A field of sunflowers is held in a shot showing the movement of the heads in a light breeze. The sound of a light aircraft approaching is soon confirmed by the appearance of the plane in the centre of the frame spraying the field as it flies overhead. That the plane is dead centre speaks of the parallels between the planning behind the field and its crop and the work of the cinematographer in capturing this precise moment. The precision machinery of mass production also recalls a visual heritage of surrealist framings. A shot of a machine gutting factory farmed fish, with its precise, jerky, strangely animal-like movements, is held for 41 seconds as eleven fish are processed.

This process in Geyrhalter’s film is not historical or comparative as in the case of Bernd and Hilla Becher and so the images cannot yield any precise typological information. The film does, however, constitute a close study of process and problem solving, revealing precise relationships between the biological cycles, the work carried out by humans and the design of machinery in the pursuit of mass production. It provides a reflection on historical developments through the connections that might resonate with the viewer with the history of agricultural images and with the history of the mechanisation of farming. Just as Pagé describes the Becher’s work as ‘a visual anthology of the era and, to an equal extent, its metaphysical mirror-image’ (Becher & Becher, 1985, p. 12), Geyrhalter’s film is an intimate unblinking stare that both acknowledges and shapes its subject, organising its processes into readable sequences and cycles of production.

**Conclusion: Arguments without Words**

The minimisation of verbal communication in *Our Daily Bread*, together with the use of a stylistically unmarked, or ‘privileged’ camera, draws attention away from the position of the filmmakers with respect to industrial farming, and directs it towards the visibility of production processes, offering an embodied account of the mechanics of plenty for contemplation. Critical responses to the film, to some extent directed by press material, and to some extent influenced by personal knowledge and argumentation, demonstrate a sense of responsibility both for the images and for responding to them. In this way the film can be regarded as a contribution to public debate not only about the subject of food production but also about the forms in which public information can be disseminated. Negotiating between food producers typically shy of public scrutiny but squeezed between the demand for mass
cheap food and the continual reduction of raw material prices (in the middle of the
noughties), and consumers ignorant of how modern agribusiness works, the film simply
opens up a space for contemplation. It is not suggested that this is the only means for the
disseminating information democratically—the participatory or communitarian film
mentioned above has perhaps more popular appeal and more effective outcomes through its
links to activism—but as an experiment in how far an audience can be left to ‘make up its
own mind’ by withdrawing commentary and formalizing its editing decisions, the film goes
some way towards demonstrating the capacity for self-determined spectatorship of this kind.
Geyrhalter’s film is also not alone in its aesthetics – he, Michael Glawogger, Ulrich Seidl,
and Raymond Depardon are just a few of the European filmmakers working on the European
psyche in this orderly yet potentially disruptive vein.

**Works Cited**


Rijavec, F. (Director). (2002). *A Million Acres a Year* [Motion Picture].


Spurlock, M. (Director). (2004). *Supersize Me* [Motion Picture].


Woolf, A. (Director). (2007). *King Corn* [Motion Picture].