

Film Review

The Slaughter

Jason B. Kohl

2013, 15 min.

At first glance, Jason B. Kohl's *The Slaughter*, a fifteen-minute docu-fiction film, has all the makings of an earnest farm-to-table cliché, right down to its closing insistence that the film's ostensible star—a Mangalitsa heritage-breed hog named Marty—was killed humanely. But as it hovers over the many labors of slowly transforming a living animal into meat, the film provokes key questions concerning what it might mean to actually make “connections” to the beings that comprise our food (cf. Weiss 2014).

The basic story is simple enough. Set across a Michigan afternoon, the symbolism of hard work that underlies butchering an animal acts as a dramatic foil that divides and tenuously unites a loafing son with his stern, overbearing father. Marty is not the only one facing the end of the line. The alcoholic and unemployed son soon learns that an offer on the property is due imminently, and his days of living at his father's house are over. The impending sale, the film's tenor suggests, would mark not only the end of their ailing relationship, but also of the family farm that is barely holding it together.

The stages of slaughter—and it is a drawn-out slaughter, not a mere killing—come to offer life lessons while functioning as something of a litmus test as to whether the son might be able to inherit these hogs and all the values embedded within them. The film is brutally visceral to the end, offering perhaps the most realistic depiction of the making of meat captured on film. It strenuously grinds through the loading, transporting, stunning, leg spasms, artery-slitting, bleeding, fur-tearing, and sawing until the only stage that remains, for the film's climax, is the splitting of the skull with a cleaver as the hog's brain matter quivers on camera for a couple of long seconds. The point is not an aestheticization of death. Kohl's own father imports these animals from Austria, and the director—self-consciously influenced by

the food movement's tenets of transparency—hopes to suspend the experiential distance between urban eaters, the animals they ingest, and those who are tasked with ending life to make meat.

One might critique the film in that, despite depicting “the sacrifices made for the products we enjoy every day” (Director's Statement), it skims over hard questions concerning the ability of farmers to make a living from intimate forms of agriculture. The father lives in a comfortable house, drives an F-150, imparts timeworn lessons about the “good business” of using all the organs, supports his deadbeat son, and seems—at least by my count—to derive this income from a grand total of twelve hogs. In *The Slaughter's* rush to confront the unvarnished textures of life and death, the very real tensions between ethical values and market value are absent from the film. One could also quibble that this solemn Mangalitsa slaughter brings us no closer to American meat, standing removed from the disassembly line that unflinchingly snuffs out 99% of farm animals. While certainly a product of the spirit of the times, ardently willing new meanings onto food, the film remains a profound viewing experience that is nothing short of immersive in its depiction of the cessation of life intrinsic to eating. The tensions between father and son are as hard to watch as the slow tearing of fur from skin. And the drawn-out exertion neatly illustrates the forgotten forms of craft still embedded in many rural bodies, which are only now being redeemed from the dustbin of history.

What resonates with me most—in part, as an ethnographer of factory farms—is Kohl's implicit depiction of the hard and unending work, beyond the tangible physical toil, that underlies learning how to kill well. His film lingers on the small gestures that people take to matter even if they are never wholly adequate to the task: a toast of rum to Marty's life, care in the placement of a bolt gun for a painless death, a moment of silence to mark this act as a consequential event. Yet, at the same time, it does not try to evade that this is an avowedly humanist drama. The death of a pig is never able to emerge as anything more than a setting for the trials of the characters'

own lives. Complicating too-easy food movement discourses of intimacy with animals, the land, and food, *The Slaughter* seems to respectfully suggest—while perhaps even querying its own realistic aesthetics—how even those who are tasked with killing, in the flesh, still remain distanced from the process. The basic question of what it means to be connected to the beings and worlds that compose sustenance and livelihoods is

not one that the film ever tries to resolve, but it is a line of inquiry that the film pursues until the end.

—Alex Blanchette, Tufts University

REFERENCE

Weiss, Brad. 2014. "Eating Ursula." *Gastronomica* 14(4): 17–25.