



• *Fragile Harvest's* worrying march of mass production

Robert Lang's
Fragile Harvest

"Nature and human nature have been in partnership for 18,000 years. Now we're going it alone," says narrator David Suzuki in this compelling documentary about modern agricultural practices which have increased the vulnerability of food crops and the genetic strains on which they are based. The focus of the film is on the wholesale elimination of plant species to suit the needs of agribusiness. Multi-national corporations are taking over the seed business: breeding, marketing and engineering seeds that are tailored to respond to the chemicals these same corporations peddle around the world.

The result is that crops are no longer an indigenous part of the local climate and conditions, widely diverse enough genetically to withstand variations in the threats from insect predators, rainfall patterns, and soil conditions. Instead, monoculturing prevails. Miles and miles of land are planted to a single crop from seeds genetically engineered to be entirely uniform. While this practice may yield a uniform product, such as tomatoes that all ripen at the same time, have a tougher skin to withstand shipping, and a uniform size for packing, such crops can be entirely wiped out at one stroke by a new predator or a change in climate – factors that a widely diversified crop without withstand.

Obviously, agribusiness is less con-

cerned with feeding a hungry world than with controlling world-wide agricultural practice for its own profit. "The pesticide developers are now the plant breeders," and the entire food chain is rapidly becoming "an assembly line." In recent years, there have been over one thousand seed company takeovers by the multinationals, which are also buying up strains in Turkey, China and Peru to increase plant resistance in the lab.

Fragile Harvest is a highly informative look at the crucial issues surrounding the future of the world's food supply. Shot in Peru, Turkey, North America, and Ethiopia, the film makes us vividly aware that "the vast treasury of diverse genes" built up over the millennia in the plant world is rapidly being robbed and destroyed. Companies like Shell, Dupont and Monsanto market practices that not only deplete the gene pool, but also replace farmers with machinery – forcing people into the cities where there are often no jobs to be had. By making clear the complex interconnections among business, politics, and food supply, *Fragile Harvest* contributes to the growing radicalization around the question of world famine.

A particular irony in the film is located in its sections dealing with Ethiopia. By now, there are few North Americans unaware of the plight of the Ethiopian people suffering from the drought that has devastated their food supplies. What is less well-known is the fact that Ethiopia is one of the world's richest storehouses of plant diversity. Crops such as wheat, barley, onion, bananas and coffee originated and developed there over thousands of years and then spread around the world. The famine relief that has been sent to Ethiopia from different countries returns home the very crops that were

developed by Ethiopian farmers long ago.

In an interconnected world, it is no longer possible to ignore the repercussions and reverberations of practices and events removed from our immediate concern. *Fragile Harvest* continually underlines these interconnections, especially through excellent interviews with people like Dr. Erna Bennett, Dr. Charles Rich, Dr. Melaku Worede, Lynn Grace and Pat Moony – each of whom adds another insight to our growing understanding of this complex issue.

Visually, there are many extraordinary moments in *Fragile Harvest*, especially shots of gigantic tractors and harvestors creeping across massive fields like ominous steel locusts. I also liked a section incorporating ads and billboards used in Third World countries to hard-sell by the chemical corporations. As well, there is a witty sequence shot at a board meeting of a food company planning to introduce Veggie Snacks – "an upscale opportunity to enjoy vegetables."

Producer/director Bob Lang has done a fine job on this film, which aired Feb. 5 on CBC-TV's *The Nature of Things*. His commitment to food and agricultural issues, present in many of his previous documentaries, has here culminated in a highly informative, compelling, and even frightening work that coincides with growing public concern and interest in world food issues. *Fragile Harvest* will certainly find ready audiences across Canada and North America.

Joyce Nelson •

FRAGILE HARVEST p./d. Robert Lang assoc.p./sc.dev. Jy Chipezak sc. Amanda McConnell ed. Michael Bennett narr. David Suzuki. Col. 16mm, running time: 60 minutes, 1986 dist. Kensington Communications Inc., 490 Adelaide St. W., Suite 304, Toronto, ON, M5V 1T4, (416) 362-9822

OCTOBER STRANGER

The schoolteacher comes on the bus from Toronto to Sioux Lookout and on to the Indian reserve for three weeks one summer. Her poetry class is a mixture of teens, an older woman, and John, a young man who wants to be a writer. There's a mutual attraction between John and the teacher – she's in the process of getting a divorce and he says it's the same with his girl Ida.

The three weeks pass too quickly for the pair; the teacher leaves and John misses her. He lives with his father and they go hunting together. The father preserves the old customs and rituals and, before skinning a moose carcass, he says an Indian prayer. When his son points out that they are Christians, the father says it doesn't hurt to keep up the customs – just in case.

After John gets a letter from the teacher in Toronto, he leaves his father. Finally, he's in the city and with the teacher. A voice-over recites, "I don't know this October Stranger/each dawn groping for an alarm clock/selecting a blue polyester suit/that used to belong to an Indian/from the back forests of Northern Ontario."

Loosely based on the 1976 poem by Ojibwa writer George Kenny *October Stranger* is a pleasant, reflective, obviously heartfelt look at an Indian who, as the poem says "writes his stories and poems as if Chaucer himself was kicking him along, never letting him rest, this Indian dedicated to becoming published." Beautifully shot by Mark Irwin at the Lac Seul Reserve in Northern Ontario, leisurely paced, and well-handled by director Alan Collins, the only small jarring note is the music, a mish-mash of rock, folk songs, and some Indian chanting *Award for Best Short subject, 1985 American Indian Film Festival, San Francisco.*

p. Christopher Lowry, d. Alan Collins, cam. Mark Irwin, sc. Denis LaCroix, Clint Bomphray, lp. Ronald Jones, Rene Highway, Ron Cook, Doris Linklater, Graham Greene. Running time: 28 mins. Col., 16mm/videotape. Availability: Ralph Ellis Enterprises, 1231 Yonge St., Ste. 300, Toronto M4T 2T8 (416) 924-2186.

MITZY

A cute and frisky cat named Mitzy frolics in the backyard, and has a few mild adventures. Permeated with a fey, wispy charm, this tiny little animated fragment by a former Sheridan College student shows promise.

d./animator: Jenny Ferenczi, 16mm/3/4 inch video, Col., 2-1/2 mins., Availability: J.J. Ferenczi Design, Music 2000, 787 Lawrence Ave. W. Toronto M6A 1C2 (416) 781-0716.

MINI - REVIEWS

by Pat Thompson



• Here Today's lead Ingrid Veninger

HERE TODAY...WHERE TOMORROW?

Winner of the competition announced by the Ontario Women's Directorate on International Women's Day in 1984, Galacom Media's **Here Today... Where Tomorrow?** is an unforced, undeniably nice approach to planning a career at the high school stage, and mainly addressed to girls. Within a docudrama format, Jill (Ingrid Veninger) struggles with science and math which seem abstract to her as well as to her friends... "but I'm not going to be a scientist" and "Grade 13 calculus will be a disaster!"

There are some group set-ups of discussions among male and female teenagers which strike this reviewer as excessively cautious, right-wing, and downright goody-goody. But there's no use denying it's a cold, hard world, and career planning comes early in life. It's to be hoped it doesn't take the fun out of being young and eager, hopeful and bubbly.

The positive and upbeat air is wafted along at a good pace. The

theme song starts with, "No-one seems to understand your hopes and fears" and ends, "You've got to try a little harder." In between the kids generally appear to speak their own pieces, and talk about guilt, mother-power and stark horror, "You don't want to be one of those kids washed up at 40!" At the end, Jill's friend spurs her on, "It's only a couple of years - how bad can it be..."

The full house at the premiere at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto loved the film - though one suspects the audience was packed with students eager to see themselves on-screen, plus a fair sprinkling of parents and interested government people. However, the film puts across its points with clarity and, within its aims and parameters, is done with a certain charm and competency. It will no doubt have a strong appeal to its target audience.

p./d. Marilyn A. Belec, sc. Belec/Robert Fyfe, cam. Philip Earnshaw, mus. Andrew Thompson, l.p. Ingrid Veninger, Cree Summer Francks, Jayne Eastwood, Lizanne Hanks, Rachel Crawford, Gina Wilkinson, Jessica Booker, Wanda Cannon. **Running time:** 26 mins. **Col., 16mm/videotape.** **Availability:** Ontario Women's Directorate (416) 965-1537.

SCAN LINES

by Joyce Nelson

Two minutes

The two-minute TV clip opens with a long shot of the spacecraft climbing steadily up into the sky, its booster rockets billowing massive trails of white smoke behind it. On the audio-track, Mission Control and Shuttle Commander Scobee are exchanging data about APU's (auxiliary power units), velocity, altitude. Cut to a telephoto closeup on the right side of the space shuttle Challenger, and the words from Mission Control, "Challenger, go with throttle up." "Roger, go with throttle up," confirms Scobee. Cut to a wider view of the shuttle, which suddenly bursts into a huge, fiery, gold-and-white cloud with two strange Y-shaped tendrils shooting off and down across the blue sky. Forty seconds of silence as the TV camera pans with the exploding debris.

On Tuesday, Jan. 28, this two-minute TV clip dominated the airwaves of North America. Although the only TV network covering the Challenger launch live was Ted Turner's Atlanta-based Cable News Network, within six minutes of the disaster CBS, ABC and NBC - shortly followed in Canada by CTV first, then CBC - broke into their regular programming and stayed with live coverage for five hours straight: playing and replaying and playing again this eerie, two-minute videoclip.

Time magazine called it "a nightmarish image destined to linger in the nation's shared consciousness." Senior writer Lance Morrow stated: "Over and over, the bright extinction played on the television screen, almost ghoulishly repeated until it had sunk into collective memory. And there it will abide, abetted by the weird metaphysics of videotape, which permits the endless repetition of a brute finality." CBC's *The Journal* called this two-minute videoclip an "apocalyptic image." Writing for *The Toronto Star*, Joe Erdelyi referred to the need to "wake up to the reality of what the screen portrays with such cold artistic beauty."

It is perhaps this last point - the "cold artistic beauty" of the TV imagery - that most deserves comment, and contemplation.

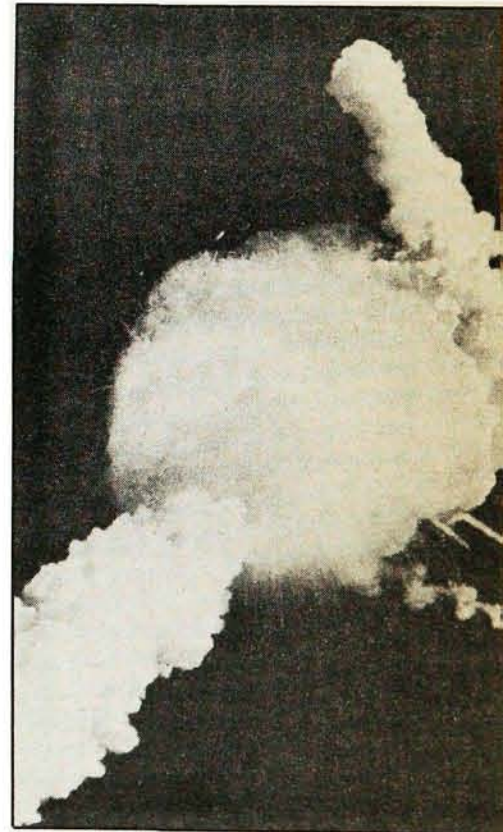
Unlike many people, the only TV coverage of the Shuttle disaster that I watched was that provided by CBC's *The National/The Journal* at 10:00 that evening. There, the two-minute videoclip was replayed at least four times. What immediately struck me while watching the clip, was the strange, uncanny, aesthetic beauty of the imagery - like some perfectly shot sequence of fireworks in summer. Maybe because of the smooth, even panning of the camera as it followed the exploding parts across the sky. Maybe because of the forty seconds of silence beneath the sequence that highlighted the spectacular quality of the visuals. Maybe because I've watched too much TV.

As Joe Erdelyi observed, this two-minute clip did convey to me a "cold artistic beauty" devoid of any emotion save

for a kind of technological awe. Not an awe of technology, but rather a machine-like awe for the performance - even the spectacular failure - of another machine, and the success of camera-eye witnessing it.

It was only when I heard another human voice actually expressing the cold, emotionless void I had momentarily fallen into that I was able to snap out of a technological fascination with the imagery. Johnson Space Center commentator in Houston, Steve Nesbitt, had paused for those forty seconds of silence while the television screen filled with exploding pyrotechnics. When he resumed his narration, it was to say, in a voice completely devoid of emotion: "Flight controllers are looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously, a major malfunction."

The shock of Nesbitt's utterly technological response snapped me back to the land of the living and the dying. But up to that point, the obliteration



tion of the seven crew-members had momentarily faded from my consciousness, completely overshadowed by the cold, artistic beauty of the TV images.

I suspect that my own response might not be atypical, that many people watching their TV screens experienced this void of technological fascination, this reduction of their human response before the TV spectacle of awesome explosion. In this sense, *The Journal* was right: it was, and is, an apocalyptic image.

While others claim that it's the visuals of this two-minute clip that'll remain embedded in their minds, for me it's that efficient, emotionless, technological voice of Mission Control clamly understating: "Obviously, a major malfunction."