See the Blind Spot, a new documentary

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- Film Review, State of the Planet Review

- The clearest wake-up call on energy to date

Culture Change Letter #223 - Blind Spot is a critical education for our time. Destined to win awards "if anyone's listening," the hour and-a-half documentary tells a clear but most alarming story through profound interviews. They are draped by artful imagery and restrained, saddening music coloring the picture of our planet and species in peril. Everyone should see Blind Spot, even the very well informed.

The "blind spot" is none other than the big issue of our time. So it is essential to renew and expand our awareness and take the next step. Blind Spot helps us get there as much as any film or book ever made, as the work is up-to-date. It might be unsurpassed forever, depending on what happens in coming months as petrocollapse continues its phases in creating a new Depression and probably much worse.

Blind Spot does not show us all, but the viewer must seek further and get up out of the chair to take action. The film-makers know that knowledge of energy and history is essential for intelligent action. Why take action, though, if our society has had so much success with expansion as a measure of progress? "Expansion was tantamount to progress," says Overshoot author William Catton in the film, and he goes on to reveal that "the whole study of history has been a non-ecological approach." The visuals back this up perfectly, showing the impact of human population exploding from less than a billion before the industrial revolution less than two hundred years ago to over six and a half billion today.

The Blind Spot is about our awful situation, i.e., our fate. Our destruction of the beautiful Earth! Ending our own story through our stupidity! No other film with the exception of What a Way to Go has shown me in more stark or clear terms what we are up against. Author Richard Heinberg is in both films, and has had two years between their making to be able to tell us in Blind Spot, "This is the most serious problem to face the human race since we've been humans."

Modern humanity's blind spot and remedies

Art and media endeavor to influence, change, and ideally honor our world. The method can be primarily entertainment or straight truth. When a person feels the calling to "make a difference," the choice can be either to tell a story to captivate and enchant, or present an argument through facts in an honest (and perhaps passionate) fashion. The latter way is the harder and more lonely path, but it has the advantage of standing out clearly as information and offering wisdom. A documentary film, for example, is openly available and known to seekers and students of our common experience -- and plight, as it happens. Such a work is not lost in the more popular catalog of romances, adventures, and comedies.

After viewing Blind Spot, I had more than the usual thoughts and feelings I have when exposed to a conscious portrayal of industrial society's techno-humanity. Having learned enough, many years ago, about what climate destruction and petroleum dependence mean for life's ability to sustain itself -- filling me with despair if I were psychologically so inclined -- I was not depressed by Blind Spot. It certainly reached me, which is to say it turned a key so I would reach myself. The primary result from watching this film and thinking about it for a few days was to come up with the question, "Why are we here?"

It is not a stupid question unless taken literally and answered in a too-rational way. There is no correct or incorrect answer. Rather, the meaning of the question is that it is at some point asked by everyone. Why are we here? It is best answered with a feeling that can be described in words, but better shown or acted out. The question reveals that consciousness exists and thrives. Religionists have co-opted the question by answering with something like, "God put us here to serve Him." A more humanist answer is that we are here to have people say after we're gone that we were good.

Regarding the billions of people on Earth, there's a question that always goes unanswered: how conscious are people in general? Are most people simple and far from conscious compared to a philosopher? We have to give a time-context. The most ancient and prehistoric people were appropriately conscious -- and had to be so. They were at one with nature, and people only recently came up with the mutant idea that people are placed above all of life, above the Earth and the Universe. Once they went down that road, they had to humble themselves by coming up with the "supreme being" or sky god. Then these anthropocentrists could pretend not to be anthropocentric, and didn't have to make an effort any more to be conscious. Without consciousness of a free self, thinking is done for us and we are led. We are led by those who have mastered ways of manipulating people like trained animals, thereby maximizing personal gain.

The blind spot we have today is that of being unconscious. This is why we need a complete cultural change. At first glance, the film Blind Spot seems to be saying that we have a blind spot called peak oil. Or it's "energy addiction" or "growth" or the proliferation of technology. In the film we are educated by a series of writers about modern afflictions of polluting via massive energy consumption. The most clear warning for the average person is that we've gotten to the point of jeopardizing our ability to continue feeding ourselves.

Listen to the wise

The eldest interviewed subjects captured by Blind Spot are Albert Bartlett and William Catton, leading thinkers already assured a place in any list of modern practical thinkers able to capture our essential flaw as a culture. Also on that list near the top would be M. King Hubbert who died in 1989 at age 85.

What the wise thinkers captured in Blind Spot have imparted is a statement to the seeker: what's needed to know about our modern way of living. This is the clearest, most logical wake-up call to date. The numbers involving pollution and species extinction are already taken into account by any deeply conscious thinker when commenting on our society. So it is the distilled conclusions these men and women have to offer that is the greatest gift for today's world. The makers of Blind Spot knew this, and did their level best to bring out essential knowledge and wisdom. There is no agenda to Blind Spot. The film does not seek to make a profit, and there are no actors looking to advance their careers. There are no corporate sponsors. It's because of corporate polluters supporting Public Broadcasting System that we depend on independents such as Randall Wallace and his team to create Blind Spot. This work was not done to inflate their egos. The film makers are off camera, only orchestrating a trip for a potential seeker.

When a seeker or serious student sits down for a dose of information and truth, it is like the hungry person who selects full nutrition rather than empty calories. But one finds, if quality is obtained, the experience is not a forced ordeal to "eat our greens." Because some of us can appreciate a product of the Earth to give us long-term sustenance and staying power. With this kind of fuel for the mind and soul, dreaming can be explored. Then the dreamer or diner or hunter can grasp and articulate deeply our big picture. Or, savor the statements of a wise man sought out for a wider audience:

Joseph Tainter, historian and anthropologist, tells the camera in Blind Spot what he believes is the main lesson of defunct ancient societies: "Complexity always costs." These societies experienced rising costs of various kinds due to greater complexity, such as with a larger military. "Ultimately, they reached the point where their complexity could not be sustained on the basis of solar energy on the basis of agriculture... they were solving problems that did not net a positive return... It was very costly to the Roman Empire and it (the empire) was no longer worthwhile... The great difficulty is maintaining the standard of living that people in the industrialized nations are accustomed to, and the social and political unrest that may follow from this."

William Catton follows such illumination with an up-to-date analysis on our modern species. He says in the movie, "In addition to becoming more numerous, we have become more voracious by developing all this technology that makes use of fossil fuels. We have in effect changed ourselves from one kind of species into another, from homo sapiens to homo colossus. We have all this machinery. We are colossal in our impacts."

Al Bartlett is a widely published physicist in Colorado who has exposed since the 1960s the folly of exponential growth in human numbers and the "development" built where nature reigned. He calls his countrymen "innumerate," as in illiterate, and has seen petroleum dependence as more than a problem of maintaining travel. He does not have to be farmer to tells us about the agricultural sector. Of relevance to recent events he warns in the movie, "Energy prices are going to go up, with fluctuation, as a rising trend."

Ted Caplow makes clear that "The energy crisis becomes a food crisis. Biofuels exacerbate this."

Richard Heinberg says in the movie, "Now virtually all the work is being done by fuel-fed machinery. The contribution of muscle power is virtually nonexistent by comparison (to a century ago)." This point is backed up by one the best exponents on the meaning of peak oil, Roscoe Bartlett, Congressman from Maryland, who tells us, "We're trying to find more and more ways to continue pigging out on energy rather than recognize oil is finite... We above all the other cultures in the world are going to be most challenged by the necessity of transitioning from the fossil fuels to renewables... I don't think it's going to be seven billion people (world population).. To really do something to mitigate the consequences we would have had to have started twenty years ago."

To some of us, this state of energy waste is frightening and disgusting. Others find this just fine -- but they don't want to go extinct; they want their cake and eat it too. One way to avoid life-style change is to harp on oil-industry profits and the "high" price of gasoline. Air pollution specialist Terry Tamminem reveals much about the payback that industry gets from lobbying: a 1,000 to one return, based on dollars contributed to change regulations favorably for profits.

The other "players" are Kenneth Deffeyes, Bill McKibben, Matt Savinar, Lester Brown, James Hansen, Mary Anne Hitt, David Pimentel, Elke Weber, Max Fraad Wolff, David Korten, Jason Bradford, and Derrick Jensen -- all worthy of our attention, bringing fine contributions to this film.

What we're up against

M. King Hubbert said in 1988, in response to a question from a solar power entrepreneur about society's inability to conserve energy,

"We’re dealing with a cultural problem. We’ve had nothing but exponential growth for 200 years. Most of us, the history we carry in our head is limited to about the American Revolution, or when our ancestors came over from wherever they came from. And during that period we’ve had nothing but exponential growth, and so we’ve in effect developed an exponential growth culture. That’s the reason that one of the most ubiquitous expressions in the language right now is growth -- how to maintain our growth. If we could maintain it, it would destroy us."

For those of you who don't know, Hubbert gave his name to the Hubbert Curve, that analyzes oil extraction patterns for an oil field or region -- and the planet. He accurately predicted in 1956 the U.S. peak of oil extraction in 1970 (a Blind Spot statistic).

We are living in the final days of the poverty of materialism and the disease of isolation through non-community. This does not apply to most of the world, but to enough in the most "advanced" societies that we are pulling everyone else

down to drown in the cesspool of pollution.

I'm sitting in a bar in Portland with pen and paper, where I'm distracted by tempers flaring regarding a basketball game aired on the TV set. As always, none of the discussion I'm hearing has anything to do with the fate of the Earth or our ability to survive. This is a hip town, as they say about Portland, but only marginally more so than any other U.S. city. -- for the dominant culture has a firm hold on the minds of the masses almost everywhere, and this will only change when the oil's gone and money won't buy squat. The correct approach, therefore, is to be ready. If enough people see Blind Spot or other excellent films and read some meaningful books, or cruise the right websites, we'll all be better off. In the run-up to the American Revolutionary War, the organizers and agitators got together regularly at such pubs as the Rising Sun Tavern in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Nowadays the meeting place is usually behind our separate computers. This won't cut it, brothers and sisters!

I would have liked to see in Blind Spot ideas on (1) how to get beyond the talk about petrocollapse (although the term is not spoken) and (2) see way beyond the hope of renewable energy. For it is too late for anything but pulling the plug on energy use now. People don't want to pull it, so they either deny peak oil and climate change or they claim renewable energies are just around the corner. Blind Spot eliminates these false refuges.

But the positive feedback loops have kicked in on climate distortion, and the petroleum infrastructure is rusting away only to grind to a halt. So die off is unavoidable. What do we do: talk and hope? Presenting a cultural and geophysical crisis without a viable option leaves us with a challenge for follow-up. This is even more critical than dealing with the latest confusion from lowered oil prices. There is less pressure on dealing with energy now, due to the price collapse that happened after Blind Spot was completed. Rather than merely responding to this confusion, a worthy follow up to Blind Spot would be to focus on taking action on what the film has laid out.

Yet, rather than overwhelm the viewer with not only our world dilemma but scope out the possible answers, Blind Spot wisely takes on the first task only, and does it beautifully. The peak oil film Escape from Suburbia certainly failed on the "solutions," leaving the field open for a worthy follow-up to Blind Spot. When the 2007 film What A Way To Go burst on the small peak oil/climate change scene -- earning a rave review on Culture Change -- it tried to condense in two hours both the problem and an approach to dealing with it. It was artfully done, with music that builds and builds. But the essential take-away message -- to build a boat, figuratively, and seek out new shores -- was not fleshed out; to do so would have made the film another hour long.

Everything in Blind Spot is true -- something I cannot say about the ground-breaking film The End of Suburbia. Whereas End of Suburbia had inaccuracies and the outdated vision of "New Urbanism," along with the implication that the suburbs would be what fail due to Peak Oil, What A Way To Go sprinkled in feelings from artistic activists that were heartfelt but not necessarily convincing to John Q. Public. Blind Spot is the most serious of these films and does not rely on 1950s footage-humor as End of Suburbia did. Blind Spot contains two powerful commercials from 1949 by Shell Oil Company, "The Incredible Realm of Petroleum" and "Oil From Alladin's Lamp" set into perspective by Blind Spot's music that returns along with images of petroleum consumption and pollution -- while Lester Brown and Richard Heinberg inform us about peak oil. "Without energy, nothing happens."

When it comes to a piece of art or someone's life, one cannot -- I cannot -- treat it like just another product and proceed to dissect it or criticize it. It would be easy to miss the point of a film or a story and say there could have been a nicer way to portray such and such, so as not to discomfit a viewer or reader. For example, the opening sequence of What a Way To Go features the screen going white from a nuclear blast. It does the job. In the case of Blind Spot, it is a less emotional and less personal film, and is entirely effective in its different approach. The opening sequence is of a gorgeous landscape that zooms in on something horrible that's hidden: a highway with polluting motor vehicles -- much as if one looked at a person's head and looked closer and closer until bugs and sores could be seen beneath the nice hair. Indeed, for some of us, modern human society is a vicious parasitic cancer. It's not just sitting there: it is killing us with every revolution the internal combustion engines on that death-road makes. Then Blind Spot proceeds to show us more cars and "development" that people are starting to see as a dead end.

It's strange to suggest that a film should be forced upon people. But that's what I would like to see for the Blind Spot. Fortunately, following Margaret Mead's maxim that it takes only a few people to bring about important social change, not everyone has to see Blind Spot. Let's face that some people will always gravitate to see a Hollywood crowd-pleaser that appeals to the power to kill or seduce -- as if there's not enough killing or procreation already.

Whether Blind Spot becomes a favorite documentary may be irrelevant. It is done and accomplished and will be seen extensively, from what I know so far. My hope and suggestion is that you will spread the word that Blind Spot is a movie that as many people as possible need to see.

Anyone involved in the politics, engineering or consumption of energy can easily spend the one hour and twenty-eight minutes to watch and listen to Blind Spot. It is produced as pleasantly and professionally as anything in the genre, so that the message may go down as easily and clearly as possible. So no one has an excuse to skip the film. Even if one knows it all and is fed up with news on ecological suicide and lazy, foolish energy use, Blind Spot should be seen as a reminder of where we are and where we are headed collectively.

It challenges our attention as mature beings. One can either view Blind Spot, or read a Richard Heinberg book on peak oil -- or choose to take another shot of whiskey and argue sports trivia at a pick-up bar. "One bourbon, one scotch, one beer!" We all need relaxation and an escape from stress in this oppressive, scary life. So we deserve to unwind and seek diversion. Yet, we know we're trying to just lessen our pain, and sometimes, not often, we seek meaning and guidance. That's why a work such as Blind Spot is created and hopefully made widely available. It is a gift to humanity, right on the shelf to take up and change the course of our world.

See the film's website www.blindspotdoc.com. Blind Spot is directed and photographed by Adolfo Doring and presented by Wallace Global Fund in association with Dislexic Films. Executive Producers are Randall Wallace and David Gil. Producer: Amanda Zackem. Original Film Score: Randall Wallace.

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