

"What a Way to Go - Life at the end of empire" Documentary

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Review of documentary film written and directed by TSBennett, produced by Sally Erickson, 2007

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"What a Way to Go" is a total rejection of the self-destruction paradigm that hard-wires our culture. Brutal honesty is applied to issues of our day.

But these aren't just issues of our day; they are issues of the universe because the planet itself is becoming altered before our eyes toward unending extinction. The film makes clear that we are caught in a broken myth of progress and technology, expecting those cultural bulwarks to save us even though they caused the crisis: climate chaos, petrocollapse and individual isolation and despair.

I get excited about very few movies, but this is one of them and is perhaps the most important media message of our time.

The movie centers around the awakening of the narrator, "a middle-class white guy" coming to grips with global issues right in his face that threaten his children's and everyone's survival. He tells the story in such a way that almost every modern human being can identify with. His expectations and world-view had been normal. He was a hard-working consumer who believed in the scientific, forward-thinking society that bestowed on him the historically unprecedented material advantages common in the First World.

Juxtaposed with almost every verbal phrase are flashing images of scenes and archival news photos of our collective experience: atom bomb tests, armies in the field, environmental devastation, and hordes of nameless consumers massed in cities and on clogged highways. The soundtrack's music builds tension without drawing attention to itself. The overall effect is immediate; right away in this film the viewer feels to be on a train ride with the narrator, and it's out of control. Welcome to the reality that society tries hard to deny.

In this fashion the points of the narrator, Tim Bennett, are rammed home effortlessly. All the viewer has to do is sit back and take it in -- there's no difficulty, no controversy. Even the concept of peak oil and the positive feedback-loops of climate distortion are presented simply and without confusion.

The documentary is in four parts: "Waking on the train", "The train and the tracks", "The locomotive power", and "Walkabout." So, in a well organized fashion, in just over two hours, the film thoroughly explores elements of our planetary predicament: how we got into it, how bad it is, and what our prospects are for recognizing our collective dilemma before it's too late. One gets the clear sensation of needing to immediately save our planet for the approximate half of today's living species that may still be around in a few decades.

For a critic of peak oil activism and, for much longer, of environmental activism that I called "compromisentalism" in 1990, I half expected this film to be full of things I could yawn at and even find fault with.

I have suffered through many a novice's revelations, and, much worse, the cynical, fraudulent compromisers' technofix BS, for many years. It has happened more than once that I find that my own message is the one missing element that would greatly improve a movie, book, article, etc. This can be from feeling that activists and commentators have a skimpy understanding of how we got where we are and why things are the way they are. However, I have no regrets about "What a Way to Go" as a background resource, forthright statement and shocking wake-up for the average citizen as well as the savvy activist. I am not needed in that movie! Here's why:

Featured interviewees include Daniel Quinn, author of *Ishmael*; Derrick Jensen, author of *The Culture of Make Believe*; William Catton, author of *Overshoot*, and Richard Heinberg, author of *The Party's Over*. Unlike "The End of Suburbia," the peak oil movie starring Heinberg, James Howard Kunstler and assorted peak-oil and New Urbanism commentators, Bennett's movie does not rely so much on a series of talking heads and their constant, sometimes redundant opinions. Instead, specific points are being made, even by unknown citizens who are friends of the film makers. Their statements

gather force as an honest cross section of thinking people, and leads the viewer right up to full realization of our culture's dead end. The End of Suburbia is a great movie, but perhaps self-limited by the scary implications of peak oil: die-off and the end of urban life as we know it. These topics are only hinted at in The End of Suburbia. One reason What a Way to Go can do it relentlessly and effectively is that the script and images burst the bubble of science as a religion pushing on blindly toward a technotopia.

In "What a Way to Go," all is placed onto the table before us. We can't walk away and ever be the same. With the peak oil challenge, in comparison, people can shrug and wonder if alternative fuels are going to come on like gangbusters, or wonder what portion of the population will be around in future to get around without cars. We are past that stage; our death warrants are posted, and time is running out to turn the situation around with unprecedented direct action.

For those who may be asking, "Is there an answer that this film offers?" Actually, in part, yes: instead of a train ride that ends as we plummet into a chasm, we are urged to leave our present system and figuratively switch conveyances: the boat. The end of the movie shows Bennett walking along roads, finally onto an unpaved path, ending up on some beach looking out to sea. A song, "Let's build a boat" starts up, and he is joined by Sally Erickson, the film's producer, and a raft of friends and family, with their backs to us. I immediately thought of the parallel solution thought up by Culture Change in the 1990s: the Sail Transport Network.

The movie is not about solutions or happy endings. Instead, it takes us to that point and leaves the task to us -- as it should be. I happen to know that the film makers have first-hand knowledge of intentional communities, but don't present them here as the logical destination. The future culture of sustainability is too big a topic for this film. It is not a criticism to say that "What a Way to Go" does not lead us out of this mess. To get out of it, we must first understand our problem and, as the film shows, talk about it.

Various devices work to succeed in this movie, including the music, the amazingly tight editing, the range of feelings and concepts explored, and the plaintive and original voice of the narrator. It is not a Hollywood announcer's deep voice, but is sincere and original.

It is a great feat for one movie to serve as an entire wake-up call and a complete analysis of our global dilemma. "What a Way to Go" delivers as few films in the history of documentary cinema do. Along with Our Synthetic Sea, which makes clear a heretofore unknown disaster creeping up that is the plastic plague, Bennett's and Erickson's documentary are all anyone needs who has yet to wake up from the toxic dream and propaganda of the dominant culture.

Some of the script that got to me, as the images flashed by:

"The stores are filled with bandages for the wounds of Empire." - TS Bennett

"The world looked insane to me, but nobody else seemed to notice, so I buried my thoughts, and muddled on. Deep inside, this was tearing me to pieces." - TSBennett

"What if we run into a tipping point where we have this kind of accelerated scenario of climate change? We're gonna get our butts kicked." ~ Paul Roberts, The End of Oil

"The Earth supports as great a collective mass of ants as it does people. It can do so because ants aren't building 6000 square foot homes, driving two hours to their jobs, buying plasma TV sets, and killing each other with depleted uranium munitions." - TSBennett

"Thirty six years after the first Earth Day, forty-four years after Silent Spring, the planet is closer now to ecological meltdown than it has ever been. If what we want is to stop the destruction of the life of this planet, then what we have been doing has not been working. We will have to do something else".- TSBennett

"We're in a culture of two-year-olds where we just won't look at the limits." - Sally Erickson, Producer

Here are the film-makers' plans for the movie:

"We are currently organizing screening tours of the Northeast this summer and the West coast and along Amtrak routes this Fall. We are looking for groups and individuals to sponsor screenings and house parties. We plan to have a DVD for sale to the public on our website before the end of August. We have a couple leads on distributors to put the movie in theaters but are getting more encouragement to pursue viral marketing via the internet and word of mouth.

"To be notified of screenings and DVD release dates, to check out our blogs, or for further reading and links: you can get in touch with us at the What A Way To Go website (link below)."

Culture Change is putting together a screening for our local readers in the San Francisco Bay area.. Contact us so you can be notified of the screening date and location. Tel. (215) 243-3144 or email: info "at" culturechange "dot" org. Or stay tuned. To get on our emailing list for weekly reports and essays, sign up at

lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/culturechange

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Further reading and links:

What a Way to Go

whatawaytogomovie.com

Another paradigm-shifting movie, with solutions that inspire, is "The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil." Obtain from Community Solutions, Yellow Springs, Ohio:

www.powerofcommunity.org

Daniel Quinn, author of Ishmael and other books

Derrick Jensen, author of The Culture of Make Believe and other books

William R. Catton, author of Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change, Foreword by Stewart Udall

Richard Heinberg, author of The Party's Over and other books

Richard Manning, author of Against the Grain: How Agriculture Has Hijacked Civilization and other books

"The End of Suburbia" website for the award-winning documentary:

endofsuburbia.com

"Escape from Suburbia" - sequel to The End of Suburbia, to be released soon.

escapefromsuburbia.com

"Our Synthetic Sea", award-winning documentary from Algalita Marine Research Foundation"

algalita.org

Sail Transport Network:

sailtransportnetwork.org