Watch What You Eat, if You Dare

By CHRISTINE MUHLKE

THREE years ago the Austrian filmmaker Nikolaus Geyrhalter grew curious about what lay behind the sunny images of food in advertisements and packages. He had read that Europeans were spending 8 percent of their income on food. In the 1950s the figure was 30 percent, and Mr. Geyrhalter wondered what, apart from an increase in affluence, made modern meals so cheap.

Mr. Geyrhalter channeled his curiosity into a documentary, “Our Daily Bread,” which opens in New York on Friday at Anthology Film Archives. “Fast Food Nation,” the book that inspired countless Americans to stop asking for “fries with that,” has been made into a feature film by Richard Linklater, complete with stars and an indie soundtrack. But “Our Daily Bread” could do much more to catalyze the move toward Slow Food nation.

The film depicts the mechanical monotony of industrialized food production, where the difference between a cow and an apple is a matter of equipment, and where humans are employed only when there isn’t yet a machine efficient enough to replace them. Each section of the 92-minute film is composed with attention to the scale and symmetry of these food factories, making it as much an art film as a political statement.

In Mr. Geyrhalter’s long, static shots, chicks shoot from a tube into baskets on a conveyor belt in an endless peeping blur. Pigs are processed in a ghoulish mechanical ballet. “Vine ripened” vegetables grow in neat rows inside a vast greenhouse complex, planted in plastic-wrapped pallets of nutrient-soaked matter and suspended by strings from a network of cables. Salmon sucked from a fjord are sawed open, eviscerated and vacummed clean in seconds.

“Our Daily Bread” is a documentary that could probably find a place in a course on science fiction films,” said Richard Peña, the chairman of the selection committee of the New York Film Festival, where the movie was shown to acclaim this fall. “Geyrhalter presents a world that looks like ours but seems one step removed from it. Of course the conceit is that indeed what he’s showing us is our world, whether we know it or not. And whether we like it or not.”

At 34, Mr. Geyrhalter has directed six documentaries on such subjects as the first year of peace in Bosnia and life in the restricted zone near Chernobyl. He made “Our Daily Bread” in Europe. Getting permission to film wasn’t always easy, but he said that when he wasn’t allowed to enter a poultry plant in, say, Germany, he would simply find another, nearly identical, place in Spain or Poland.

During editing, Mr. Geyrhalter removed all the interviews. Even the workers who are seen eating alone on lunch breaks — effectively marking the end of the conveyor belt — do not speak.

“I had the feeling that as soon as somebody starts talking, even if it’s interviews, the audience expects explanations and somebody to be blamed,” the director said last month from a hilltop near his weekend home in the Austrian countryside, where he had driven to find a cellphone signal. “And since food has to do with everybody, I just didn’t want to give the audience any chance to escape because they all have the responsibility for what they buy.”

Since completing the film, Mr. Geyrhalter said, he eats less meat and buys organic food when he can. While he said that the recent spate of books and films that take on agribusiness could have some impact on certain consumers, he is not optimistic about more sweeping changes.

“You will never reach the majority,” he said. “Whatever we see in the movie is just part of our reality, and it will always stay part of our reality.”