

NASSAU W E E K L Y

March 7, 2008

On Film and Fair Trade

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Few people question the work that goes into their daily cup of coffee. Few are even aware that coffee is the second most traded international commodity after oil, with 12 billion pounds consumed annually. Perhaps, one may find the fifty-cent cup of Americano bought from a street vendor in Manhattan entirely unremarkable. The Starbucks phenomenon has become, for the majority, completely banal; after all, isn't it just another business like McDonalds that managed to sell its products successfully on the global market? With the difference that Starbucks coffee, unlike fast food, is in no way cheap. So why do so many people buy it? Why can Starbucks sell a two-dollar “Grande” cup of Joe when the beans from the same plantation go into a cup sold for fifty cents? How does the coffee economy operate? How is a bean picked, processed, traded, roasted, and retailed?

Dissatisfied with her inability to answer these questions, Su Friedrich goes in search of answers in her documentary film “From the Ground Up”. She has cropped and manipulated over 40 hours of footage into a 54-minute explanation of the coffee-making process. The length of the feature is matched to intermittent blurbs of the song “Java Jive” which are sometimes neurotically repeated to strengthen the understanding and the feeling for how coffee is made.

Friedrich, renowned filmmaker and film professor at the University, has been making movies since 1978. She is the recipient of numerous awards, and her work has been commemorated in retrospectives at the Museum Of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, among others. A proponent of the American feminist movement, Friedrich has imbued her films about personal experiences with an underlying social or political message. Questions of sexual norms and homosexuality have also been a common subject of her work. She has never made a purely documentary film in her career before and she does not know what to think of this first attempt. Her humble, questioning ambivalence is understandable coming from a filmmaker trained in a different genre. Nevertheless, the film is successful in its candid representation of the coffee industry from the ground up.

The film opens in a plantation in Guatemala, where workers of all ages pick glossy copper berries from vast stretches of densely packed shrubs. At the end of a hard day's work, the coffee pickers, drenched in sweat, lug their plump 100-pound canvas bags to a clearing and drop them with a sigh of relief. Their income ranges from two to three dollars a day. A recent study shows that over half of the coffee pickers in Guatemala don't even earn the minimum wage imposed by national law. During the film, there is hardly any time to contemplate these injustices, as the viewer is compelled to move on, like the shots onscreen, at a rather fast pace. So I sadly watch the workers heave the heavy fruits of their labor up a steep ladder to release them at last onto the deep bed of a pickup truck.

The sacks are then transported to the factory where their contents are subjected to a serious makeover. The berries are burst to release the resplendent pale yellowish grey of fresh, pre-roasted beans. The beans are separated from their shells then passed through an assembly line of women trained to skillfully extract damaged seeds. The lyrics “I love coffee, I love tea” repeat insistently, evoking a suppressed feeling of frustration about to burst. “Some of these women faint on their first day of work,” Friedrich notes. Indeed, picking spoiled coffee seeds from a rapid conveyer belt for extended time intervals is worthy of confusion, as well as mental and physical exhaustion.

Friedrich engrosses us in her absorbing vision of the intricacies and hard work behind the coffee-making process. As a viewer, feeling sympathetic toward the workers at the bottom side of the coffee chain is inevitable, as is the questioning that goes with it. Where do we as consumers stand in this cycle of production and trade?

Although the film doesn't explicitly encourage the audience to take any sort of action, it does support the movement toward fair trade by elucidating the exploitation that drives the coffee industry. Those who profit the most from the business are, surprisingly, the roasters and tasters, who ultimately determine the flavor of the coffee. On the other hand, laborers in developing countries are paid less than the amount needed to afford their basic living requirements. Because fair trade coffee makes up only about two percent of total coffee produced worldwide, it is important that we as consumers buy fair trade certified coffee in order to boost demand. Fair trade farms not only provide workers with a just wage to allow them the possibility of economic development and wellbeing, but also ensure safe working conditions and promote sustainable agriculture. The results benefit both human beings and the environment.

Friedrich manages to suggest a message, to incite curiosity, and motivate a strong response through the visual, rhythmic quality of the film. She does not flood the viewer with facts, statistics, or economic analyses of the coffee industry before jumping into her documentary. We are only asked to watch and understand. The idea is simply one of exploration, observation, and personal evaluation.

Once the coffee travels back to the United States, we follow its path as it gets roasted, tasted, and eventually sold. Retailers usually buy coffee from roasters, but nowadays an increasing number of coffee shops roast the coffee themselves. In the documentary, coffee tasting is portrayed as an almost spiritual experience that captivates the senses. Like wine tasters, coffee tasters are experts in their field. As they congregate around a table topped by a collection of different roasts, the tasters each pick a cup of the same type of coffee, and bring it close to their lips slowly, musingly. They take a tentative whiff of the concoction and allow the dark liquid to rotate as they delicately rock the cup back and forth. They then move in for the kill, gingerly, to avoid getting burned by the steaming brew, and keep it in their mouth, tasting it with patience. Finally comes the verdict and the coffee is either sold or modified. The final scenes of "From the Ground Up" take place in Manhattan, where Friedrich approaches pushcart vendors in search of a conclusion to the coffee's odyssey. As an interesting side note, Friedrich filmed these scenes in the beginning of her adventure. She meets with an African food vendor, who rants openly about his boss. Those who put in the most work always get the least benefits, he complains, but such is life. He laughs it off while he scrubs every inch of his metal pushcart with a foamy sponge. In our minds, we are brought back to the workers in Guatemala, and we can't help but feel sorry for them. The pushcart vendors, despite their undesirable working conditions, are paid much more than three dollars a day.

And where does Starbucks fit in the situation? As the largest specialty coffee company in the world, it would seem natural for Starbucks to offer Fair Trade coffee to its consumers. Yet it took a long process of protests and petitions to achieve results; Starbucks now sells Fair Trade coffee only in whole bean form. Its pricing policies only ensure workers about \$.80 cents per pound of picked coffee beans, as opposed to the \$1.26/lb guaranteed as a minimum to conventional Fair Trade workers, and \$1.41/lb to organic Fair Trade pickers. So buying coffee from Starbucks does make a large impact, considering that the company owns a fifth of all cafes nationwide and many more around the globe. Buying Starbucks coffee that is not certified as Fair Trade only encourages the persistence of corrupt standards and dangerously low wages for coffee plantations workers in the developing world.

"From the Ground Up" closes with an arrangement of beautiful shots through the streets of New York City as "Java Jive" approaches its conclusion. People stride in and out, oblivious to their surroundings, clutching clutch a cup of steaming coffee.