

FROM THE GROUND UP

From the Ground Up by Su Friedrich has a simple but fascinating premise: it follows a coffee bean on its long travels from the plant to the cup of a customer. As the camera observes the chain of events, one truth is inescapable: we truly live in a global economy, and most of even our most basic products, even a simple cup of coffee, must pass through hundreds of hands and various countries in order to get to us.

The film opens in Guatemala as hundreds of workers enter a field of coffee plants. They emerge with countless bags (often up to 100 pounds full) of the prized beans; workers are paid by the amount they pick. In what is perhaps the most political aspect of the film, the camera reveals that many of the pickers are children. Also, most of the pickers live in a makeshift village on a coffee plantation. However, the focus of the film is more on observing the truth rather than passing judgment. It has minimal dialogue and, refreshingly, minimal politics, leaving the viewer free to make up his or her mind on what is shown.

The film follows the beans as they are washed, dried, raked, sorted by quality, trucked, tasted, traded on the open market, and shipped to the U.S. From there, the film moves to Charleston, SC, where the bean is blended, roasted, packaged and sent to New York City. Finally, the film shows a push-cart vendor in the pre-dawn picking up his delivery, moving his cart in place (near, humorously, a Starbucks), brewing the beans, and finally, serving his first customer of the morning.

From the Ground Up is far from perfect. The Guatemalan section that shows the actual picking and initial preparation of the bean was, for me, by far the most interesting aspect of the film. The second half, which primarily focuses on the trading, shipping and purchasing of the coffee, is less involving (though necessary in order to show the complete journey). However, my primary complaint is the use of a rather monotonous and irritating ditty known as “Java Jive” as the score. Not only is the song the only score used, but the score often just repeats a word or phrase, like a skipping record, in order to accompany a particular scene. On the filmmaker’s website, she says she used this repetition “to mimic the relentless and monotonous nature of most coffee production work.” These annoying repetitions instead often draw attention to themselves and away from what is on screen, when the images are usually strong enough to stand on their own.

Still, From the Ground Up is, for the most part, fascinating and insightful. It truly would be beneficial to show in a high school sociology and/or economics class. It also made this reviewer (who loves coffee, by the way) appreciate how much time and effort went into my next cup of coffee.

Reviewed by Trent Daniel on CurledUpWithAGoodDVD.com

<http://www.curledupdvd.com/documentary/fromthegroundup.html>