

Movie Review – “The Gleaners and I”

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I had doubted how a movie could last for more than an hour without a story to keep the audience amused until I watched “The Gleaners and I”, a documentary. Though lacking in amusing elements, the movie grabbed my attention all the way through.

As shown in the poster with a few females bending over what appeared to be stems of wheat, the word “gleaners” first appealed to me as women gathering a ripe crop from the field. The movie, however, shows gleaners of various kinds. There are gleaners seeking to survive on leftovers on farms, in orchards, vineyards and even oyster farms after the harvest. There are also urban gleaners who live off discarded produce in the streets.

The movie thus brings to light the problem of wastage in both rural and urban areas. Because of overproduction, a lot of potatoes, apples and grapes are left to rot on the ground. Similarly, over consumerism has led to huge amounts of unwanted goods thrown in the streets.

However, such revelations are not meant to sadden the audience. The gleaners, rural and urban ones alike, appear to be enjoying themselves. Without the least sign of self-contempt, they talk cheerfully about their experiences. One interviewee boasted of staying in good health despite his decade-long consumption of discarded outdated food. A lecturer who teaches French to immigrants is found to be feeding daily on vegetables thrown out of fresh markets. In response to the director's curious questions, he can even explain the nutritious values of the vegetables he chooses. Another hopeful delight is the exhibition at which everything on display is picked up from the street. So gleaners are not limited only to those suffering from poverty. And there are other claims to the unwanted goods than just something to fill the stomach with.

The word "I" in the movie name suggests that the director has a part to play in the movie. Indeed she can be considered a gleaner herself. With the use of a handheld digital video camera, she travels from place to place, gleaning ideas, images and people's emotions to make her film. She does gleaning literally, too. She has a collection of abandoned objects gathered on her filming trips. What impresses me most is a glass enclosed clock without the hands. "Then," she says "I won't have to think about the passing time". The heart-shaped potatoes are another pleasant surprise.

In this age when there is so much talking about environmental protection and waste reduction, the movie offers another perspective from which we can ponder the issue. Gleaners perhaps deserve better social attention for their contribution to the idea of turning waste into value.

Let me sum up by saying that documentaries can be interesting. They are more true to life than ordinary kinds of movies, even those about a life event, as documentaries show the real world we are living in.