

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES

July 3, 2023

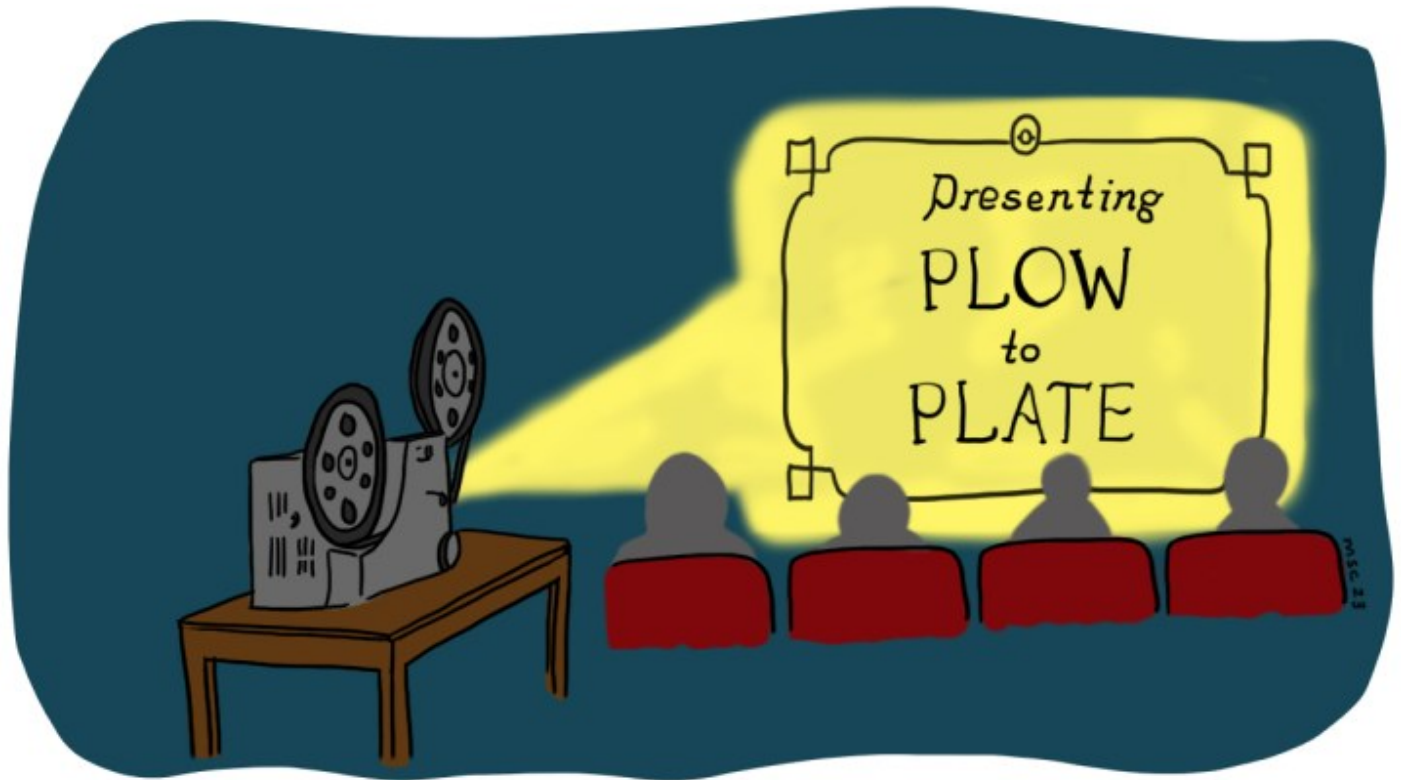


Illustration by Maggie Carson

AMERICAN MEAT

By Adam Rabiner

American Meat is a 2013 documentary focusing on pig, poultry and cattle farming in the United States past, present and possibly future. Hog farmer Chuck Wirtz from West Bend, Iowa is typical of the present-day farmers who prefer the industrialized model for its efficiency and productivity. Whereas earlier in the 20th century, swine, like many farm animals, were raised in open barns on larger areas of land. By mid-century, they were brought indoors and confined to smaller, temperature-controlled spaces. Now one of Chuck's pigs will spend its entire life confined to a ten by eighteen-foot space with 24 brethren.

Like many of the farmers interviewed in this film, farming is Chuck's family business, passed down from parents to children. Chuck did not go to college but started taking

care of the pigs full-time right out of high school. When Chuck was a boy, he spent hours upon hours helping his parents by pitching manure while listening to a transistor radio. As an adult he spends a good portion of his day walking through the Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO) looking for sick pigs, segregating those ill ones from the others and administering antibiotic shots. The work is less physical than it used to be. As a child he and his parents could spend all day caring for 500 animals. Today with the aid of machines to pump, haul and spread manure, he can take care of 10,000 in two hours.

Chuck finds that farming brings him closer to God and the wonder of his creations, whether through witnessing the birth of an animal or seeing a crop slowly grow from seed to harvest. His worldview is traditional and homocentric. God created his pigs for food to sustain humans.

Standing in stark contrast to this paradigm and representing the potential future of farming, Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farm in Swoope, Virginia, believes in letting his animals be their true selves. Unlike many conventional farmers who debeak their chickens to prevent cannibalistic behavior, Salatin observes natural patterns of animal behavior and uses them to his advantage. His birds are allowed to express their “chickenness.”

Nicknamed the “Lunatic Farmer,” Joel has invented various contraptions such as The Egg Mobile and a composting barn known as The Pigaerator where cows spend the winter eating hay and creating manure. Corn is periodically added to the hay-manure mix and fermented over time. In the spring the cows are released into the fields to eat fresh grass and the pigs are brought into the barn where they smell the fermenting corn and dig deep to eat it. This mixes air into the manure-hay mixture which creates compost which is then spread on the fields in the fall and helps to create a new harvest of healthy, nutrient-rich grass for the cows the following spring. And the cycle continues.

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Many farmers have already begun to emulate Salatin's low-tech, non-capital-intensive solutions requiring physical labor which the film holds up as an idealized vision for what farming can look like. Ironically, farmhands pulling "egg mobiles" across pastures call to mind the way families worked the land side by side in the past. Back to the Future.

Polyface Farm, for all its innovations that set it apart, shares industrial farming's emphasis on efficiency. However, while industrial agriculture achieves this from scale, capital equipment, computers, modern machinery, chemical fertilizers and contemporary medicine, Polyface and its imitators have achieved impressive and similar results from the intelligent use of land and animals rotating across the same acreage.

American Meat concludes that it is possible to transition to a world where the Polyface model is the norm in the United States. To realize this vision would require hundreds of millions of acres, but there are currently a billion acres of pasture and crop land in the United States. Because it is much more labor-intensive than current methods, such a shift would require a new generation of young farmers—which is beginning to happen. Several other changes would be necessary including redirecting subsidies for manure pits and corn and soy production, as well as funding innovations in distribution and production, including farmers' markets, buying clubs and community supported agriculture (CSAs). More companies would have to source from these smaller, local farms, as Whole Foods and Chipotle have begun to do. Pollyannish or no?

American Meat, July 11, 2023 @ 7:00 p.m.

Screening link: <http://www.plowtoplatefilms.com/events/>

To be added to our mailing list for future screening announcements, please email a request to jsfaerber@yahoo.com.

Adam Rabiner lives in Ditmas Park with his wife Dina and two children, Elan and Ana.