

PLOW TO PLATE FILM SERIES: KISS THE GROUND

January 16, 2024

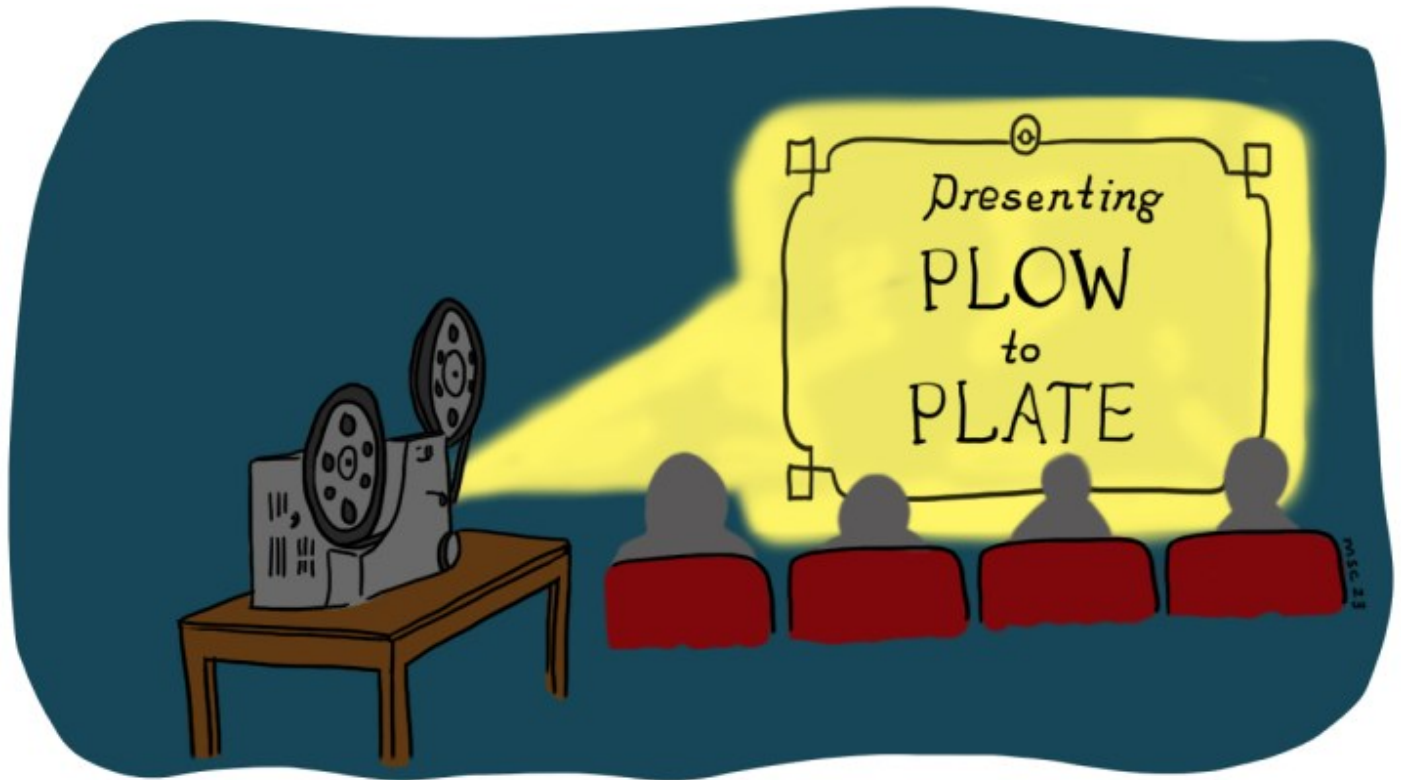


Illustration by Maggie Carson

By Adam Rabiner

Kiss the Ground begins with an unnamed narrator grimly intoning about fires, hurricanes and other natural disasters caused by climate change, as news reel footage graphically illustrates these catastrophes.

With six mass extinction events already underway, the bad news about our planet is overwhelming, and the fear that we're headed for a cliff puts most of us in a state of paralysis.

After this proclamation, the camera alights on the narrator, who is speaking into a microphone in a darkened studio. "The truth is, I've given up..." the man says while grimly biting his lower lip, "...and, the odds are, so have you." Then the camera then cuts to a picturesque forest, with a coastline in the background. "But what if there was another path?" the voice asks. This is Woody Harrelson, and his message is any-

thing but cheery.

This other path, the subject of *Kiss the Ground*, is restoring healthy soil that has the ability to sequester vast amounts of greenhouse gases that could balance the climate, replenish fresh water supplies and feed the world.

THE MODEL GISELE BÜNDCHEN AND HER FORMER HUSBAND, THE FOOTBALL STAR TOM BRADY, DISCUSS THEIR HEALTHFUL EATING HABITS.

Kiss the Ground focuses on several key strategies of sequestration, the primary one being regenerative agriculture. Regenerative agriculture focuses on improving the health of soil, which has been degraded by the use of heavy machinery, fertilizers, and pesticides in intensive farming. Ray Archuleta, who works for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), is a proponent of regenerative agriculture. He travels the country teaching ranchers, farmers and other producers the basic scientific principles of soil.

Most of his students have been practicing industrial-scale agriculture for years but do not know how soil works. As Ray makes efforts to reduce chemical spraying and tilling, which harm the soil and contribute to erosion, he discovers that educational and social issues precede ecological issues.

Just as Ray seeks to persuade farmers that they can still farm productively and profitably without pesticides and herbicides and using no-till drilling, *Kiss the Ground* challenges other common misconceptions about modern-day agriculture, such as the belief that methane-burping cows are always bad for the environment.

In another segment, the actor Ian Somerhalder visits Allan Savory, the Zimbabwean ecologist and livestock farmer who originated Holistic Management—a system of restoring parched African savannah to fertile and healthy grasslands through a con-

trolled system of cattle grazing. Doniga Markegard, a rancher who uses the innovative, carbon-storing methods of regenerative ranching in the depleted San Francisco Bay Area, has also achieved soil preservation through similar methods.

But it is not just producers who can improve the soil—everyday consumers can contribute by carefully choosing what they eat. For example, a vegan or vegetarian has a smaller environmental footprint than a meat eater. However, even carnivores can lessen their impact by choosing local, grass-fed animals rather than those mass produced on feedlots. These points are highlighted by the model Gisele Bündchen and her former husband, the football star Tom Brady, who discuss their healthful eating habits.

Cities can get into the action as well. For example, San Francisco has an innovative composting program that could serve as a national and international model. The system penalizes restaurants and citizens for contributing to the waste stream and rewards them for diverting food waste into compost, which is then given to local farmers.

One of the biggest successes highlighted by *Kiss the Ground* was the restoration of China's 140,000 square mile Loess Plateau between 1994 and 2009. In this span, a team of scientists worked with communities to turn a dusty and dry landscape into a verdant one that supports agriculture and has lifted 100 million people out of poverty. The plateau had been completely devastated, but through a lot of cooperation and hard work, both its biodiversity and economy were restored.

PERHAPS THE MOST DIRE AND DEPRESSING STATISTIC CITED IN THE FILM IS THE UNITED NATIONS' DOOMSDAY ESTIMATE THAT THE WORLD'S REMAINING TOPSOIL WILL BE GONE WITHIN 60 YEARS.

Counterbalancing these positive narratives, the film cites some hard facts that harken

back to those early, scary images of destruction. For example, we've lost one third of the world's topsoil since the 1970s, and two-thirds of the world is currently in the process of desertification, which is causing 40 million people to be pushed off their land every year.

One estimate suggests that there will be one billion soil desertification refugees by 2050. Perhaps the most dire and depressing statistic cited in the film is the United Nations' doomsday estimate that the world's remaining topsoil will be gone within 60 years. That is only 60 harvests left.

While *Kiss the Ground* bounces between fatalism and optimism, with an upbeat soundtrack by singer-songwriter and guitarist Jason Mraz, it seems to ultimately take the side of hope. After all, between the two potential paths facing our small green planet, what choice, really, do we have?

Kiss the Ground screened on October 10, 2023 at 7:00 p.m.

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