



• *Fragile Harvest's* worrying march of mass production

Robert Lang's  
**Fragile Harvest**

"Nature and human nature have been in partnership for 18,000 years. Now we're going it alone," says narrator David Suzuki in this compelling documentary about modern agricultural practices which have increased the vulnerability of food crops and the genetic strains on which they are based. The focus of the film is on the wholesale elimination of plant species to suit the needs of agribusiness. Multi-national corporations are taking over the seed business: breeding, marketing and engineering seeds that are tailored to respond to the chemicals these same corporations peddle around the world.

The result is that crops are no longer an indigenous part of the local climate and conditions, widely diverse enough genetically to withstand variations in the threats from insect predators, rainfall patterns, and soil conditions. Instead, monoculturing prevails. Miles and miles of land are planted to a single crop from seeds genetically engineered to be entirely uniform. While this practice may yield a uniform product, such as tomatoes that all ripen at the same time, have a tougher skin to withstand shipping, and a uniform size for packing, such crops can be entirely wiped out at one stroke by a new predator or a change in climate – factors that a widely diversified crop without withstand.

Obviously, agribusiness is less con-

cerned with feeding a hungry world than with controlling world-wide agricultural practice for its own profit. "The pesticide developers are now the plant breeders," and the entire food chain is rapidly becoming "an assembly line." In recent years, there have been over one thousand seed company takeovers by the multinationals, which are also buying up strains in Turkey, China and Peru to increase plant resistance in the lab.

*Fragile Harvest* is a highly informative look at the crucial issues surrounding the future of the world's food supply. Shot in Peru, Turkey, North America, and Ethiopia, the film makes us vividly aware that "the vast treasury of diverse genes" built up over the millennia in the plant world is rapidly being robbed and destroyed. Companies like Shell, Dupont and Monsanto market practices that not only deplete the gene pool, but also replace farmers with machinery – forcing people into the cities where there are often no jobs to be had. By making clear the complex interconnections among business, politics, and food supply, *Fragile Harvest* contributes to the growing radicalization around the question of world famine.

A particular irony in the film is located in its sections dealing with Ethiopia. By now, there are few North Americans unaware of the plight of the Ethiopian people suffering from the drought that has devastated their food supplies. What is less well-known is the fact that Ethiopia is one of the world's richest storehouses of plant diversity. Crops such as wheat, barley, onion, bananas and coffee originated and developed there over thousands of years and then spread around the world. The famine relief that has been sent to Ethiopia from different countries returns home the very crops that were

developed by Ethiopian farmers long ago.

In an interconnected world, it is no longer possible to ignore the repercussions and reverberations of practices and events removed from our immediate concern. *Fragile Harvest* continually underlines these interconnections, especially through excellent interviews with people like Dr. Erna Bennett, Dr. Charles Rich, Dr. Melaku Worede, Lynn Grace and Pat Moony – each of whom adds another insight to our growing understanding of this complex issue.

Visually, there are many extraordinary moments in *Fragile Harvest*, especially shots of gigantic tractors and harvestors creeping across massive fields like ominous steel locusts. I also liked a section incorporating ads and billboards used in Third World countries to hard-sell by the chemical corporations. As well, there is a witty sequence shot at a board meeting of a food company planning to introduce Veggie Snacks – "an upscale opportunity to enjoy vegetables."

Producer/director Bob Lang has done a fine job on this film, which aired Feb. 5 on CBC-TV's *The Nature of Things*. His commitment to food and agricultural issues, present in many of his previous documentaries, has here culminated in a highly informative, compelling, and even frightening work that coincides with growing public concern and interest in world food issues. *Fragile Harvest* will certainly find ready audiences across Canada and North America.

Joyce Nelson •

**FRAGILE HARVEST** p./d. Robert Lang assoc.p./sc.dev. Jy Chipezak sc. Amanda McConnell ed. Michael Bennett narr. David Suzuki. Col. 16mm, running time: 60 minutes, 1986 dist. Kensington Communications Inc., 490 Adelaide St. W., Suite 304, Toronto, ON, M5V 1T4, (416) 362-9822

**OCTOBER STRANGER**

The schoolteacher comes on the bus from Toronto to Sioux Lookout and on to the Indian reserve for three weeks one summer. Her poetry class is a mixture of teens, an older woman, and John, a young man who wants to be a writer. There's a mutual attraction between John and the teacher – she's in the process of getting a divorce and he says it's the same with his girl Ida.

The three weeks pass too quickly for the pair; the teacher leaves and John misses her. He lives with his father and they go hunting together. The father preserves the old customs and rituals and, before skinning a moose carcass, he says an Indian prayer. When his son points out that they are Christians, the father says it doesn't hurt to keep up the customs – just in case.

After John gets a letter from the teacher in Toronto, he leaves his father. Finally, he's in the city and with the teacher. A voice-over recites, "I don't know this October Stranger/each dawn groping for an alarm clock/selecting a blue polyester suit/that used to belong to an Indian/from the back forests of Northern Ontario."

Loosely based on the 1976 poem by Ojibwa writer George Kenny *October Stranger* is a pleasant, reflective, obviously heartfelt look at an Indian who, as the poem says "writes his stories and poems as if Chaucer himself was kicking him along, never letting him rest, this Indian dedicated to becoming published." Beautifully shot by Mark Irwin at the Lac Seul Reserve in Northern Ontario, leisurely paced, and well-handled by director Alan Collins, the only small jarring note is the music, a mish-mash of rock, folk songs, and some Indian chanting *Award for Best Short subject, 1985 American Indian Film Festival, San Francisco.*

p. Christopher Lowry, d. Alan Collins, cam. Mark Irwin, sc. Denis LaCroix, Clint Bomphray, lp. Ronald Jones, Rene Highway, Ron Cook, Doris Linklater, Graham Greene. Running time: 28 mins. Col., 16mm/videotape. Availability: Ralph Ellis Enterprises, 1231 Yonge St., Ste. 300, Toronto M4T 2T8 (416) 924-2186.

**MITZY**

A cute and frisky cat named Mitzy frolics in the backyard, and has a few mild adventures. Permeated with a fey, wispy charm, this tiny little animated fragment by a former Sheridan College student shows promise.

d./animator: Jenny Ferenczi, 16mm/3/4 inch video, Col., 2-1/2 mins., Availability: J.J. Ferenczi Design, Music 2000, 787 Lawrence Ave. W. Toronto M6A 1C2 (416) 781-0716.