

Kilowatt Ours Film Review

Liliana Parra

Ronald Reagan/Doral SHS

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Kilowatt Ours, an environmental documentary by filmmaker Jeff Barrie, deals with the idea of energy consumption and other environmental issues the general consumer is often ignorant about in a manner that is freshly informative and relative to the average American. What the film aims to do is educate the general public on the truths about electricity, such as where it comes from—a question many Americans seem not to know the answer to—and give practical solutions that not only have a positive impact on the environment but on a man’s wallet, too. One of the reasons this film is such a success is that, unlike many other environmental documentaries of a similar nature, this particular one is geared toward the typical, possibly ignorant, civilian. The way the movie achieves this is the crucial difference between it and other eco-friendly films. All of these contain several, somewhat predictable, appeals to emotion: the endangerment of polar bears in the North Pole, the loss and deforestation of the exotic Amazon rainforest, or the slick black faces of ducks and otters after a devastating oil spill. However, *Kilowatt Ours* delves into the minds of those less concerned with environmental problems and finds a way to guarantee that they, too, will contribute to the cause. By stating hard facts on the drastic monetary decrease of electric bills after some sort of “green” change has been done to a house, the documentary also appeals to man’s sense of business and economy. *Kilowatt Ours* assures its audience that yes—being “green” helps you *have* more “green”. Of course, the movie also exposes some horrendous truths about the production of energy and its consequences, such as the appearance of haze pollution in every national park located in the U.S.

In *Kilowatt Ours*, several topics are discussed in depth, all of which pertain to the theme of energy. These include coal mining and burning, electricity use, energy efficiency, and “green power”. The movie starts off with the horrors of mountaintop-

removal, a procedure done increasingly often in an attempt to supply America with coal, a resource that generates half of the country's electricity. (*Kilowatt Ours*) This method of mining for coal has resulted in the burying of over 1,500 miles of streams in the Appalachia. (*Kilowatt Ours*) The atrocity left one man that's lived near one of the affected mountains for years dumbfounded. Speaking to the cameras of *Kilowatt Ours*, he talks about how beautiful the mountain used to be and how he will never experience that same beauty again, shaking his head in disapproval and saying, "Why would you take a picture of a mountain? It's going to be there forever—or so I thought."

Meanwhile, the actual burning of coal to produce electricity is not only massively polluting the air but people as well. It becomes quite evident that pollution is a major problem when one goes to some of the most pristine national parks in the U.S. only to find that the air there isn't that pristine after all. For example, as mentioned in the documentary, the visibility in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park has declined 60% in the last 60 years, with 83% of that due to sulfate from coal-burning power plants. (*Kilowatt Ours*) All these substances lingering in the air lead to many health issues for the Americans breathing the polluted air. In fact, air pollution contributes to 11,000 deaths a year in the American Southeast. Unnatural amounts of mercury in fish, another environmental consequence of the burning of coal, is another major problem affecting most Americans, including—and most importantly—pregnant women, who then pass harmful amounts of mercury to their children. Thus, the *Kilowatt Ours* team is inclined to admit that we are "poisoning our grandchildren." The movie also reports on the shocking truth of coal and electricity use, with statistics on coal and energy consumption throughout the country. It elaborately explains the concept of "green" efficiency and informs the average consumer how to partake in energy efficiency, also lowering his or

her electric bill in the process. It mentions a more environmental and economical use of energy in products such as light bulbs, refrigerators, and washers.

The United States' total carbon dioxide emissions in 2005 equaled 5,957 million metric tons, whereas India's were 1,166 million and Botswana's 3.92 million. (Miller) Therefore, it's no surprise that Jeff Barrie felt it was necessary to make a documentary like *Kilowatt Ours*. It's also easy to believe that the U.S. produces more greenhouse gases than any other country—and by far the most per person. (Nijhuis) One way to help change this is to make your home and everyday life a little more eco-friendly. This is discussed in *Kilowatt Ours*, and many tips on how to do this are presented throughout the film. For example, the documentary promotes all Energy Star products, being from a government-funded company dedicated to making more energy-efficient appliances. Having only one room in every home in America lit using Energy Star lighting would save 1 trillion pounds of greenhouse gases from entering the atmosphere. (*Kilowatt Ours*) Compact fluorescent lightbulbs (CFLs) may cost three to five times as much as conventional lightbulbs, but they use a fourth of the electricity and last several years longer. (Knauer) Another appliance an environmentally conscious person should consider replacing is his fridge, since new energy-efficient refrigerators are 40% more efficient than they were just two years ago. (*Kilowatt Ours*) All of these achievable changes decrease the amount of energy used, thus lowering one's electric bill dramatically. The documentary uses this idea in order to entice the business-minded of America.

As far as scientists and most citizens of the world are concerned, the debate on global warming is virtually over; it's happening. Now is the time to find a way to reverse the damage already done by mankind and to find new ways to produce energy in order to

create a sustainable world for generations to come. It is necessary to make conceivable methods of alternative energy into more than just an “alternative”. A perfect example of success in alternative energy is Samsø, a small Danish island that uses solar and wind energy to free itself from greenhouse gas emissions. (Nijhuis) The key is attaining energy through indispensable, reliable resources without causing more damage to the environment. Two excellent ways to do this, although often underrated, are wind and solar energy. Although some argue that one can never fully predict the amount of wind and sun exposure on a given day, it is obvious that the sun and wind will always be there to be used as energy sources, and the fact that it is “renewable” unlike coal and oil is an added bonus—and a very important one, too. Currently, Germany uses more wind power than any other country, but the U.S. has a huge potential for wind energy and is easily capable of surpassing Germany. (McKibben) According to TIME, “Generating electricity from the power of the wind is one of the few forms of alternative energy that make economic sense at present...” (Knauer) With a recent federal subsidy, U.S. wind capacity more than doubled between 2000 and 2005, and with wind power being one of the nation’s two fastest-growing sources of electricity, the country can expect more growth in the years to come. (Knauer) Unfortunately, however, right now less than half of 1% of all electricity comes from wind energy, a number that environmentalists hope will soon change. (Knauer) Aiding in the quest to establish enough alternative energy resources is the other of the two fastest-growing energy sources, solar energy. If the amount of energy provided by the sun in a single hour was harnessed, it would supply for the energy needs of the entire planet. (Knauer) By the time energy from the sun reaches Earth’s surface on an ideal day, it has fallen to about 1,000 watts per square meter; that amount, averaged over the entire surface of the planet for a whole year, equals to 4.2

kilowatt-hours of energy—almost a barrel of oil—a day per square meter. (“How Solar Energy Works”) At the moment, researchers for solar energy are working on a way to make solar energy more economical since the production of solar panels requires silicon, a very expensive material. Other, maybe less commercialized, sources of alternative energy include ethanol and geothermal power. Ethanol power gives the idea of food as energy a whole new meaning. Chemists have long known how to reduce crops such as corn and sugarcane into alcohol, which burns much more cleanly than ordinary gasoline. (Knauer) After a sudden burst in research, the idea of using ethanol to power a vehicle was conceived, and now Brazil meets 40% of its transportation needs by using ethanol from sugar cane as car fuel. (Knauer) On another note, the laws of geology allow for the concept of geothermal power, which involves using the heat from Earth’s center as an energy source. Although geothermal power is only in its infant stage presently, it already provides for the electricity of 2.8 million U.S. homes. (Knauer)

Veggie Revolution, an environmental blog, called *Kilowatt Ours* a “simple but extremely effective film.” (Kneidel) Convincing environmental documentaries such as this one are necessary right now. Anything that attempts to educate the common folk about the issues of current, conventional energy sources and the possibility of switching energy dependency to alternative sources makes up a crucial step in the environmental revolution that must take place. Soon, Mother Earth will be thanking environmentally-forward individuals like filmmaker Jeff Barrie.

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