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Images and Voices from the Cumberlands:
Surface Coal Mining Opposition and the Evolution of Appalshop's Documentary Activism

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
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August 2005

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Keywords: Appalshop, Appalachia, Surface Mining, Film, Documentary, Environmentalism

ABSTRACT

Images and Voices from the Cumberland Mountains:

Surface Coal Mining Opposition and the Evolution of Appalshop's Documentary Activism

by

Katherine E. Schram

Since the early 1970s, Appalshop, a regional film workshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky, has been examining social, economic, and environmental issues important to the people of Appalachia. Appalshop's goal has always been to give a voice to a community that is often stereotyped and misunderstood by the media. Since its creation, Appalshop has devoted ample attention to the practice of surface mining, its potential consequences to the region, and most importantly, local opposition to the practice. While Appalshop's early surface mining documentaries are focused on educating the general public about the issue, its later documentaries appeal to viewers' emotions and develop an angry, passionate tone. Appalshop's changing filmmaking techniques and increasing devotion to activism are discussed here with an incorporation of film theory and references to various environmental, literary, and historical texts. Comparisons and contrasts are drawn between Appalshop surface mining films from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

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INTRODUCTORY QUOTATION

The churchmen, educators, welfare agents, independent do-gooders, journalists, and novelists, and the institutions which pay their salaries—that is, those who have made an extraordinarily good living trying to “understand” the mountain man—have studied the Appalachian not to learn from him, but rather to “teach” him, to “school” him, to “doctor” and “save” him by making him into what they already are: Middle America, assimilated into the America of the television and Holiday Inn—The America which Tocqueville and Faulkner warned was founded by those who sought not to escape from tyranny, but to establish one, in their own image and likeness.

–J.G Branscome,

from “Annihilating the Hillbilly: The Appalachian Struggle with America’s Institutions.”

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Appalshop's Organization and Mission

Driving up US 96 North from Virginia to Kentucky today, the scenery is mostly beautiful. The rolling hills and diverse plant life are enough to make local residents proud to live in this part of Appalachia. Nearing the turnoff for Whitesburg and Hazard, however, one mountain overlook reveals something curious and unsightly. Three or four mountains seem out of place. Perfectly flat on top and nearly treeless, they look more like the mesas of Arizona than the gentle, wooded Kentucky Cumberlands. In their background and foreground, untouched mountains stand in stark contrast. The effects of surface mining here are apparent and disturbing. Whitesburg, Kentucky is less than ten miles from this overlook, and here the effects of strip mining are apparent in a different way. In the short drive through town, two identical bumper stickers on different cars make an emphatic statement: "Strip mining destroyed my Kentucky mountain home." In the heart of Whitesburg sits a huge, brown, barn-like building with white letters on the side that spell out the word "Appalshop." Inside this building, men and women dedicated to telling the many stories of eastern Kentucky work on various media projects designed to give the world a glimpse of Appalachia.

Appalshop, or the Appalachian Film Workshop, was created in 1969 in a joint project of the Community Film Workshop Council, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and the American Film Institute. The workshop's creation was part of an economic development project of the War on Poverty. Appalshop was designed to train Appalachian young people in media

skills, but because few job opportunities in film or television existed in Appalachia, graduates of Appalshop would have had to leave their hometowns if they wanted to find employment in the area of their education. No one outside the region saw this as a problem, because the expectation was that graduates would use their media skills as a way to escape from Appalachia. Instead, the first Appalshop participants, who were hoping to honor their region and stay connected to their roots, decided to put their talents toward a different goal (Horton 11).

When Appalshop trainees looked at the existing media images of their region, they realized that the Appalachia in films and pictures was nothing like the one they knew. They decided together that they needed to tell their own stories in order to do justice to their families, their culture, their environment, and all the struggles they encountered on a daily basis (Hanna, "Three Decades" 378-9). At first the young Appalshop filmmakers encountered hesitation and suspicion from locals, who were generally wary of people with cameras (Newell 190). Although eventually Appalachian mountain residents warmed to Appalshop and its mission, their initial wariness was expected and understandable.

Until this point, media images of Appalachia had often depicted mountain residents as impoverished, uneducated, and socially backward. Films with footage of dilapidated houses and children wearing rags encouraged stereotypes that degraded and isolated the Appalachian people. Residents from all social and economic backgrounds came to disapprove of this exploitation. Members of the middle class in areas like eastern Kentucky resented the stereotypes because they felt as though incorrect generalizations were unfairly representing all Appalachian people as poor and helpless. The mountain residents actually depicted in media images were often proud, private people who did not welcome the curiosity of outsiders. Appalachian activists argued that

the familiar image of the “hillbilly” enabled the region’s underdevelopment by discouraging economic ventures and movement into the area (Shapiro 59-112).

The Appalshop participants were different from all filmmakers who came before them in that they were *not* outsiders. They had a deep respect and appreciation for their region, and they were careful not to record only the parts of Appalachian environment and culture that were consistent with stereotypes. They filmed beauty along with hardship, and they sought out the essence of a place they knew to be complex, exciting, and full of love and sacrifice. They tried to give a voice to individuals who might be otherwise mocked or silenced, and they always sought out new stories to tell an new ways of telling old stories.

In the thirty years since its formation, Appalshop has produced more media images of Appalachia than any other single organization. They have recorded films on the topics of healthcare, religious practices, music, arts, education, and environment. The more than one hundred documentary films made at Appalshop since 1969 find an audience in community centers, high schools, universities, film festivals, and even private homes (thanks to the public television stations that show a selection of their films). The twenty-five filmmakers who have contributed work to Appalshop have had the final say over the content and style of the films they have directed and produced. This autonomy makes it possible for Appalshop to maintain its integrity by avoiding the influence of those who would seek to exploit Appalachia and its residents (Hanna, “Three Decades” 372-5).

Though its original OEO and AFI funding stopped in 1971, Appalshop is still a nonprofit organization thirty-six years after its formation. The once small workshop has actually expanded to include its own radio station, roadside theater, and recording company. Appalshop earns about

fifty percent of its income from film distribution, record and magazine sales, and theater performances. The remainder of its income comes from grants from the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts and private donations. New media projects are always in the making (Horton 11-13).

Now after the turn of the century, Appalshop is not only committed to telling the stories of Appalachia but also to shining light on environmental and social problems that plague the region and its inhabitants. Documentaries dedicated to activism have been produced almost since the organization's establishment, although they have increased in number as Appalshop filmmakers have earned critical respect and established a trusted reputation within the region. Though the topics of these activist films have varied, one issue has been the subject of at least one documentary each decade of Appalshop's existence: surface coal mining and its effects on the soil, water, animals, and people in eastern Kentucky.

Surface Mining: An Overview of History, Practices, and Controversy

The practice of surface mining dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Several different forms of surface mining exist, and though most people lump all of the forms into one category, some practices are more destructive to the land than others. At the time of its introduction, surface coal mining encompassed both area mining and contour mining. In the mid and late 1800s, these methods both involved taking off layers of rock and soil to get to the minerals underneath, but the removal of those layers did not involve machinery until the 1920s. Area mining, the earliest surface mining method, was the process of plowing and scraping coalfields in parallel strips with shovels. Contour stripping evolved in Pennsylvania

where the use of steam technology flourished. Surface miners were able to use the new technology to create L-shaped “benches” on the sides of mountains by scraping away the land around an exposed coal seam. In the late 1940s auger mining, the processes of boring into an outcropping of coal with something akin to an enormous drill, became popular (Montrie 17-24).

By the 1960s some mining companies were practicing what has come to be called “mountaintop removal,” or the demolition of entire mountain peaks. This practice, a modified form of contour mining, was by far the most destructive of the surface mining methods ever introduced. Instead of following the contours of a coal seam, surface miners would blast away the entire top of a mountain to get the minerals they sought. This would reduce the height of a hill by as much as twenty percent. Mountain top removal was practiced almost exclusively in Kentucky and West Virginia, and it was met with fierce resistance from residents already opposed to traditional mechanized contour mining (Montrie 17-24).

Though opposition to surface mining existed for several reasons, the earliest opponents were landowners who felt that the companies that owned the mineral rights to their land were unjustly destroying their property. Mineral rights and surface rights were first separated by deeds signed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this time period, agents for land companies aggressively moved through the mountains of Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and Ohio making tempting offers to landowners. In a region where many farmers lived sparsely, agents had little trouble convincing people to sell the mineral rights to their land. The broad form deeds ultimately benefited companies much more than landowners, because tax liability stayed with the surface and because the minerals and natural resources below the soil were often purchased for as little as fifty cents per acre (Montrie 66).

Broad form deeds were written in small print, and they made use of complicated phrases and difficult vocabulary. Landowners who could neither read nor write were permitted to sign the deeds with a mark (On Our Own Land). Included in the documents they were signing was the companies' right to use whatever means desired to extract minerals from the land and to pollute the soil and water during the mining process (Montrie 66). These clauses would cause much anguish in the decades to come, when practices like contour mining and mountaintop removal became the preferred means of coal extraction in eastern Kentucky, destroying vegetation, creating an overburden of coal in the soil composition, and contaminating water with toxic metals like selenium (National Research Council Ground Water 66 and 77).

Even the landowners who could read and understand what they were signing could not have anticipated the destruction that would come to their property years later. At the time most mineral rights were signed over to companies, coal mining practices did not involve ravaging the surface with explosions and huge machines. In Night Comes to the Cumberlands, Harry M. Caudill writes that in the late nineteenth century,

Coal mining was a primitive industry whose methods had changed little in a hundred years and which still depended entirely on picks and shovels. To the mountaineer, "mining" meant tunneling into a hillside and digging the coal for removal through the opening thus made (305-6).

Operating with machines and explosions unheard of in the 1800s and using the onerous broad form deeds as legal justification for their actions, mining companies like Bethlehem Mines Corporation and Island Creek Coal Company blasted and bulldozed their way through Appalachia despite opposition from landowners and mountain residents (To Save the Land and

the People). Most Kentuckians recognized that surface removal benefited outsiders and harmed locals (Levy 3). United in a mission to put an end to the practices that threatened to destroy their peace, their pride, and their land, citizens fought back against the surface mining companies.

Strip mining opponents from eastern Kentucky initially tried to settle their grievances by appealing to government officials and courts, but they were not always taken seriously. Many of them were functionally illiterate, and they were sometimes viewed as backward individuals whose lives were characterized by isolation and poverty (McNeil 147). Their early activism involved letters, petitions, personal accounts, lawsuits, and resolutions, but these methods proved inadequate. All methods of strip mining continued in full force. Landowners sought relief from the judicial system because they believed that surface mining was such an intolerable practice that officials would certainly support their position. However, though the landowners may have had fierce determination and compelling arguments on their side, court rulings were only occasionally in their favor. In the 1950s and 1960s, angry landowners tried to get courts to strike down the protection offered by broad form deeds, but decisions in these cases were inconsistent from state to state (Montrie 62-84).

Pennsylvania courts sided with surface owners, prohibiting companies from using the broad form deeds as justification for destroying a person's property. In 1953 and again in 1961, Pennsylvania Supreme Court justices ruled that the original parties who signed the deeds never intended to grant permission for strip mining techniques that would inevitably destroy and disfigure the surface. Eastern Kentucky residents were not as lucky. Though in 1955 Kentucky courts agreed that the deeds were intended for deep or shaft mining only, they upheld the rights of coal companies to strip mine under the deeds in eastern Kentucky. Courts waffled on the issue

of whether mining companies should be forced to pay compensation to surface owners, but ultimately decided that broad form deeds provided protection from liability for surface destruction. This decision was devastating to landowners, who were left virtually defenseless against companies seeking the minerals below their property (Montrie 62-84).

Throughout the 1960s, Kentucky residents continued to seek legislation that would put an end to a practice they saw as a violation and an outrage, but they fought at the local level as well. They formed many social activism groups including Appalachian Group to Save the Land and the People, Save Our Kentucky, and Save Our Cumberland Mountains. Some members of these groups engaged in protests designed to stop surface miners from working in certain areas. Mountain residents began blocking bulldozers, sabotaging equipment, and threatening miners with physical harm (Fisher 17-30). As the temperature of the conflicts began to rise through 1966, militant activism increased. Violent tactics earned a kind of legitimacy within the region, because legal action and formal grievance processes had failed (Montrie 61-2). Individuals like Doris Shepherd blocked bulldozers with their bodies, risking life and limb for their cause. Some landowners like “Uncle” Dan Gibson threatened to kill coal company operators if they trespassed on private property. As the intensity of the coal mining debate increased, the issue of surface mining and the plight of Appalachian residents began to receive national attention. Local activist groups would be disappointed to find that national opposition was generally watered down and ineffective (Montrie 155-83).

National environmentalist groups like the Sierra Club were willing to compromise with mining companies, and activists in Washington began stressing the need for “realistic” solutions to the surface mining problem. Activists were initially unwavering in their demands for a

complete ban on surface mining practices, but as the 1970s approached, the opposition lost some of its zeal. At a time when over 50% of America's coal was extracted through surface mining methods, a full ban on those methods seemed unattainable. Focus gradually shifted to environmental regulations that would be palatable to both mining companies and landowners, although any compromise was bitter and unacceptable to those who lost land to coal companies (Montrie 155-83).

The Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act sought to impose regulations that would encourage reclamation and force mining companies to limit their dumping of debris. Passed by congress and signed into law by Jimmy Carter in 1977, the SMCRA was unsatisfying for individuals and action groups still hoping for a complete ban on surface mining. Some groups like Save Our Cumberland Mountains actually opposed passage of the SMCRA, fearing that its provisions made sense on paper only. In the view of many eastern Kentucky residents, environmentally conscious surface mining was an impossibility. Reclamation would not succeed in returning the land to its pre-mining state because surface mining irreversibly altered land contour and soil composition. Furthermore, mining companies would cut corners and dodge regulations wherever they could because regulations were to be enforced at the state level. Powerful connections and skilled lawyers would surely dissolve any sticky legal problems that companies might face (Stacks 82-100).

Furthermore, a great downfall of the SMCRA was that it did not prohibit companies from using broad form deeds to mine without the permission of surface owners. Broad form deeds were valid and legal until 1987, when a broad form deed amendment was added to the Kentucky constitution. The amendment required coal companies to obtain surface owner consent before

mining and to pay for any surface that was damaged during the mining process. The broad form deed amendment was upheld by the Kentucky Supreme Court in 1993. This amendment was one big victory in three decades of disappointment, bitterness, and grudging compromise (Montrie 173-80).

Appalshop, Surface Mining, and Film Theory

Appalshop surface mining films document the opposition to mining practices during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Each film concentrates on the problems of the decade in which it was created. The tone of the documentaries changes with time, becoming more vitriolic and forceful as mining practices grow increasingly destructive and as local sentiment to abolish surface mining swells. Whereas the earliest film released sheds relatively objective light on mining practices and the controversy surrounding them, the most recent film highlights the pain, anger, and indignities caused by coal companies and their methods. Strip Mining in Appalachia (1973) and Strip Mining: Environment, Energy and Economics (1979) may be viewed as films that takes a questioning look at a problematic industry, but On Our Own Land (1988) and To Save the Land and the People (1999) are both unquestionably vehicles for social and environmental activism.

With the rise in popularity of documentaries made in the style of directors like Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock, twenty-first century film viewers may have a difficult time imagining a kind of documentary activism in which the director is invisible to the audience. Interestingly, Appalshop's two most recent and most opinionated surface mining films do not even include directorial narration. Instead, they use carefully chosen interviews, compelling film footage, and locally recorded protest music to support the sentiment that strip mining is an

abomination that should come to an end. To what extent, though, does Appalshop arrange its surface mining documentaries in a way that advances its own agenda, and is that agenda consistent with the “authentic” story of the region? Also, what kind of balance does Appalshop create between the desire for accuracy in reporting and the desire to capture a film audience’s attention with aesthetics and creativity?

The dry narrative form and long, silent frames in Strip Mining in Appalachia, Appalshop’s earliest surface mining film, do little to the service of the region that a textbook could not. Appalshop is not to blame for this shortcoming; at the time of the film’s production it was a new organization with limited resources, little community support, and few experienced hands. Appalshop’s later surface mining films effectively incorporate topics like religion, music, literature, and family life in order to capture the essence of the emotional climate surrounding the surface mining issue. Though Appalshop’s most recent surface mining documentaries are still focused on content rather than aesthetics, their directors seem more comfortable and more sophisticated in their use of filmmaking techniques than the directors of the two earlier films. As the documentaries become more structurally complex and visually interesting, Appalshop is able to convey information in a way that appeals to intellect, logic, and emotion. The eastern Kentucky presented in On Our Own Land and To Save the Land and the People is a complex region with a rich cultural heritage. The residents interviewed by filmmakers are sympathetic figures with intelligence, passion, and interesting personal accounts of the mining practice that threatens their home. Appalshop documentaries seem to have evolved over the decades from one type of “film of fact” outlined by film theorist Siegfried Kracauer to another type also described by Kracauer. The difference, however, is that Appalshop is able to appeal to emotion while

maintaining an integrity of reportage that Kracauer claims is impossible when a documentary ceases to be objective.

In his 1960 book Theory of Film, Kracauer seems to suggest that documentary films must either sacrifice aesthetics for the sake of veracity, or produce a film that is cinematically interesting but flawed in the depiction of its subject. He asserts that films like the British documentary Housing Problems are boring for their plain camera shots and dry interviews, but argues that the plainness is necessary for accurately describing the slums to a “mature” audience (Kracauer 202). Judging from the dry narrative form and long, silent frames in Appalshop’s Strip Mining in Appalachia, director Gene DuBey may have felt duty-bound to accurately represent his subject. The result, though, is a documentary that is dull and emotionally barren. Though Kracauer might praise DuBey for his objectivity, Strip Mining in Appalachia would be, by itself, unlikely to inspire any real concern for the issue at hand. Arguably, a documentary film on surface mining in eastern Kentucky that does not evoke emotion from the viewer is not presenting the raw truth of the opposition and its cause.

Kracauer goes on to describe a different sort of documentary in Theory of Film—one that accurately describes the kind of creative film Appalshop has evolved to produce in the 1980s and 1990s. Kracauer writes,

The filmmaker’s concern for unbiased reporting (which inevitably entails straight photography) may yield to an urge to picture reality in the light of his views and visions. His formative impulses will then prompt him to select the natural material according to his inner images, to shape it with the aid of the techniques available to him, and to impose upon it patterns which would not be fitting for a reportage. (203)

Kracauer suggests that such innovation will cause the director’s interpretation of the world to supersede veracity and realism. He does not consider the possibility that in some cases a

director's interpretation may give viewers greater access to the very heart of a given subject. Flat, objective images cannot describe the emotional truth of a topic like surface mining that creates such tension and passion for the people who face it every day. Appalshop directors are uniquely qualified to interpret and creatively arrange the images they film because those images have the same kind of emotional impact on them that they do on the people whose story Appalshop attempts to tell. Here, the director's interpretation of reality is also the subject's interpretation of reality.

In short, Appalshop surface mining documentaries are most effective in capturing the essence of regional opposition when their directors take the some license with cinematography and editing. In the case of Appalshop films, the most accurate are also the most aesthetically interesting and emotionally appealing. Though documentaries may generally sacrifice truth when their makers manipulate content, Appalshop directors are individuals who have *lived* the stories they are telling, and their experience makes all the difference in the amount of creative license they can take. For this reason, despite Appalshop's insistence that its films tell regional stories just as they are, never putting anything in or taking anything out, its surface mining documentaries achieve the greatest success when the director's camera becomes an extension of the hand that holds it. Appalshop cannot lend a strong voice to eastern Kentucky by only looking through an objective lens.

CHAPTER 2

APPALSHOP IN THE 1970s: A DECADE OF EDUCATION AND EXAMINATION

Strip Mining in Appalachia (1973)

Strip Mining in Appalachia, the first of Appalshop's surface mining documentaries, was produced in 1973 and directed by Gene DuBey. This film is twenty-five minutes long, providing only a brief overview of surface mining methods and the tensions surrounding them. DuBey seems to be targeting an audience unfamiliar with strip mining. His initial narration offers an introduction to the practice, complete with a sketchy history of Appalachian mining and a detailed look at the step-by-step process of surface contour mining. The film provides information about the environmental hazards of strip mining, and it includes visual contrasts that highlight the differences between untouched wilderness and mining sites. These contrasts continue throughout all of Appalshop's surface mining documentaries, and in all films they cast a negative light on the environmental havoc wreaked by mining companies. Despite these visual contrasts, the tone of Strip Mining in Appalachia remains detached, as if the filmmakers are standing back in order to look at surface mining practices with some measure of objectivity. The goal of this early film seems to be education rather than activism, although Appalshop's leanings toward the opposition to surface mining are beginning to show themselves here.

Interviews

It is in Strip Mining in Appalachia that Appalshop first begins to explore the ways in which people's lives are affected by surface mining methods through personal accounts of property damage and loss. However, the accounts included here do not make the kind of

emotional appeal to viewers that accounts in On Our Own Land and To Save the Land and the People make. Though the filmmakers incorporate some interviews with local residents and experts on surface mining, Gary Slempt's bookish narration competes with the other voices in the film. The chosen interviewees do not provoke much viewer sympathy because they keep a calm and dispassionate tone while telling their personal accounts. The stories of hardship included here in Strip Mining in Appalachia are focused primarily on financial losses for landowners rather than human indignities like the destruction of family gravesites. Furthermore, no mention is made in this film of the broad form deeds that allowed miners to take land without permission; a surprising omission, considering the fact that such deeds were the major source of conflict at the time of the film's production.

The narration that runs throughout most of the film is delivered in unaccented, academic language complete with statistics and projections about twentieth and twenty-first century coal production. The narrator's voice and tone contrast sharply with the voices of the mountain residents who are interviewed, setting the narrator apart from those whose story he tries to tell. In the first five minutes of the film he gives a detached and almost stereotypical description of the Appalachian man, who, according to the narrator is "peaceful" and likes to "work with the land" (Stripmining in Appalachia). This narration accompanies footage of a laborer in overalls plowing a field. The narrator speaks in third person only, and viewers never get the sense that he is personally familiar with or connected to the region.

The impartiality of Slempt's narrative tone was probably useful in lending credibility to Strip Mining in Appalachia, because at the time of the film's production, Appalshop was an organization still trying to earn industry respect. In an article addressing the question of

documentary objectivity, Jay Ruby writes, “Imagemakers who follow the dictates of broadcast journalism argue that any relationship between the filmmakers and the filmed compromises the objectivity of the film” (43). If the film had included narration from a person with a regional accent and a clear alignment with the surface mining opposition, Appalshop may have been labeled as a biased organization that encouraged narrow reportage. However, the narration does make this documentary seem much like those produced by individuals or companies who come from outside the region and view Appalachia with a mix of curiosity and condescension.

The first actual interview in Strip Mining in Appalachia is with George Barnett, a surface miner who works in Virginia. This interview seems to be conducted with the hope that Barnett will damage the credibility of coal companies and surface mine operators by making false or ridiculous statements. He first acknowledges the need for environmental conservation laws, but he goes on to make outlandish claims. For example, he states that surface mining tends to create property that is “much better” than the region’s natural mountainous terrain. To any reasonable person viewing film footage of surface mined land, the property is clearly worse than it was to begin with. Also, Barnett claims that mining companies have a “good working relationship” with the Department of Conservation. Evidence and examples presented in the film indicate that surface miners routinely disregard regulations outlined by that Department. The camera finally focuses in on a fat wallet in Barnett’s pants pocket, implying that he is perhaps motivated by financial greed.

The next interviewee is Kitty Hill, a local resident and mother of six children. She holds a baby, presumably her own, and tells her interviewer that she thinks it is sad that surface mining is destroying the land, because when she was a child, the region was beautiful. By incorporating

an interview with this young mother, Appalshop is calling attention to the fact that surface mining methods and environmental destruction may have a negative impact on future generations. The implicit question is whether or not the baby in her arms will be able to enjoy the same mountain beauty she did as a child. Though the connotations of the interview are important ones, it lacks the ability to appeal to viewers' emotions. Mrs. Hill seems timid and reserved, and there is no anger in her comments. She says that is a shame that coal companies "have to do it," as if they have little choice about the matter. For this woman at this time, surface mining may be just another necessary evil. Furthermore, her tone and mannerisms suggest that she may have been caught off guard by the interview request, and that she may not be knowledgeable or particularly opinionated about mining practices.

The next voice viewers hear comes from Philip Sheltman, a biologist familiar with mining practices. His commentary is valuable because he is knowledgeable about specific environmental hazards likely to result from mining practices. He and the Appalshop film crew fly over the region in a helicopter, taking a look at the multiple seam contour stripping that has destroyed a Virginia mountain. Dr. Sheltman describes how aquatic life in the Pound, VA reservoir was killed by the acidic water that flowed into the reservoir from that mining site. This impartial and scientific look at environmental destruction builds a foundation for the next interviews in the film. Dr. Sheltman's words lends credibility to Willie Vest and Mr. Bates, men whose personal accounts of surface mining damage might be otherwise dismissed by viewers as unfortunate exceptions to careful mining practices.

Mr. Vest, a retired deep shaft miner from Dickinson County, Virginia, talks about how mining near his home has caused soil erosion and mudslides. He warns that if heavy rains ever

come, much of the debris left behind by miners could slide down towards houses and farms, becoming dangerous for people and destructive to property. Miners have told him that they will clean up the land around his property, but it has not happened yet, and he doubts that it ever will. Mr. Vest speaks with wounded resignation rather than anger, and his account of what has happened to the property seems rambling and sometimes vague. However, he speaks with honesty and genuine concern for people and his environment, and this interview gives viewers the sense that coal companies are not acting honorably in their dealings with landowners. That sense is confirmed in the next interview.

Mr. Bates, a man who lives next door to his parents, talks about a terrible mudslide on their property that left their floor buried in nine inches of dirt. They had to pay for the damage themselves, because the mining company responsible contributed nothing and insurance reimbursed them only sixty dollars. The man laments that his mother and father do not even feel safe enough in their home to sleep there at night, so they must sleep at his house and return to their own during the day. This interview touches on three important issues: soil erosion, displacement of local residents, and unrecoverable financial losses. Soil erosion is one of the most hazardous environmental consequences of surface mining because such erosion often leads to dangerous and costly natural disasters like mudslides and flooding. If individuals cannot feel safe and comfortable in their own homes, mining practices must be destroying the peace of the region. In addition to being forced out of their houses, residents must bear a financial burden they should not have to shoulder. If mining companies are not legally responsible for property damage and insurance companies pay only a fraction of what the repairs cost, landowners are often unfairly forced to pay bills that they cannot afford.

J.L Holyfield, who speaks twice during the film, is a retired timber manager for Virginia Iron and Coal Company. He speaks of having planted trees in 1946 to replace some that had been destroyed, but notes that as surface mining spread, it became more and more difficult to reclaim and restore the land. The trees planted in 1946 have been destroyed by surface miners before even reaching full maturity. Holyfield sees that miners are creating an impossible mess, and he wishes that something could be done to stop them from further destroying land. He tells his interviewers that he has “been informed there are movements in the making” to place tighter regulations on mining companies, and he is blunt with his opinion that strip mining should be banned. Holyfield’s perspective is important to the film because he has seen the surface mining industry grow and change over the years to become something immoral and destructive. He speaks convincingly and clearly, and he gives a prophetic warning that most of the damage being done by mining operations will never be repaired. He also correctly predicts the opposition movement that will follow in the coming decade—a movement Appalshop filmmakers will follow and record.

Film Footage

Though Strip Mining in Appalachia looks at surface mining from the different perspectives of all its interviewees, the narrow focus of its film footage sometimes makes the film seem one-dimensional. Most footage is devoted to images of the mining process, shots of untouched land, and shots of mining sites and the benches contour mining creates. Film viewers are not exposed to elements of Appalachian life that may be subtly relevant to surface mining opposition—elements like religion, values, customs, and means of expression. The only aspect of Appalachian culture viewers encounter is in the form of a song that plays during a montage of

natural images and coalfield images—“They Can’t Put It Back,” a surface mining opposition song written by Billy Ed Wheeler in 1970. Because the film focuses only on the issue at hand and neglects to incorporate many glimpses of regional life and culture, Strip Mining in Appalachia does not give viewers a strong sense of the place that is being destroyed or of the people who live there. The complexity and richness Appalshop achieves with On Our Own Land and To Save the Land and the People is mostly absent in this film.

The film opens with black and white footage of the Cumberland Mountains. Contour mining benches are apparent on several of them, though most of the land in the footage is still untouched. As the narration begins, the camera records a man plowing a field. The narrator describes Appalachia as a peaceful place where men have a special relationship with the world around them and like to work with the land. The camera’s focus quickly shifts to a strip mining operation, where the loud noise of bulldozers seems to break the harmony of the natural setting. For the next few minutes of the film, viewers are presented with images of the bulldozers, shovels, trucks, and trains. The narrator describes shovels large enough to scoop up to ten tons of earth at a time, and he tells viewers that the large trucks necessary to transport the coal out of the mountains cause small roads to crumble. His descriptions and the footage accompanying them begin to pose questions about the environmental damage that such huge machines must leave in their wake. Also, the contrasts in this segment of the film may be Appalshop’s first attempt to call attention to the disruptive nature of surface mining operations.

Next, the narration and the camera footage begin to focus specifically on the practice of contour mining. The narrator explains how a mining bench is created, and he mentions the 1966 law requiring companies to reclaim land they destroy. A contour mining bench stands as an

example of the failures of reclamation. Though this particular bench would be easy to reclaim, in the three and a half years since its creation it has changed little. Vegetation is sparse, and soil erosion still exists. The suggestion here is that if even small mined areas are left in such poor condition, larger sites must be even less likely to receive the reclamation efforts they would require. This brief commentary on reclamation sets the stage for later Appalshop films that offer stronger, more convincing evidence that reclamation is little more than a way for lawmakers to assuage their guilt at allowing surface mining to continue. In reality, most mining sites sit barren and unreclaimed for years. Even when practiced as it is supposed to be, reclamation does not significantly improve the aesthetics of a mined site, because most native plant life cannot grow in soil that is mostly rock, coal dust, and minerals (NRC, Soil, Coal, and Society 117-43).

The camera shots in Strip Mining in Appalachia are generally quite long, and sometimes those long shots are accompanied by neither narration nor music. For some viewers, mining images may lose their intensity after they have been onscreen for more than a few seconds. For example, the sight of a giant shovel scooping up tons of earth is initially powerful, but when the camera stays focused on that shovel as it goes back for another scoop, and another, that particular image wears out its welcome with viewers. It is also due to the long shots that the images of contour benches in this film all begin to blend together and become the part of the expected scenery.

Film theorist Sergei Eisenstein claimed that the long take showed a lack of artistic competence, a lack of economy, and a confusion of meaning (Andrew, Major Film Theories 42-75). Though his words may be harsh, they seem applicable to Strip Mining in Appalachia in some ways. However, rather than claim that the Appalshop directors here lack artistic

competence, a more accurate statement would be that they lack artistic maturity. That inexperience does lead to a lack of economy because young filmmakers may not know how to get the most out of a single shot without prolonging it. The uncertainty of meaning may exist for viewers even if the director knew exactly what he wanted to convey with a certain shot. Viewers may be unsure what they are supposed to learn from a shot that seems to extend too long. They may question their initial impressions of the images in an extended shot, wondering if perhaps they are missing a subtle point the director is trying to convey.

In the formative tradition of film theory, Eisenstein places great importance on montage as a film technique. According to Eisenstein, each camera shot is only valuable for as long as it can hold a viewer's attention and create in the viewer some sort of emotional or intellectual response. After that, the frame loses its power and meaning. Each individual camera shot is like an attraction, and the purposeful combination of these attractions is a montage (Andrew, Major Film Theories 52-3). This technique is successfully used in all of Appalshop's surface mining documentaries. The brief, often contrasting camera shots add intensity to each film. Toward the end of Strip Mining in Appalachia, Appalshop presents a video montage of different images from earlier parts of the documentary.

This montage arranges contrasting shots next to one another, highlighting the differences between the loud, industrial side of Appalachia and the peaceful, natural side. Shovels, bulldozers, smokestacks, contour mining benches, and explosions stand in stark contrast to rolling hills, flowers, trees, and animal life. Included in this montage are the faces of various interviewees, serving as a reminder that surface mining is not just an environmental issue, but a social issue also. Even though film viewers have already seen most of the images from the

montage, this segment of Strip Mining in Appalachia may be the most effective. The contrasts presented here hint at a thesis, and the arrangement of images seems careful and purposeful. The montage ends with footage of a single, large explosion, perhaps a symbol of the destructive nature of surface mining. The documentary leaves viewers with an uneasy feeling about the future of the region in which surface mining is practiced, which may be exactly what Appalshop intended.

Protest Music

The song that plays during the montage of images alludes to the social and environmental activism that will present itself in later Appalshop documentaries. “They Can’t Put It Back” (see appendix) expresses the frustrations, the anger, and the determination of eastern Kentucky landowners and residents. Sung in the style of a traditional ballad, it emphasizes the destructive force of the bulldozers while implicitly admonishing the kind of consumption that would allow such swift destruction of land and trees. The tone of the song contrasts with the tone of the film, and the singer’s warning that he won’t “take it layin down” seems to open the door for future documentary exploration of opposition and protests. The title and refrain of the song get to the heart of the argument that reclamation is not a good solution to the environmental problem surface mining creates.

The first stanza of the song laments that the “crows no longer fly” in a valley close to the singer’s home, indicating that surface mining has negatively affected the environment. In this stanza a bulldozer is personified as a monster that “stands ten stories high” and can destroy grass, soil, and plant life “a hundred tons at a bite” (Kline). The bulldozer described here seems like an aggressive intruder or a predator intent on eating away all of the land. Wheeler writes of the

bulldozer in a way that emphasizes the reckless and shortsighted nature of surface mining operations that destroy without any regard for social and environmental consequences.

The second and third stanzas focus on the violation landowners feel when they are told they must allow mining companies to take over their land in order to extract coal. These two stanzas are defiant, revisiting the reasons for local opposition and finally acknowledging the need for protests and action groups. The singer says that the mining operations have polluted his stream and demolished trees that had been standing for many years. His refusal to move for the mining companies is consistent with what often happened in the 1960s and 1970s in eastern Kentucky; many landowners claimed that they would die rather than leave their property. Though the singer claims to never have been involved in pickets or protests before, he realizes that he may be “behind the times” (Kline). The willingness of a person who would not ordinarily protest to get involved in oppositional activities suggests that more is at stake in the surface mining conflict than ever before in any other regional disagreement.

The last stanza hints at the fierce and determined nature of landowners who have made the decision to fight the mining companies. The lyrics indicate that an important battle is about to take place, and the strip mined sites described in this stanza seem much like casualties of war. Rocks bleed and the disturbed soil is likened to “bare guts” (Kline) For the singer, allowing the mining companies to do such harm to the environment is akin to selling his soul, and he refuses to quietly allow his land to fall victim to those who would ruin it for “another tiny little vein of coal” (Kline). This phrase alludes to the mining companies’ greed and the insignificance of their coal profit when it is weighed against the region’s loss. The message of “They Can’t Put It

Back” is even more powerful in Appalshop’s later film To Save the Land and the People when it serves as background music for long aerial shots of demolished coalfields.

Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics (1979)

Appalshop released Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics in 1979, two years after the passage of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act. Though this film and the earlier Strip Mining in Appalachia share director Gene DuBey, the focus of this longer documentary has turned to the surface mining debate raging at the national level—a debate that had barely begun at the time of the first film’s production. Some of the filmmaking techniques here are more sophisticated than the ones used eight years earlier, and the point/counterpoint argument format of this film is better suited for holding an audience’s attention than the dry narrative format of Strip Mining in Appalachia. The film is visually no more interesting than the first, but the voices of interviewees from each side are angrier, more thoughtful, and more seasoned. Despite the overall balance of camera time Appalshop gives to both sides of the surface mining debate, this documentary seems to eventually arrive at the conclusion that surface mining is a short sighted and irresponsible practice. However, filmmakers do include commentary designed to take both opponents and proponents of surface mining to task for their stubbornness in seeing the issue in black and white. Appalshop implies here that a heroes and villains mentality is not helpful to anyone, and that Americans on both sides of the debate should take a look at their own energy consumption (because it is that very consumption that creates such a demand for coal).

Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics is filmed entirely without narration. The documentary opens with footage from a congressional hearing on surface mining. Different lawmakers offer their perspectives on the issue, and the general consensus is that coal is an important domestic fuel source that must be mined in a way that will preserve the environment as much as possible. The problem with the notion of careful surface mining is that many believe it to be an oxymoron, and opinions differ on just how strict mining industry regulations should be. This hearing is an effective way to begin a film that has its foundation in the balanced presentation of surface mining arguments. The entire film plays out a bit like a congressional debate; an argument is made by one side and then refuted by the other. Though some arguments are more articulate and logically sound than others, each side appears to get a “fair fight.” By alternating from one argument to another in this way, Appalshop is able to keep from hammering at one point until it loses all intellectual and emotional impact. Commentary by academics like sociologists and professors add reason and objective facts to a film that chooses not to rely on the opinions of locals who are emotionally enmeshed with the surface mining debate.

Regulation Debates

Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics is unique among Appalshop’s surface mining documentaries in that it shows not only local opposition to mining practices but also local opposition among miners who are angered by restrictive surface mining regulations. In one scene, a group of surface mine operators picket with signs and demand to be able to work. Their company has apparently been shut down for failing to comply with regulations, and they feel unfairly targeted for small violations. One man exclaims that, “Any damned thing [enforcement agencies] want to find, they can find it.” Another man complained that local

companies are “trying to be good” (Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics). This scene chips away at the idea that surface mining is a black and white debate. The miners here are frustrated, furious, and confused. They seem to genuinely want to comply with regulations, but they may lack the knowledge and the resources to do so. Pride seems to be the major motivating factor for these individuals, not money. The men say that they do not want welfare. They want to work, and they feel that they should be given the opportunity to correct violations.

Some owners of local companies like Richard Ison argue that while not all regulation are bad, some of them keep miners from being able to do their jobs. He believes that if companies were to operate exactly as the reclamation laws require, small companies would go bankrupt because the additional conservation efforts would be so expensive that they could not afford to pay their employees. Though Mr. Ison’s point initially seems valid, Appalshop later includes another interview with him that calls into question all of his views about reclamation and environmental protection. Referring to the possibility that the area of surface mining will increase and destroy the mountains around him, Ison says, “It’ll almost be level land in fifty to seventy-five years. People will just have to get used to it. These mountains, they ain’t no good, really” (Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics). Appalshop highlights Ison’s inability to see the environment as valuable for any thing other than exploitation and financial gain to in order to illustrate the idea that surface coal miners have lost respect for the land. People no longer have the kind of reciprocal connection with the earth that existed during an earlier time in Appalachia. That crucial disassociation accounts in part for the continuation of environmentally damaging mining practices.

Locals who want to preserve the mountains do not agree that regulations on mining companies are too strict. Individuals and local activism groups want to see surface mining practices banned because they see that no amount of regulation can ever be strong enough to protect the land. They know that mining companies regularly violate conservation laws, and when it comes to new guidelines they believe that the future will be full of abuses. The anti-surface mining interviews in this film are limited to those that make logical arguments rather than telling personal accounts of loss and hardship. Appalshop relies on academics to make the most of the compelling environmental arguments against surface mining. Their combined commentary is informative and compelling, but it may have the unintended effect of deflating any emotional punch that directors sought to deliver on the side of the opposition.

Academic Arguments

This film makes a clear argument that regulations and reclamation efforts could never be enough to preserve the land. When surface mining takes place, primary minerals are brought to the surface of the land, changing the soil's composition in a way that is unfavorable to all plant life. The hydrology of the land is changed, and the subsurface structure of the land is changed in a way that cannot be corrected. Reclamation efforts can only replace the topsoil, but most plants have roots that dig deeper than the topsoil and must be able to survive in the subsurface—a task that is nearly impossible when the subsurface is mostly coal and rock.

Sociologist Helen Lewis speaks several times throughout the course of Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics. She comments on the relationship between the Appalachian man and his environment, which she believes has changed as the coal industry in the region has grown. When most Appalachian men and women lived by subsistence farming

and working in small businesses, they valued the land because they had a relationship with it. If a farmer values and takes good care of his land, he will be more likely to reap benefits from that land in the form of usable materials. This is not the case with coal miners who work for money and purchase goods from the company store. A miner's livelihood does not depend on caring for the land but on exploiting it. Lewis's commentary is consistent with the view presented in Allen Batteau's book, The Invention of Appalachia. In a chapter titled "Toward Civilization," Batteau describes how the industrialization of the region and the transformation of the environment into a commodity affected the way outsiders define Appalachia and the way Appalachia defines itself (87-101).

Eugene F. Mooney, Secretary of the Kentucky Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Restoration, is the only interviewee out of all four Appalshop films to discuss the need for Americans to control and responsibly limit their energy consumption. All Americans create a demand for energy, so in a way, even those who oppose surface mining facilitate it by creating a supply and demand market that requires substantial coal production. He does suggest that Appalachia has had to pay the price for American energy consumption for too long, and that other regions should be required to contribute something to the environmental plight if they want to use energy that is fueled by the region's coal. He also implies that Americans need to investigate other domestic fuel sources and reduce consumption, but is pessimistic that the demand for coal will decrease.

Entitlement

Appalshop implies that Americans' excessive energy consumption might stem from a feeling of entitlement to natural resources. This entitlement comes in part from the Christian

idea that the Earth belongs to man. An interview with Mr. Groom, a surface miner from Virginia, suggests that even good men will exploit the land if they feel they have divine permission to do so. An interview with a deep shaft miner who has rejected surface mining suggests that those who do not feel entitlement are less likely to participate in destructive practices.

Mr. Groom, a surface miner from Virginia, expresses his view that God gave the earth to man, and all of the minerals, plant life, and animal life on the planet are for humans to use as they see fit. He goes so far as to say that *not* extracting all of the minerals from the earth would be a sin because it would mean that men are not using their talents to take advantage of the gift God has given them. Mr. Groom's opinion that the land belongs to man is not an unusual one among Christians who believe that the earth is young and was created with human needs in mind. However, his interpretation of biblical texts is dramatically different from the interpretation presented in the later film "To Save the Land and the People," in which a minister preaches environmental activism from the pulpit and asserts that God would be angry with surface miners. This contrast stands as a testament to the fact that people faced with a controversy can read religious texts in a way that will support their position, no matter what that position might be. Appalshop's interview with Mr. Groom illustrates one of the ways surface miners try to morally justify their actions, quietly identifying Christianity as one of the sources of the troubling sense of entitlement that allows people to destroy land for personal gain.

Larry Adams, a coal miner from Virginia, provides commentary that serves as a powerful counterpoint to arguments like Mr. Groom's. For his interview he sits in front of a contour bench, his face and hands black from work in the deep mines. He still wears his work clothes

and his hard hat. He tells his interviewers that when he was a child, his mother always told him that the only thing she did not want him to do was work in the mines. As a young man he moved to the city, but soon came to feel that city dwellers were greedy and disconnected from their roots. When he came back to the mountains he had little choice but to mine, and he chose deep mining because he saw the stark effects of surface mining on the land around him. He notes that the land is very old and very beautiful, and that it will be here longer than any person alive. He believes that humans have a responsibility to preserve it for future generations, but doubts that they will do so.

Appalshop's interview with Mr. Adams draws viewer sympathy in a way that none of the other interviews have until this point. Mr. Adams knows the advantages of working above ground rather than below it. His mother has always worried that he will be killed in the deep mines, and he recognizes this possibility. He also knows that surface mining would be more financially lucrative work. Though Mr. Adams is young—perhaps in his late twenties—he is willing to sacrifice his personal health and financial security for the good of his region. His moral opposition to surface mining has power, credibility, and emotional appeal. Professors and scientists can talk about the ill effects of surface mining using studies and careful projections, but their words are not as meaningful as those coming from someone who has been touched by surface mining destruction on such a personal level that he would go down into a mine shaft every day rather than participate in that destruction.

Protest Music

Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics also incorporates music to create emotional appeal. This documentary includes “They Can't Put it Back” and also incorporates a

new protest song. The song “Strip Away” was produced in 1969 by Michael Kline and Tom Bethell. The lyrics of this song reflect the worries of local residents opposed to surface mining. It incorporates their environmental concerns, broad farm deed woes, and property right debates in its verses. Ironically, “Strip Away” is sung to the tune of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” The focus of the surface mining song’s lyrics contrasts sharply with the original gospel lyrics. The “home” in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is heaven, whereas the “home” in “Strip Away” is the tangible, earthly place that surface miners are quickly destroying. In the original “Swing Low” lyrics, the narrator is content and joyful to be headed somewhere comforting. He is certain of his destination, and feels fulfilled. The narrator of “Strip Away” is lost; he is unsure of what is going to happen to his land, and he had no control over his situation. The original lyrics are filled with contentment, while the new lyrics are filled with worry and turmoil. The religious lyrics of “Swing Low” are replaced with the entirely secular lyrics of “Strip Away,” implying that the immediate concerns of surface mining have drawn focus away from religion and towards worldly concerns. “Swing Low” is a song about resurrection, while “Strip Away” is about burial.

In the first four stanzas of “Strip Away” refer to bulldozers, mining companies, spoil banks, and acid clay. This imagery conveys concerns about environmental damage, unsightly mine benches, and intrusive companies. The writers of the song do not hesitate to place blame for some of the damage on specific companies. The second stanza refers to the Island Creek Coal Company pushing down trees on personal property, and the third stanza implies that the greed of large energy companies like Tennessee Valley Authority is responsible for destructive mining methods. The song also addresses property rights in the fifth stanza when it claims that the broad farm deeds always “let [mining companies] win,” implying that the deeds are not fair

to landowners. The refrain “comin’ for to bury my home” is repeated eleven times in a song with only seven stanzas. This repetition emphasizes the imminent nature of the threat. In the last two stanzas of the song the word “my” in the refrain is changed to “our,” indicating that individuals are unifying in their fight against mining companies. This unification is underlined with the phrase “Well boys we gotta organize.” The overall message of “Strip Away” is one that laments property destruction and reflects the growing surface mining opposition movement.

CHAPTER 3

APPALSHOP IN THE 1980s AND 1990s: FINDING A ROLE IN ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL ACTIVISM

On Our Own Land (1988)

“The mountaintops were my greatest treasure.”

--Eldon Davidson

When Appalshop released On Our Own Land in 1988, a time of importance in the broad form deed legal fight. The twenty-nine minute film documents regional efforts to do away with the controversial deeds, and its tone marks a significant shift in the way Appalshop filmmakers approach the surface mining debate. This film details the eastern Kentucky movement to pass broad form deed legislation that would make mining illegal without surface owner consent. This film is different from those that came before it in several respects. First, the emphasis in this documentary is on people rather than environment. The mining process is not explained or examined, and there are no detailed descriptions of the environmental consequences of surface mining methods. Instead, images of ravaged earth are left to speak for themselves, which is a task they achieve easily. The contrast between the thick, green mountains and the desolate, gray mining sites is heightened in this film because On Our Own Land is in color. Interviews here are passionate rather than logical, and they illustrate the emotional and psychological damage many area residents experience when threatened with the destruction of their land. On Our Own Land tackles the broad form deed debate head-on, and Appalshop unabashedly sides with those who seek to have the deeds struck down. The film is, overall, more subjective, more emotional, and

more visually appealing than Strip Mining in Appalachia or Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics.

Film Footage

In Appalshop's first two surface mining documentaries, most film footage of mining sites records the damage done by contour mining and auger mining. In On Our Own Land, however, the shots with the most startling effect are those that capture mountaintop removal sites. Joe Childers, attorney for Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, notes in this 1988 film that mountaintop removal has become the most widely practiced form of surface mining. No one in the film has to tell viewers that this method is vastly more destructive than even the most aggressive contour mining operations. The contour mined mountain a biologist from Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics describes as "the most damaged site in Virginia" still at least looks like a mountain, despite the five benches carved into its side. In contrast, some of the film footage of mountaintop removal sites from On Our Own Land looks as if it could have been taken from another planet devoid of all plant and animal life. The colors in this film accentuate the contrast between untouched land and mined land, adding an emotional punch that is not present in the black and white films. The difference between vivid green and light gray is a lot more striking than the difference between dark gray and light gray.

Images of protest are abundant in this film. Appalshop provides still shots from the 1960s of people blocking bulldozers with their bodies, sabotaging equipment, and sitting poised with their guns. Viewers see action shots of individuals dancing, singing, and waving signs in front of Kentucky courts throughout the film. These pictures of discontentment and uprising reflect the growth and change of the opposition movement. They also show how the people of

eastern Kentucky are uniting to fight surface miners, and they prove that residents are passionate enough about the issue to risk arrest or injury in order to stop mining companies.

Through visual contrast and a collection of protest images, Appalshop succeeds in conveying both the seriousness of the environmental situation and the passion of surface mining opponents. The educational tone that existed in the first two films is gone here, and Appalshop firmly aligns itself with the individuals and organizations that seek to abolish destructive mining practices. In this film more than the two that came before it, viewers catch a glimpse of the human side of the conflict. Interviewees talk about personal losses and the unjust broad form deeds that allow companies to take land without permission.

Interviews

Most of the interviews included in On Our Own Land include some discussion of the negative consequences of the broad form deeds. This documentary is the first Appalshop film to focus on the property ownership aspect of the mining controversy, and in doing so it draws viewers in to the Appalachian plight in a way that the other two films could not. The stories in One Our Own Land are personal, authentic, and tragic. Whereas the two earlier films tend to talk about the debate in theoretical and academic terms, this film brings a reality that is almost tangible to the viewer. The interviews inspire a kind of ideology outline in Dudley Andrew's Concepts in Film Theory. Andrew writes,

Audiences are, in the first place, assigned their roles as spectators beneath the narrative authority of the film. Straining to totalize the world they inhabit, straining to achieve a sense of personal unity, they submit willingly, even passionately to the experience of

cohesion which the film delivers to them in the beautiful compositions of its images and in the exhilarating logic of its tales. (Concepts 113)

Appalshop devotes great attention to the dilemma of Elizabeth Wooten and her family. Mrs. Wooten's story illustrates the ways in which mining companies treat landowners with degradation and callous disregard. It also proves that stereotypes weaken the credibility and strength of the Appalachian people by reinforcing the idea that they are ignorant and unable to make reasonable decisions for themselves. Surface miners initially offered the Wootens money for their land but later told them that their land would be mined whether or not they accepted the offer. Because the Wootens refused to allow miners to strip their land, a coal company took Mrs. Wooten to court in order to have her declared a pauper. In her interview she speaks with a hurt and defensive tone as she tells the story of how she was asked by a lawyer whether or not she knew what the word "pauper" meant. Mrs. Wooten, who sits near the house her children grew up in and nearer a gravestone that bears both her deceased husband's name and her own, tells interviewers that respecting her husband's dying wish to preserve the land is more important to her than any amount of financial security coal companies could give her. She responds to their monetary offers by saying only, "I don't see dollar signs" (On Our Own Land).

Coal companies in this case obviously do not understand that Mrs. Wooten's riches are not monetary at all, but that they are more real and satisfying for her than any amount of money in the bank. They issued her an unreasonable ultimatum, and when she would not accept it, they tried to persuade courts that she was too poor and uneducated to make reasonable financial decisions for herself. In Appalachia's Path to Dependency, Paul Salstrom notes that mining engineers from as early as the late 1800s believed mountaineers to be ignorant of their own

“miserable” conditions (58). Coal companies mocked Mrs. Wooten in a public courtroom by questioning her intelligence, and they continuously chipped away at her peace of mind by threatening the land that her dying husband had made her promise she would protect. Their treatment of the Wooten family reflects the kind of condescension toward the Appalachian people that texts like Jack E. Weller’s Yesterday’s People promote. In this 1965 book, Weller claims that those who are satisfied with the lifestyle that subsistence farming provides are “unambitious,” and that a large number people who choose to stay in Appalachia are mentally disabled, psychologically damaged, physically weak, or crippled by a fear of change (21). This misguided view of the Appalachian resident as an “other” leads to the kind of cold and degrading treatment Mrs. Wooten received from coal companies.

Sidney Cornett, another interviewee in On Our Own Land, also speaks out about the treatment he has received from coal companies. He stands in front of a large contour bench and tells of how a coal company used the broadform deed to mine his land against his will, saying that though coal operators promised to reclaim it and make it useful again, they have not made a single reclamation effort since they destroyed his property four years earlier. In the middle of his interview, a truck carrying coal operators arrives. They insist that Mr. Cornett is trespassing, despite the fact that he is on his own property. A physical fight nearly ensues, and the men from the coal company attempt to turn off Appalshop’s camera. In this interview, viewers are able to see that mining companies are aware enough of their violations to try to avoid being caught on camera. This interview is important because it adds to the documentary evidence that reclamation is not solving any problems, and it calls attention to the paradox of land ownership without control over what happens to that land. It highlights the damage that can be done when

“absentee corporate ownership” of mineral rights leads to abuses of the land that negatively effect surface owners (ALOTF 8).

This confrontation is the result of a kind of direct cinema in which the Appalshop director and camera crew have arrived to film a situation of tension hoping to reveal some sort of truth to the viewer. Because filmmakers in this situation did not directly attempt to provoke the conflict, this scene from On Our Own Land is not a good example of the kind of cinema verite in which filmmakers try to create a circumstance that will bring about a truth-revealing crisis. Here Appalshop crew members stand by quietly as the conflict occurs, and at one point the director even attempts to de-escalate the crisis. The 1974 book A History of the Nonfiction Film asserts that “the direct cinema artist plays the role of uninvolved bystander; the cinema verite artist espouses that of provocateur” (Barnouw 255).

In all of the Appalshop surface mining documentaries, filmmakers do little or nothing on camera to provoke interviewees. Viewers have no way of knowing what is said or done off camera prior to filming. Because filmmakers almost certainly instruct interviewees to talk about their views about surface mining, Appalshop’s method could still be identified as a kind of cinema verite. However, it is important to note the difference between this kind of cinema verite and the extreme cinema verite practiced by directors like Michael Moore, who approach subjects on camera and ask them questions in a confrontational and provocative manner.

Protest Music

On Our Own Land opens and closes with a surface mining protest ballad. This song is perhaps the most powerful and emotional of all of the protest songs used in the four Appalshop documentaries. “Sad the Day” conveys a sense of genuine desperation and anguish that all of the

other songs with the exception of “They Can’t Put it Back” lack, probably because the song is sung in a minor key, without musical accompaniment, and in the style of old ballads. Most of the other protest songs included in the Appalshop documentaries have a fighting spirit and are almost upbeat. In “Sad the Day,” the singer begs coal companies to spare her parents’ land and gravesite.

This song, unlike most other protest songs, does not threaten or promise any kind of action against the coal companies. A gentleness is present within the song’s verses, and references to the destruction of homes, land, and gravesites make the line “Goodbye my sweet home, you soon will be gone” seem even more poignant than it would be otherwise. The repetition of the price paid for mineral rights—in this case, twenty-five cents and acre—emphasizes the unfairness of the destruction. The singer of the song implores companies to reconsider their stance on broad form deeds, saying that they should not push over gravesites even though the law may give them the right to do so. “Sad the Day” is unique for its appeal to coal company morality and decency. Most other songs (correctly) assume that coal operators will not listen to their pleas, so they will have to take their complaints elsewhere and protest to others who will listen.

Appalshop’s Changing Tone

On Our Own Land is the first Appalshop surface mining documentary to throw all support and energy the way of the landowner. Filmmakers do not even try to take an objective look at the coal company perspective on the issue of broad form deeds, because there is no justification for what those companies are doing to landowners. The coal representatives who make statements for the film might as well not speak at all, for their statements are so

implausible that they themselves cannot possibly believe what they are saying. For example, one representative claims that the property value of a piece of land that has been subjected to mountaintop removal is “Ninety percent of the time” higher than it was prior to its demolition. The idea that anyone seeking to buy property would choose to purchase the treeless, grassless, gray wasteland that mountaintop removal leaves in its wake is ridiculous. Appalshop’s next film, To Save the Land and the People, convincingly argues that the land demolished by mountaintop removal practices is forever worthless.

To Save the Land and the People (1999)

It was hard. It was beautiful. We had beautiful timber, we had beautiful mountains, and we had a hard way of living. After the stripping was done the people just pulled out with the money and the coal was sold, and the good effects went to the other ends of the world, but not around here. The [people] that weren’t working and was seein’ their property destroyed, it gave them some scars. Instead of wealth it gave them scars.

-Bessie Smith, Kentucky resident

In many ways, To Save the Land and the People incorporates all of the issues introduced by all of the Appalshop strip mining films that came before it. Viewers of this film are able to take a look at the ways strip mining affects the region in terms of environment, economics, and social issues. Directed by Anne Lewis, this documentary presents an overwhelmingly negative picture of the practice, appealing to emotion even more than On Our Own Land did ten years

before. Viewers are meant to come away from the film feeling sympathy for the landowners, outrage towards the mining corporations, and sadness about the destruction of such beautiful country. Lewis achieves this goal in two key ways. First, the interviews that she chooses to include offer a delicate balance of emotion and objectivity and of education and personal experience. The interviewees on the side of the opposition to strip mining are set up as likable, sympathetic figures while the interviewees who represent the mining corporations come across as ignorant and uncaring. Second, the film footage she uses in To Save the Land and the People presents stark contrasts and exposes the lie that strip mined land can be reclaimed.

Interviews

Throughout “To Save the Land and the People,” viewers are introduced to many more interviewees than they have encountered in any of the earlier films. Though most of them are Kentucky residents angered by the effects of strip mining on their home environment, some are coal company representatives, strip mine workers, authors, and politicians. Appalshop includes commentary from both local residents and individuals looking at the situation from a more academic standpoint. The resulting balance of passion and objectivity lends credibility to arguments made in the film. Some of the voices Appalshop uses to tell the story of strip mining in the Cumberlands even come from a different era. The inclusion of interviews and film footage from the 1960s allows viewers to hear the urgency and pain that characterized arguments over ravaged land at a time when the strip mining debate was raging full throttle. These interviews are folded into the film along with modern reflections from people who lived through the tumultuous strip mining arguments and who continue to fight against mountaintop removal today. The film’s ultimate condemnation of strip mining is a powerful one because, though Appalshop

includes interviews from people of different time periods, education levels, and perspectives, those interviews all ultimately reflect the ills of strip mining in Kentucky.

“To Save the Land and the People” opens with commentary by Harry Caudill, author of Night Comes to the Cumberlands. He makes the emphatic statement that strip mining is “the most devastating thing man has ever done to land.” In this brief clip, Mr. Caudill sits in what appears to be an office. Wearing a dress shirt and tie, and he speaks of the damage strip mining does to the water system and the soil. His statements are objective. He does not speak of personal land loss or heartache, and his commentary does not beg sympathy. The film quotes his book often, setting him up as an academic authority, and his tone, clothing, and objectivity here reflect that authority. Shortly after he finishes speaking, his wife, Ann Caudill, reads a passage from the very last page of the postscript of Night Comes to the Cumberlands. The passage speculates on the future of Appalachia.

Like her husband, Ann Caudill is well-dressed and professional, wearing a suit jacket and reading glasses. She, too, sits indoors in a nicely decorated room of her home. The passage that she reads uses unmistakably academic language, though it reflects a deep concern for the environment and the people of Kentucky. It rebukes the nation for ignoring the plight of Appalachia, and in doing so, focuses on the problem of strip mining from a different perspective than the one presented by many of the Kentucky residents who address strip mining on a local and regional level. The selected passage also poses a question that the film will try to answer: “Where will this course lead us at last?”

By incorporating commentary and literature readings from Harry Caudill and his wife, Appalshop is able to accomplish several objectives. First, it presents strip mining as a problem

that concerns the nation. If all of the interviewees in To Save the Land and the People were landowners who were losing their property to the mines or locals who objected to the ugliness of the stripped sites, viewers might miss the larger environmental and social impact of the practice. It would be easy to say that emotion and personal inconvenience color the viewpoints of disgruntled landowners, but the Caudills' academic tone and broad knowledge of strip mining make their views difficult to dispute. The passages they read from Night Comes to the Cumberlands also make clear the fact that strip mining has far reaching implications, and that it should be addressed by our nation's leaders. The interview with Harry Caudill and the selections from his book also bring a recognizable and generally respectable name into the documentary. Viewers who have read Night Comes to the Cumberlands might be particularly interested in Caudill's perspective.

If all of the interviewees in To Save the Land and the People were as objective as the Caudills, viewers would not get a sense of the personal tragedy and painful losses strip mining creates on the local and regional levels. Because Kentucky residents bear the greatest brunt of the practice, interviews with these local objectors are important to the film. The interviewees are sympathetic figures, and their stories often involve strong emotion. Many of them are women whose remembrances involve their children. The interviews are mostly modern reflections, but a few are interviews from many years ago at the peak of the conflict. Also important is film footage of their protests dating back to the early 1960s, because these protests allow viewers to see that the issue of strip mining was important enough to bring neighbors and even whole communities together to fight.

Viewers are first introduced to Doris Shepherd, the daughter of a Kentucky woman who put much time and energy into fighting strip miners in the 1960s. She recalls that people often accused Bessie Smith, her mother, of “liking a fight.” Ms. Shepherd seems calm, and she speaks of her mother with admiration and humor. This short interview clip and all subsequent clips of Ms. Shepherd are filmed indoors in what appears to be a library. When she speaks of strip mining in To Save the Land and the People, she speaks as the voice of the new generation and future generations. Bessie Smith and her contemporaries worried about what kind of environment their children and grandchildren would grow up in, and Doris Shepherd can speak of growing up in that environment. Ms. Shepherd also at one point talks about taking her young son to an area untouched by strip mining to play in a creek see the beauty of nature. She notes his poignant observation that “it should all be like this.” By including Ms. Shepherd’s commentary about her mother, herself, and her son in the film, Ann Lewis and Appalshop have established and the effects of strip mining on several different generations within one family.

Bessie Smith speaks several times throughout To Save the Land and the People as well. Her statements are clear and profound, and her persistence and courage shine through her fiery tone. Viewers see one 1960s picture of the small woman standing just a couple of feet in front of an enormous bulldozer with her arms raised up in the air, palms facing outward, as if to tell the giant machine to halt. Modern interviews of Ms. Smith are all conducted outdoors, establishing a firm connection between the woman and her environment. Ms. Smith’s role is an important one. Her articulate self-expression, her willingness to take on a gigantic foe, and her keen understanding of all aspects of the problem of strip mining make her seem like the voice of the local people.

Ms. Smith is also a kind of women's leader, because she organizes a group of women (Doris Shepherd, Madge Ashley, and others) to fight strip miners despite enormous obstacles. The women stand firm in the face of opposition even when they are threatened and, in some cases, physically injured, and Bessie Smith is their backbone. She is brave and intelligent, and she has an iron will. The very existence of women like Ms. Smith refutes any argument that Appalachia is too backward and isolated a place for movements like environmentalism and feminism to flourish (Englehardt 14).

Black and white video footage from 1965 shows a crowd of men and women helping to defend Red Singleton's farm against strip miners who seek to destroy it. The locals argue with a man in a business suit and tie, telling him that "one man can't fight an army" (To Save the Land and the People). In this clip it is possible to see the anger and the passion ignited by the unfair demolition of a landowner's rightful property. It is also possible to see how community members were united in their opposition to the broad form deed and its terrible consequences for property owners. Appalshop's use of old footage like this makes the sentiments of Eastern Kentucky come alive for viewers who have previously only seen individuals talk about 1960s strip mining in hindsight. Here Appalshop includes voices from a generation ago in addition to the voices of today.

In another black and white clip from the 1960s, a man introduced as Uncle Dan Gibson describes how he was arrested for defending a neighbor's land. When he realized that the land was to be strip mined, he situated himself on a hill with a gun, threatening to shoot anyone who trespassed there. When he was finally taken to jail, the entire community marched toward the jailhouse in protest with their guns, and Uncle Dan was released. In this clip, viewers see Uncle

Dan Gibson as a kindly old man with a gentle manner. He is certainly a sympathetic figure, and his story and interview show that even mild mannered individuals were driven to drastic measures when their land and their neighbors were threatened. As in the clip about Red Singleton's farm, viewers are able to see the bond between neighbors and the fierce loyalty and unity that characterized the Kentucky communities threatened by strip mining in the 1960s.

Anne Lewis includes a brief sermon from 1969 in "To Save the Land and the People." The Reverend Otis King (1969) stands in front of a picture of Jesus and talks about the beauty of the Kentucky land that God has created. The Reverend has a pained look on his face, and he speaks of the mountains with a reverence that many pastors reserve for God and holy texts. He rebukes the evils of strip mining, exposing the practice as selfish, greedy, and destructive. In this man's eyes, strip mining is a sin and a manifestation of man's corrupt nature. Through Reverend King's sermon it is possible to draw conclusions about the sacredness of environment in his region. Religion and nature are linked here because an assault on the mountains is, in a way, an assault on God's creation. To Reverend King and his congregation (from which viewers here an occasional "amen" or "mm-hmm"), strip mining is as much an insult to God as it is to man. The inclusion of this sermon in the documentary forms a critical link between religion and environmentalism.

One of the most powerful interviews in the film comes from a man named Frank Sturgill. Mr. Sturgill tells the film crew that he has worked on strip mine sites since the 1960s when times were so difficult. He averts his eyes and talks softly about his job, admitting that he does not talk much about what he does because so many people are against it. Mr. Sturgill claims that in the 1960s he worked for a man who only did the peaceful jobs, and says that he would not have

pushed land over on people because he does not “believe in stuff like that.” He admits that strip mining destroys a lot of land and timber. After this admission, he pauses briefly, looks away, and mumbles “I figure He put enough here for us to....” Mr. Sturgill clearly is not fooling even himself with such a statement. His discomfort and shame are obvious.

Appalshop’s interview with Frank Sturgill is important because it redefines the enemy. Many locals make negative statements about strip miners throughout the film, but in reality, these miners are Kentucky residents who love their homeland too. Mr. Sturgill is unassuming and soft-spoken, and he seems reluctant to justify strip mining in the area. When he does make justifications, his voice intonation and facial expression give away his true feelings. He does his job and earns a living, and he is set up as a sympathetic figure. Viewers come away from this interview with the understanding that Frank Sturgill is not the real enemy here. The blame must rest somewhere higher up, and mine representatives like David A. Zegeer bear the brunt of it in To Save the Land and the People.

Mr. Zegeer, president of Bethlehem Mines Corp., comes across as a villain in the film. His euphemisms and justifications seem flimsy and flawed. In a clip from the 1960s and in a modern clip, Mr. Zegeer talks about strip mining as if it is a patriotic activity, the very embodiment of the American Capitalist system. He claims that to give in to demands and mine another way would be akin to Socialism, going on to say that “If what we’re doing is wrong, this whole country is wrong” (To Save the Land and the People). He further talks about strip mining as if it is no more damaging to the environment than natural erosion, and he claims that strip mining improves the economy in regions where it is practiced. Mr. Zegeer is the face of strip mining in To Save the Land and the People, and his arguments are refuted throughout the film.

Film Footage and the Lie of Reclamation

Perhaps the most important task of “To Save the Land and the People” is to expose the lie that strip mined land can be reclaimed and made beautiful once again. The documentary does this primarily with film footage. Throughout the film, images of grey, desolate, flattened land flash across the screen. These images often precede or follow video footage of green, lush, untouched Kentucky hills. The visual contrast Appalshop presents refutes Bethlehem Mines Corporation and TVA’s attempts to describe and explain the positive aspects of strip mining, and it does so more effectively than any amount of narrative intrusion into the documentary could. If a picture is worth 1000 words, it is no wonder viewers rarely hear the voice of director Anne Lewis in To Save the Land and the People. The images speak volumes.

Near the beginning of the film, Ethel Gabbard walks down through an area of strip mined land, surveying the damage. The land around her is grey and barren. The only color in this wide shot comes from Ms. Gabbard’s clothing. She observes that the large trees are gone, the small trees are gone, and even the seedlings are gone. The significance of Ms. Gabbard’s observation is profound. In destroying the large, old trees, the strip miners take away part of Kentucky’s heritage and history. Trees that may have grown for hundreds of years as part of the beautiful mountain landscape are killed for industrial profit. In destroying the young trees and the seedlings, miners are robbing Kentucky’s future generations. They take from the land and leave nothing to grow and replace what has been demolished. This opening scene sets the tone for the rest of the film, hinting at the surface mined wastelands viewers will see in later aerial shots.

The overhead film footage of surface mined sites provides some of the most powerful scenery in the film. The camera generally first focuses on rolling green mountains and hills. In

one shot the trees are thick and beautiful. Most of them are a rich green, although some have started to turn orange or red for fall. A light fog has settled in the dips between mountain peaks, and the atmosphere is peaceful. The camera slowly pans to a strip mining area, and a sharp contrast is apparent. The mined land is flat and gray, and bulldozers roll along, continuing to work. The rolling hills and thick trees are still visible in the background. Visual contrasts like this one are an essential part of To Save the Land and the People, because they emphasize the fact that surface mining cannot be done without wreaking environmental havoc. Seeing the untouched hills and the strip-mined sites in the same video frame, it is apparent that it would be impossible for surface mined sites to return to their former state. After this film footage, viewers are presented with an unconvincing counterargument.

In a short clip from the 1960s, Tennessee Valley Authority justifies its use of surface mined coal. The images of strip mine sites and the mining operations in this clip are much different from the ones viewers have already seen in To Save the Land and the People. First of all, the work sites here are not shown against a backdrop of rolling green hills. Without that contrast, the stark and ugly reality of strip mining is not readily apparent. The shots TVA chooses emphasize productivity and hard work rather than environmental consequences. Viewers see images of trucks carrying coal to its final destination. Careful to explain that they themselves do not actively take part in strip mining, TVA goes on to emphasize its role in reclamation efforts.

TVA shows several images of reclaimed land. In one image, an elementary school sits on a flat, green patch of land on the side of a large hill. In another, a mobile home park rests in a strip-mined bench of land. Though TVA attempts to show here that surface mined land can still

be useful, the images do not make a strong case for the argument that reclamation is possible. The strip-mined sites are without trees and most plant life. Though the sites are indeed being used, they are entirely different in form and function than they were in their natural state.

In short, the images used in the TVA clip appeal to American work ethic and consumerism. In fact, one TVA representative defines the word “conservation” as “the use of the earth for the good of man.” The objective here seems to be to drain the land for as many resources as possible. TVA’s assertion that “the earth is our apple” indicates the earth is ours to feed on, to process, and to sell. The implication here is that consumers can have their cake and eat it too, using strip-mined coal for energy and then using the land for construction. The clip does not take into consideration the human indignities that occur in the process of surface mining. It ignores the fact that many landowners lose their land to strip miners who use the broad form deed to justify their actions, and that sacred sites like graveyards are demolished.

After the TVA clip, viewers are introduced to The Swine Operation, a reclamation project designed to turn strip-mined sites into fertile farming land. A representative talks about the lack of level farming land available in Martin County, saying that strip miners are really doing residents a favor by doubling the amount of “useful” land in the area. He describes strip mining as a transformation rather than a destruction. While this representative is making his statement, viewers are presented with more aerial shots of strip mines. The pictures on the screen clash with the argument the man makes, and his words sound ludicrous and comical against such a stark backdrop.

Immediately after the representative ends his commentary on the benefits of strip mining, another describes the logistics of The Swine Operation. The goal of this reclamation project is to

fertilize the land with hog manure so that it can be used for farming. Viewers are bombarded with images of hog manure as the representative speaks. In one shot, viewers see a large pool (or “lagoon”) of manure in the middle of a patch of strip-mined land. In another, large sprinklers spout the manure all over the ground. Appalshop’s clever juxtaposition of the reclamation commentary and the pictures of hog manure here make a statement about the validity the project itself.

This sequence in the film presents a few images of reclaimed land. Though this land is green rather than brown or gray, it is still perfectly flat on top. There are no trees or shrubs, only smooth grass. The terrain looks artificial and manufactured, almost like a putting green. The sequence about The Swine Operation ends with a man trying his hardest to break the soil of some strip-mined land with a shovel. The shovel will not go through the solid earth, which appears to be composed entirely of rock and hard clay. His inability to manipulate the ravaged land reflects the larger scale inability of workers to reclaim what has been destroyed.

If a man cannot even break the soil with a shovel, how are trees to grow there? The effort to fertilize surface mined soil with manure sheds light on an important point that has been made in earlier Appalshop films: Strip mining changes the very composition of the soil to the point that nothing could ever grow there without human intervention. Even with millions of dollars and hundreds of man hours of human intervention, new plant life is minimal and the end result is unsatisfying. Viewers of this documentary are left with the impression that reclamation efforts really are akin to trying to “put lipstick on a corpse,” as one Kentucky resident notes. The images clearly indicate that the land will never be the same after it has been strip mined, despite even the United States Department of the Interior’s claim that “today successful land reclamation and

environmental protection have become routine parts of the coal mining process” (20th Anniversary Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act).

Protest Music

To Save the Land and the People incorporates several of the songs used in earlier documentaries. Songs like “They Can’t Put it Back” and “Strip Away” play as viewers are exposed to long aerial shots of mountaintop removal sights. Two new songs, “Dan the Red Nose” and “Almost Done” are also included in the film. “Dan the Red Nose” is a short song about the violent sabotaging of mining equipment. “Almost Done” also deals with violent opposition, but it also addresses some of the confusion and anger of the Kentucky residents. These two songs compliment a film that is devoted to the filming of all kinds of local activism.

In the first two stanzas of “Almost Done,” the singer talks about how long the surface mining has been going on. The refrain at the end of these stanzas is optimistic: “Almost done, almost done./ I feel like they’re almost done.” This refrain may refer to the initial hopes of landowners that surface mining would not continue for very long. The refrain takes on a different meaning as the singer begins to talk about rifles and damaged mining equipment, lamenting that the stripping has been “goin’ on too long.” Here the refrain could be interpreted to mean that landowners and residents are going to unite and bring surface mining to an end any way they have to do it, even if violence is necessary.

An Activist’s Voice

To Save the Land and the People is Appalshop’s most outspoken surface mining documentary. It successfully refutes all of the standard mining company arguments in favor of the practice of strip mining in Appalachia. Through the carefully selected interviews, viewers

see the faces and hear the voices of men and women who have suffered economically and emotionally as a result of seeing their homeland slowly destroyed. Their voices belie any suggestion that strip mining strengthens the economy by providing employment for local residents. The one interview of a strip mine worker speaks volumes about the shame and pain that must go along with the meager wages earned by these workers. Through the video footage of barren strip mine sites and futile reclamation efforts, Anne Lewis and Appalshop prove that any attempt to return strip mined land to its natural state will certainly not succeed, since what has been removed can never be put back. This documentary exposes the practice of strip mining as a great evil, and in doing so, it achieves Appalshop's goal of giving a voice to the eastern Kentucky mountains.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

With each of its four films devoted to surface mining, Appalshop tries to present information in a way that will make viewers care about Appalachia and the obstacles it faces. All of its documentaries on the subject succeed in conveying factual information about surface mining in a way that avoids the stereotypes perpetuated by some other media organizations. However, the documentaries produced in the 1980s and 1990s surpass the early films in terms of ability to tell a multidimensional story and in terms of success in evoking viewer empathy. When Appalshop filmmakers allow their own connection to an passion for the region to shine through in their work, the documentaries go beyond anything an outsider could produce about the region and chart new territory in which the director is both observer and subject. In On Our Own Land and To Save the Land and the People, Appalshop firmly establishes a role in regional documentary activism, taking on coal companies and exposing greed and abuse.

Each film conveys a slightly different view of local surface coal companies and miners, but large coal companies are consistently portrayed as greedy, short-sighted, immoral, and in most cases, criminal. Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and Economics films surface miners who feel overwhelmed by the government's expectations of them and local mining company owners who do not know how they would make ends meet if they were to comply with all of the regulations, since doing so would be too expensive. In To Save the Land and the People one surface miner seems riddled with guilt, while others are seemingly conscienceless, resorting to threats of violence against women and children. Overall, Appalshop paints a complex and

contradictory sociological portrait of individuals who are somehow able to use financial, practical, and even religious justifications for destroying their own homeland.

Appalshop always vilifies large mining companies like Bethlehem Mines Corporation and energy plants like Tennessee Valley Authority for their greediness, their stubborn and obtuse insistence that reclamation efforts have been successful, and their ignorant assertions that surface mining is good for the people of Appalachia. What most sets these companies apart from the small, locally owned and operated companies is perhaps the fact that the owners of the large companies are destroying an environment that they do not have to live in or even look at. The films On Our Own Land and To Save the Land and the People address the human indignities perpetrated by large mining companies, and the latter film includes several clips with commentary from David A. Zegeer, president of Bethlehem Mines Corporation. Appalshop portrays Mr. Zegeer as a manipulative man who is so blinded by the capitalist drive for wealth that he cannot see the ridiculousness of his statements or the amount of anguish he is causing local residents.

Appalshop is more willing to use emotional appeals in its later films, probably because as the area of surface mining destruction increased over the years, the issue became increasingly emotional for mountain residents. The early documentaries are informative and probing, but they do not explore the emotional impact of surface mining in the same way that they later films do. Appalshop's first surface mining documentary, Strip Mining in Appalachia, was produced before any of the Appalachian environmental action groups had been formed and before many important legal battles had been waged. The interviews at in that film feel stilted, even when landowners are talking about damage to their personal property. Strip Mining: Energy, Environment, and

Economics captures some of the anger and frustration surrounding the mining debate, but interestingly, it is on the part of local surface miners, not landowners. It is in On Our Own Land and To Save the Land and the People that landowners offer the most detailed and compelling personal accounts of hardship. These accounts draw viewers in to Appalachia in a way that allows for the region's authentic voice to be heard. The residents come across as lively, intelligent, passionate people who love the land and are willing to unite in an impressive and forceful way to preserve it. Appalshop filmmakers have little interaction with interviewees on camera. For this reason, the filmmakers are able to seem like bystanders in even the films with the most activism. Appalshop avoids the kind of artificiality of circumstance that can occur when cinema verite artists try to provoke conflict.

Contrasts are key in Appalshop's incorporation of mining site images in all four of the documentaries. Film shots of leveled mountains, barren land, and soil erosion are always most effective when juxtaposed against the backdrop of untouched mountain wilderness and all of the plant and animal life that exists there. When viewers get a clear sense of what exactly is being destroyed, they are more likely to be sympathetic to the plight of its destruction and to those individuals who seek to preserve it. Viewer concern is ultimately what Appalshop wants to provoke, because ignorance and indifference to issues like surface mining can delay meaningful action until it is too late for that action to bring about significant change. The amount of visual contrast seems to increase a little with each film, but the subtlety of such contrasts also increases, adding to the sophistication of the technique. Film montages also become more sophisticated in later films, when Appalshop places still images in the montage in a careful and purposeful way.

From the early 1970s to the late 1990s, Appalshop has grown into its role in environmental and social activism. That growth is apparent in the four surface mining films produced during the first thirty years of the organization's existence. The fact that many Appalshop films have different directors may account for some of the changes in tone and focus that take place from film to film. However, Appalshop's collaborative nature and the organization's unified goal to give a voice to the region make it unlikely that one director would unilaterally take the issue of surface mining and run with it in the direction of his or her choosing. A more likely scenario is that working under the guidance of a director, Appalshop filmmakers worked together on each film to present as authentic a picture as they could of the surface mining issue as it existed at the time of each film's production.

In an interview transcribed in "Appalshop and the History of Appalachia," Herb E. Smith, an Appalshop employee, claims that more than one hundred-fifty people are involved in the viewing and editing process of a film (Miller 410). According to Francis Morton, an Appalshop director, employees "don't have very well-defined job descriptions. Jobs run into one another" (Williamson 417). If this is the case, the changes apparent in Appalshop's surface mining documentaries over three decades reflect both the increasing confidence and competence of a young film workshop. On a larger scale, the changes reflect an evolution of thought and attitude within the organization and the region. Viewers who watch all four videos will feel the intensity increase with each film, due in one part to better, bolder filmmaking techniques and in another to an actual surge in the emotional climate surrounding the strip mining debate within the region. Appalshop's documentary activism slowly shifts from fact-based reportage to something different: a kind of hybrid filmmaking voice that relies on a combination of intuition, emotion,

regional connection, and tenacity. Appalshop has found its own voice while helping the Appalachian people to find theirs.

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