Column/Julian West

You’ll never eat another sausage

Asked, "what do you think about non-human animals?" a person on the street in The Animals Film answers "I haven’t given them a lot of thought." This surprising feature-length documentary does.

It thinks about the fur-bearing animals of all descriptions, gnawing their limbs off in leg-hold traps in the North American wilderness. It thinks about the victims of vivisection in redundant experiments and training exercises. It thinks about the beef cattle being fattened for market on a diet of cement and excrement.

This is a film to see if you have never thought about any of these subjects. If there is no other way to convince you to see this film, think of it as a supreme example of the filmmakers’ craft.

The perception which is brought to bear in the movie is remarkable. Clever editing intersperses scenes of pigs at a factory farm, rooting at the metal bars of their cages, with hogs in the wild, manufacture of sausage links, and advertisements for pharmaceutical companies. The film contains everything from animation to underwater photography.

Even more interesting to consider is Schonfeld’s work as an investigative journalist, ever impartial, in compiling some of the more astonishing footage. A lengthy segment on factory farming was compiled by feigning an interest in the farmers’ ingenuity in “trying to breed animals without legs and chickens without feathers.” What the impartial camera actually reveals is a nightmare underside of society in which animals are converted into food machines.

The film does not preach. Underneath it all is Julie Christie’s steady voice, describing the scenes which unfold before us. Some are brutal: chickens being debeaked, veal calves starved, monkeys shocked until they vomit. Others are more subtle: a McDonald’s commercial featuring a “hamburger patch” denies that Bessie was slaughtered to provide our burgers.

As with humans, it is the female of most species who bears the full of the suffering. Sows are shown being forcibly serviced, and then confined in tiny breeding pens where they don’t have room to fall over and injure their piglets. As one woman says in the film, “If I don’t see it, I wouldn’t mind.” This film denies us all that excuse.

The film was shot over a four year period, mostly in the United States and the United Kingdom. Made for only $300,000, it was a labor of love for everyone involved. The care that was put into it comes across on screen as in very few other films.

The makers of the film say that “It’s not about them; it’s about us,” and this statement is very perceptive. Ultimately, the film is a terrifying journey into the dark side of humanity, an exposé of the evil which we perpetuate in the name of greed.

The Animals Film will be shown on campus tomorrow night. You should consider seeing it, particularly if your initial inclination is to dismiss it as so much extreme propaganda. If that is the way you feel about the subject, then you are exactly the person this film is for, if not about.