

## Film Review

– *Angel in the Sugarcane*, directed by Godelieve Eijsink. Solidaridad/IDTV, 2017.

The Salvadoran writer Manlio Argueta used to complain that, while Central America provides the world with most of its sweet desserts (bananas, pineapples, sugar), the region itself is left with the bitter remains. *Angel in the Sugarcane*, a 45-minute documentary directed by Dutch filmmaker Godelieve Eijsink and produced by Solidaridad, a Dutch NGO that aims to make global trade more equitable for producers and consumers, takes a close look at the often-bitter reality behind the production of sugar in El Salvador. The film aims to promote a scheme initiated by Solidaridad that illustrates the efforts made by doctors and some sugar industry proprietors to make the industry healthier for the agricultural workers. Most recent documentaries on El Salvador have concentrated on the aftermath of the lengthy civil war and the violent gangs that have threatened its peace and security, *Angel in the Sugarcane*, which premiered in March 2018 at Movies that Matter, the well-known human rights film festival in The Hague, the Netherlands, is innovative in focussing on the local problems related to the sugarcane production for the global market.

The film opens with the health consequences of the hard labour of sugar cane cutting. The labourers are depicted leaving before dawn to spend the day working in the hot sun without any special clothing, water or other care in the fields. As a result, a high number of cane cutters suffer from kidney failure and other problems. In the documentary, the voice-over suggests that 'kidney disease is a sneaky killer,' because it is not immediately identifiable while it claims as many as 20,000 victims in the past decade in Central America. *Angel in the Sugarcane* specifically revolves around one doctor, Emmanuel Ricardo Jarquín, son of a sugarcane factory manager, who has made it his mission to improve the conditions in the cane fields in El Salvador. With the help of Juan Wright, an owner at El Angel – estate close to the capital San Salvador –, he is able to promote his three-pronged strategy for trying to improve conditions for the workers and so avoid more medical problems: provide water, rest and shade. The film closely follows Jarquín's attempts to get the workers and their foremen to implement these changes in their daily practice. He meets opposition from the workers themselves, since they are paid by the amount of

cane they cut, which means that any rest or slowing down reduces their already meagre wages. However, Wright enthusiastically supports the doctor's efforts. For him, he tells us, it is not philanthropy, the better the men are treated and the healthier they are, the higher the yields. One couple in particular, Edwin and Maria, illustrates the challenges of bringing change to such a traditional agricultural endeavour. Both of them work in the fields, but although Edwin has had kidney problems in the past, he finds it hard to accept the need to adapt. It is his wife Maria – who has to work double, looking after their children, and cooking – who encourages him to be more responsive to these new ideas.

As the film progresses, we see that the cane cutters' health problems are part of a wider, equally disturbing context. The sugar mill owner flies in with his private jet and is always seen accompanied by armed guards. As he explains, this is because of the gang violence in El Salvador, which he claims is driving away his best workers, although he 'feel[s] safe here'. Towards the end, we see another, possibly even greater threat to the cane-cutters way of life: mechanization. New machines are being brought in that can cut as much cane in one day as sixty men, raising the spectre of unemployment that could lead to more instability and violence unless the sugarcane owners can diversify their production. This sombre note is amplified in the last few minutes of the film, when Jarquín returns to El Angel after a year to see if his programme is still being carried out. Unfortunately, it is not. The canopies for shade have not been erected, the labourers prefer to bring their own plastic bottles of water, and they are still worried that any rest means their quota drops. Unfortunately, the scale of the problems facing those who seek to bring change to the Salvadoran countryside becomes obvious when one of the foremen comments acidly that 'the indians', as he calls them, simply refuse to change their ways. Despite this, the film ends more optimistically, with a meeting organised by Solidaridad with sugar factory owners. They turn up in large numbers and ask pertinent questions as to how much the programme costs, what the benefits are, why they too need to embrace change. Jarquín refuses to be dismayed by the difficulties. He insists that the initiative brings hope; he hopes that every link in the chain of producing sugar will become aware of the human cost behind it.

In *Angel in the Sugarcane*, Eijsink illustrates the work that a NGO like Solidaridad can do. As such, it seems to be mainly aimed at supporters of international aid organizations. In many ways, however, it is what is only hinted at that is most interesting: the ever-present threat of violence, the continuing domination of the Salvadoran economy by a few large landowners, the social divisions in what is still a largely peasant society. A bolder approach to these themes would have given the film a wider appeal. All in all, however, *Angel in the Sugarcane* succeeds in presenting a balanced and intriguing look at the possibilities of significant change in a society still trying to overcome its violent and divisive past.

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