

H-Net Reviews

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Peter Bull, dir. *Dirty Business: "Clean Coal" and the Battle for Our Energy Future*. Produced by Center for Investigative Reporting. Oley: Bullfrog Films, 2011. 90 mins. \$295.00 (dvd), ISBN 978-1-59458-903-4.

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The past ten years have witnessed a renewed interest in energy policy. There now exists a small cottage industry of books and documentaries examining a range of energy issues; the most active subjects include peak oil, the oil curse, American foreign policy and national security, and recommendations for a fossil fuel free future.[1] With most of the attention centered on oil, natural gas, and alternative forms of energy, the documentary film director Peter Bull has done a great service by focusing on coal: a widely used, enormously impactful, but far less glamorous form of energy.

The narrator and most frequently interviewed individual in this documentary is Jeff Goodell, a *Rolling Stone* contributing editor and author of *Big Coal: The Dirty Secret behind America's Energy Future* (2007). Like the book, this documentary is a critique of the coal industry for its environmental destruction and political influence. While the film does an adequate job in this task, coal is an easy target and the documentary is ultimately disappointing.

Goodell's *Big Coal* begins with a simple question: if you could arrive at a full accounting of what it means to be dependent on coal, would you feel the same way about electricity? It then proceeds to examine in broad brush strokes the environmental impact of our dependence on coal. It addresses the effects of mountain top removal in West Virginia by interviewing the people left in the small dying towns still holding on in the shadow of massive environmental change. It cuts to protests against existing (in Washington DC) and planned (Mesquite, New Mexico) coal plants. It follows American researchers documenting the impact of air pollution on newborn babies in China. It interviews environmentalists protesting Wall Street banks for financing new coal plants.

Two segments of the film in particular warrant special mention. The first is an interview with Don Blankenship, the chief executive officer of Massey Energy.[2] Blankenship has long been among the most aggressive proponents of mountain top removal, the technique by which coal seams are mined by removing the mountain under which they lie. He has also been a strong opponent of unions and has invested significant sums of money in West Virginia politics. Blankenship offers the most complete defense of coal found in the film. He declares mountain top removal to be an environmentally sound method for removing energy; he attacks the credibility of his opponents when he states that anyone who believes in climate change or who "benefits from the environmental movement" will say anything to protect their jobs. Blankenship goes on to claim that in those places where his company operates not only is the ground water not harmed, but it is also actually improved! Half-mumbling throughout the interview, this lecture is delivered with such little conviction it is not clear that even he believes what he is saying. Perhaps sensing that there is no defense of the impact of coal on the environment, Blankenship leaves in the middle of the interview.

It should be noted that the film effectively demonstrates many of these ideas to be baseless. When Blankenship is making claims about the beneficial impact of coal production on surface water, the film cuts to recent local television coverage of coal ash spills in Tennessee and Kentucky. The visuals of the impact of mountain top removal are stunning as is the suffering of the people who must live with its aftereffects.

The second segment of note is an extended examination of "clean coal." While it is a full half-hour before the documentary addresses this topic, the film is at

its strongest in both explaining the science behind Carbon Capture Sequestration (CCS) while ultimately arguing that it is impractical. The more respectful treatment of CCS comes from a series of sympathetic interviews with a scientist from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. That sympathy stems from the intentions of the scientists working on CCS concerned about the contribution of coal to global warming. The argument is that CCS affords the nation an opportunity to burn coal while being good environmental stewards. To its credit, the documentary visits sites where CCS is used in Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR) operations. EOR has been around for forty years and pumps CO₂ into the ground to help push oil to the surface. The problem with CCS is not that we lack the technology or the available subsurface space. It is the required investment and potential environmental impact of scaling CCS to capture all the CO₂ emissions produced by the burning of coal. Another problem is the financing. Who will pay for the vast infrastructure required by CCS?

The case against coal is not complete without arguing that coal is unnecessary. In this vein, the final twenty minutes of *Dirty Business* shifts to a series of segments focused on alternative energy. We visit a cattle rancher in Kansas enthusiastic about the wind turbines on his property; we head back to Mesquite, New Mexico, where a company proposes to construct a thermal solar plant; and we visit with consultants working to increase the energy efficiency of a silicon plant in West Virginia. Yet the film provides no sense of the extent to which these alternatives could effectively replace coal; or what would be required for the potential of alternative forms of energy to become reality.

Despite the stunning visuals of mountain top removal and the discussion of CCS, *Dirty Business* is ultimately disappointing for three reasons. First, the environmental pollution and devastation produced by the nation's dependence on coal is discussed but never sufficiently explained. We never learn precisely the many different means by which coal generates air and water pollution. Second, while the title of the film is *Dirty Business* and while it appears to be the intention of the documentary to trace the political influence of the coal industry, it never does the necessary research to persuasively document this political influence. We learn about the sums spent on lobbying but there is no discussion of the influence of coal state Democrats or precisely how coal interests secured favorable provisions in the Energy Policy Act of 2005. This influence is accepted as a given when it needs to be more fully explored and explained. Third, and of

particular interest to H-Net readers, there is no historical contextualization. At the beginning of the film it is mentioned that coal is responsible for producing half of the electricity consumed in the United States, but this is treated like an unchanging figure. How did coal come to comprise so large a share of the electricity market? How has this changed over time? Why is the coal industry so successful in avoiding the environmental consequences of its actions?

Had the film asked these more difficult questions it might have realized how quickly the ground beneath the industry's feet is shifting. While the film wants to convey the power and influence of the coal industry, it inadvertently documents its weakness. For despite the millions spent on lobbying and the federal government's support for CCS research (and a recently abandoned CCS demonstration plant in Ohio unmentioned by the film), the share of coal used to meet the nation's demand for electricity is in steep decline. Beginning in 2008, three years before *Dirty Business* was released, coal began to account for a declining percentage of the nation's electricity. This was accompanied by declines in overall coal production. What happened? The collapse of natural gas prices in 2008, due to significant new production from fracking, made coal considerably less desirable to utility companies on a commercial basis even before the environmental problems of coal were taken into account. Of course natural gas fracking is not without its own environmental issues, but that is the subject of another documentary, *Gasland* (2010).

Notes

[1]. The following citations include only a very small sample of this emerging scholarship. On peak oil, see Matthew R. Simmons, *Twilight in the Desert: The Coming Saudi Oil Shock and the World Economy* (New York: Wiley, 2006); and Kenneth S. Deffeyes, *Hubbert's Peak: The Impending World Oil Shortage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). On the oil curse, see Michael L. Ross, *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012). On foreign policy and national security, see Michael J. Graetz, *The End of Energy: The Unmaking of America's Environment, Security and Independence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011); and Michael Klare, *Blood and Oil: The Dangers and Consequences of America's Growing Dependency on Imported Petroleum* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004). On a fossil fuel free future, see Robert U. Ayres and Edward H. Ayres, *Crossing the Energy Divide: Moving from Fossil Fuel Dependence to a*

Clean Energy Future (Philadelphia: Wharton School Publishing, 2009).

[2]. In April 2010, twenty-nine miners were killed at Massey's Upper Big Branch Mine. In January 2011, Massey was acquired by Alpha Natural Resources.

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