

WINNER TAKES ALL

BY LARRY ENGEL

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The Gold Rush (Chaplin, 1925) is one of Charlie Chaplin's greatest films. This classic comedy pits the Tramp against some grizzly prospectors as they seek fortune panning for gold and fighting over claims in the Klondike. The focuses on the personal conflicts that arise from the competition over the glittering ore.

Fast forward nearly a century, and we're back to the future with Discovery Channel's *Gold Rush Alaska* series set in the wild's of Alaska. Again with burly men (and a few women) competing (essentially teams of miners searching for riches buried below) to find that new vein of TV fame and real-life fortune. As with all successful reality TV shows, much of the series focuses on the relationships, the friendships, the interpersonal relationships, the spats, and the tensions, another element of the show builds up the big machines. It's sort of like *Survivor* meets *Megastructures*, and the outcome is, well, a disaster. Not for the characters or their fortunes and machines, but for mother nature, and frankly, viewers.

Several months ago I attended a rural film festival in northern Italy (Corto e Fieno Film Festival, 2011). I screened a film of mine about food resilience called *Potato Heads: Keepers of the Crop*. As guest filmmaker I also spoke an issue of importance to me – embedded environmental ideology that may be found in all films, not just environmentally-oriented ones. Themes found in film often override content. (The original presentation was converted to text for a guest blog on American University Professor Matt Nisbet's Age of Engagement site, <http://bigthink.com/age-of-engagement/recognizing-the-ideology-embedded-in-nature-films>.)

Environmental issues may appear both before and behind the camera. The plot itself, the situation (circumstance), conflict, climax, and resolution may “contain” environmental elements. How the film is made (the “behind” part) should be of concern not just to environmentalists, but to filmmakers and audiences alike. (We all should be aware of and concerned about our earth.)

A couple of years ago I co-authored with British producer Andrew Buchanan *The Code of Best Practices in Sustainable Filmmaking*; it was supported by American University's Center For Social Media, its Center for Environmental Filmmaking, and by the international organization Filmmakers for Conservation. I did this because of my commitment to be personally responsible for my environmental actions, both in my personal and profession lives. How could I as an environmental filmmaker produce my films any other way? How could I as someone who has been to some of the most spectacular and pristine places on earth not be concerned about my impact on those places and their inhabitants? So now I practice what I preach, or preach what I practice.

Back to the show, though. Mining is one of the most risky of human operations. It demands heavy machinery and resources. It takes a huge toll on local, distant, and global environments and their peoples. Whether after coal, production metals, or precious metals and diamonds, the very nature of mining is destructive. And to get the goods, miners often have to resort to even more destructive processes and further pollution through the use of chemicals. The byproducts of mining don't disappear and usually aren't well contained. Land, water, and air pollution all occur.

So here we have a television series whose core sets up both competition among different teams but also sets up conflict with nature. Set in Alaska, not only do the teams try to be the first to find that gold streak, but they even go so far as to build their own roads to get into locations that may hold the sought-after ore. In one episode, one team got several pieces of machinery stuck in muck. Tension was high as the miners and operators tried to free them (successful, of course – more trucks and machines had to be called in for the rescue operation). I'm sure folks watching were enthralled with the drama, knowing that precious time was being lost by this team as its competitors kept up their search for the yellow stuff. And watching the team members themselves fight among themselves only added to the drama.

Unfortunately not once was it mentioned by contestants or narrator that the reason they had gotten stuck was that during the Alaskan summer, much of the ground thaws and mud is very much present. I don't know if they were in the tundra, but I remember being up in Barrows, Alaska for a February shoot. It was cold, really cold. There was ice and snow everywhere. Yet the Eskimos with whom we were working talked about marshes and mosquitoes that would come the following summer. Nor was there ever any reference to the impact that the road building, the drilling, the pumping of water deep into the ground, the enormous consumption of petroleum for the machines (and the flights for the crew behind the camera as well as on-camera), the pollution and destruction – not once. Nature decimated, animals disturbed if not destroyed, nope.

Then in another episode, a black bear was shot. Reports suggest that there was really no reason to shoot the bear other than building up its threat, then its destruction, made for high drama and good ratings

(<http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2011/02/18/bear-killed-unnecessarily-gold-rush-alaska-agency-says/>). Again, the classic man versus nature plays out with only one winner and many losers.

All fun and games, drama and tension. Big men. Big women. Big machines. Pitted against each other and the Alaskan landscape and its inhabitants. One team wins in the end. But everyone loses. The ideology behind the series – core story conflicts of “man versus man” and “man versus nature” demand, at least for the latter, rooting for the humans, hoping that one team will be able to beat mother nature. Wouldn't it be nice if someone in the series or at Discovery would acknowledge just a bit that sometimes to

make what some think is good television the production of it destroys the very things that are being celebrated by it?