

Film Forum

Cheshire, Ohio: An American Coal Story in 3 Acts. Directed by Eve Morgenstern. *Evenfall, LLC. Chicken & Egg Pictures, 2017. 75 minutes.*

Eve Morgenstern's award-winning *Cheshire, Ohio: An American Coal Story in 3 Acts* documents the displacement of a white, small-town community in the Ohio River Valley upon the arrival in 1971 of the American Electric Power company (AEP), a large investor-owned electric utility. The narrative turns on the company's decision to site one of the nation's largest coal-fired power plants, the Gavin Plant, next to the town's borders, which at the time was home to ninety or so families. The site, we learn, was chosen by the AEP for its natural advantages, including a steady water supply to cool the power plant's boilers, a navigable river to move coal barges, and proximity to the region's high-sulfur coal mines only a few miles away. The story that Morgenstern relates about the Gavin Plant is not insignificant; the plant is the nation's ninth largest, serves as many as two million homes with electricity, and emits a staggering fifteen million tons of carbon dioxide a year. It is thus a local story that speaks to the larger history of both coal-fired energy development along the Ohio River and the nation's remaining 500+ coal-based power plants.

Cheshire, Ohio is, in one sense, a straightforward lesson in environmental justice. Filmed over the course of a decade, it traces this working-class rural community's gradual awakening to its exposure to aerial and soil contaminants (for example, sulfur dioxide, arsenic, and various heavy metals from coal ash waste), its subsequent shift to collective action after a toxic "blue plume" in 2000 made the plant's health risks transparent to everyone, and its ultimate decision to accept the AEP's offer in 2002 to buy out residents' homes to create a buffer zone around its emission releases. Like much of industrial life today, the story does not have a resolution. It leaves off, in one sense, where it began, still emitting huge

amounts of waste and with the company facing a lawsuit over employees' exposure to its coal ash dump (although, to bring the story up to date, the AEP recently sold out in 2017 to new investors).

The film is evocative and carefully done, even if Cheshire's story will likely strike *Environmental History* readers as a familiar one, as yet another example of corporate injustices done to a local community. That is to say, the film's declensionist narrative will not be surprising. Yet that does not render the story any less important. The power of a documentary like this one lies in its ability to put a recognizable face on the vast impersonal structures that adversely impact local communities—in naming names that bring public attention to an industry that acts irresponsibly and with malfeasance. Moreover, this particular story gives attention to an energy industry that has a long history of covering its tracks (tracing back to before the 1928 Federal Trade Commission's damning report on the National Electric and Light Association) so that the public never really knows, sees, or feels the human costs of electricity generation. Lifting the veil on Cheshire thus challenges the nation's history of energy boosterism that otherwise all too easily writes off people and their communities as externalities.

Three facets of the film are worth highlighting briefly for scholars and teachers of environmental history. First, Morgenstern's documentary raises important issues about place, people, and trauma. Cheshire is a place in every sense of the word, and the director recreates for us what this place meant (and means) to its residents through carefully edited interviews, vintage photographs and video footage, and an ambient soundtrack. The film's conflict centers on the trauma that Cheshire's residents experience when events outside their control turn their town into a toxic landscape, as homes become hazards and part of an industrial sacrifice zone. We hear about residents waking up one morning to learn that footprints of a passing bird have strangely appeared on the bottom of an aluminum awning, upside down, its acidic feet having burnt through the metal; to the discovery that the town's soil had accumulated unsafe levels of arsenic over twenty inches deep; to residents' skin blistering, their tongues and lips burning, during a sulfur dioxide event; to the wheezing of asthmatic children, and to the fears of cancerous bodies, from exposure to aerial emissions and coal ash.

This is something to ponder: what it means for one's home, one's place, to transform into a new nature, to become deranged and unfamiliar, no longer safe. Morgenstern captures this feeling of disorientation in an interview she has with one resident. "What was your town like?" she asks. The response was soft and muted: "I don't remember anymore." If place and trauma have occupied environmental historians' attention for years, *Cheshire, Ohio* illustrates for us what trauma meant for one working community in the contemporary Midwest.

Second, this documentary opens up meaningful questions about narrative, about the nature of telling a story of environmental injustice. On

this issue, *Cheshire, Ohio* does not take large risks. Rather, it adopts the traditional trope of an American pastoral's fall from grace, of the machine in the garden gone wrong. That narrative is not subtle. The film opens to ominous smokestacks pouring into a pale blue sky, eerie electric transmission towers, and silent coal barges framing prelapsarian memories of residents talking about a time prior to the Gavin Plant when their town was "a pretty town," "a clean place," with "a lot of Christian people" and "nice trees," and with "no rough stuff," a homey place of marching bands, American flags, baseball games, and picnics. But this juxtaposition of cheerful memories (a woman kissing her husband, a child in an outdoor washtub) and towering smokestacks (which we learn did not have proper sulfur dioxide scrubbers) forewarns the viewer that white picket fences are about to give way to a great derangement.

On the question of narrative form, *Cheshire, Ohio* leaves the *Environmental History* viewer to ponder whether the melancholic narrative we tend to tell is capable of generating new awareness, new action. That is an open question for us all.

Finally, Morgenstern's documentary raises the vital question of personal agency in the face of vast impersonal institutions that appear immovable, inevitable, even bigger than life. The story here is not uplifting on this score. On the one hand, the community's class action lawsuit (which included hiring health consultants, forensic physicians, and environmental attorneys) did lead to a \$20 million buyout as a compromise. But that resolution was a hollow one. It really only gave residents the option to take the money and run, to leave their homes and rebuild their lives, families, and sense of place somewhere safer. If the company could claim that it was "a winning story for both sides," that sentiment all too casually dismisses the ongoing deterioration of air, water, and soil quality, the legacy of asthmatic lungs, cancerous bodies, and other invisible injuries, and the residual distrust that such malfeasance leaves all of us with when we think about corporate management of our environment.

Cheshire, Ohio exemplifies, in this respect, today's big story of ecological deterioration that each of us faces because of investors' continuing attraction to coal, oil, and gas and government policies that perpetuate the value of these investments. Morgenstern's documentary never really gets around to this pressing issue of climate change, but it does leave us with the memorable words of one elderly resident who at some point gave up her home: "[W]e tried to fight it. We just couldn't do it."

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