

How "Life in a Day" (aka "The YouTube Movie") Reveals Today's Aesthetic of Lowered Expectations

by Ben Davis

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A man enthusiastically eating a watermelon is one of 80,000 video submissions for "Life in a Day."
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Like many YouTube videos — I’m thinking of you, “[Sleepy Kitten!](#)” — the whole premise of “Life in a Day” is right there in the title: the 90-minute feature stitches together hundreds of videos taken by people all over the world in a single day, forming a kind of freewheeling, pan-cultural portrait of life on earth on July 24, 2010.

The filmmakers — “Life in a Day” was produced by brother directors Ridley and Tony Scott (of “Blade Runner” and “Top Gun” fame, respectively), directed by Kevin Macdonald (“The Last King of Scotland”), and edited by Todd Walker (who worked on artist Steve McQueen’s “Hunger”) — claim to have received approximately 4,500 hours of footage in response to their call for YouTube footage. Of this, Walker estimates that he sat through about 600 hours, which is just 13 percent of the total but still an amount of raw footage that could run 25 straight days. The film was

screened in theaters in select cities in time to celebrate YouTube's fifth birthday last year, and was then [released on the Internet](#) in November so that those who were home for the holidays and looking for something mildly amusing to do with their parents could see it too. "Life in a Day" is, in fact, probably best described as an experimental family film, a humanist feel-good fable about life in the Internet age. It's also a little bit of a con. We'll get to that in a second.

So, what does this film really tell us about life as it happened on July 24, 2010? "Life in a Day" begins in the early morning hours in the company of a drunk dude, and proceeds to wend through the day's events more or less sequentially. There's a montage depicting people waking up, then a section of people having breakfast, and so on. A little later, a gawky teenager gets his first shave, the intimacy of this classic father-son bonding moment fatally compromised by dad's insistence on swooping his camera over his son's bleeding face. Later, another young man with awkward facial hair — directly addressing the audience through the lens ("Hello, 'Life in a Day!'") — chronicles his own hapless efforts to ask a girl out. Also, a giraffe gives birth. A bull is slaughtered. A woman goes skydiving. A guy talks about his sports car. And on life goes.

Macdonald himself has said he was inspired by the Depression-era [Mass Participation project](#) in England, an experiment in popular sociology that sought to catalyze an army of volunteers to provide a collective portrait of British life. (The archives of this effort are today at the University of Sussex.) Though nobly intentioned, Mass Participation's citizen chroniclers were hardly a representative slice of the British population — including, for instance, few blue-collar workers. Its many participants were rather "an aristocracy of the articulate" (in [the New Statesman's words](#)). The contributors to "Life in a Day" aren't always particularly articulate, but the film seems to have the same basic demographic issue. ([Aware of this](#) and hoping to broaden the project's scope beyond a "a middle class with access to broadband," the filmmakers sent cameras to far-flung places, which likely explains some otherwise incongruous clips from Africa and South America).

And yet, Mass Participation and "Life in a Day" have almost diametrically opposed thrusts. The liberal sociologists behind Mass Participation wanted to prove that public attitudes were actually more complex than was being let on by the pollsters of the recently formed Gallup agency. On the other hand, what stands out about "Life in a Day" is that while it is full of quirky moments and mildly redemptive encounters, it

is also a relentlessly selective and ultimately glossy rendering of the human condition. “Life in a Day” features astonishingly little in the way of depictions of people’s working lives — you know, what most of humanity actually does with 80 percent of their waking day (the most memorable exception being a forlorn street urchin, somewhere in Latin America, wandering about with his shoeshine kit). The clips instead inhabit a narrow realm of domestic vignettes and recreational activities, alternating with montages on themes like fears, hopes, love, and so on. It is also basically free of the hint of sex, as well as any real sense of human cruelty (a reality of contemporary life well represented in the infamous YouTube comments stream).

"We're looking for pure moments, and whether what we get is beautiful or ugly, we will follow it where it goes," Macdonald said, [explaining his vision](#). But he fretted, "I'm also concerned that we might get too many videos of dancing dogs." In other words, “Life in a Day” has been engineered to be a YouTube Movie that is deliberately not about what YouTube actually is about. There are no booty clap vids, no guys getting whacked in the nuts, and none of the animals are being amusing at all. Stood alone, it is unlikely that too many of the clips in “Life in a Day” would ever be discovered by more than a handful of people; they are, by and large, anti-viral, so to speak. The “Life in a Day” project is about flattering the idea that YouTube is a place where people’s everyday self-representations take on a halo of wonder and significance by being put before an immense interconnected global public — which is a myth.

No one cares about your video blog. No one cares about your family videos. Unless they actually are wondrous or significant. The mere ability to “Broadcast Yourself” redeems nothing.

Why, then, care at all about this film? I guess what interests me is the idea that “Life in a Day” underwhelms not because it fails in its mission but because it succeeds. “What makes ‘Life in a Day’ so compelling is how completely ordinary it is,” Molly Eichel [wrote](#). “Sure, there are dull sections where nothing of note seems to be happening, but isn't that what life is?” To translate: the film’s trivial character is a sop to our narcissism, since most of us feel trivial most of the time. It therefore points to a kind of ambient semi-aesthetic sensibility, a side effect of online sharing which may or may not be a barrier to developing more focused aesthetic investments, retarding us by miring us in the mud of our own self-regard. The film put me in mind of the [online debate](#) the New York Times recently had about whether YouTube, with

its transformation of everyday quirks into spectacles, had depleted our ability to appreciate performance art — a sad conclusion if it's true.

At the film's end, a woman delivers a monologue into the camera that, [according to Macdonald himself](#), serves as the thesis statement of "Life in a Day": "The sad part is, I spent all day long hoping for something amazing to happen, something great, something to appreciate this day and to be a part of it," she [tells us](#). "I'm not gonna sit here and tell you that I'm this great person, because I don't think I am — at all. I think I'm a normal girl; normal life. Not interesting enough to know anything about. But I want to be." You can both identify with this sentiment — and apparently, some 80,000 hopeful contributors to "Life in a Day" did — and recognize how trite it is, and wish a better future for her than just to be able to express how uninteresting she is in public. I wish for her — for all of us — the beautiful and the extraordinary, which are also the well-springs of the artistic. And in the meantime, really, I prefer sleepy kittens and dancing dogs.

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