

APPROACHING THE SCIENCE OF FOOD WASTE  
THROUGH DOCUMENTARY FILM

by

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iii

DEDICATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION ..... 1

2. RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT WASTE THROUGH DOCUMENTARY ..... 3

    Unreliable Models for Approaching Food Waste ..... 4

    The Limitation of the Performative Approach ..... 7

2. ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *ROT* ..... 11

    Relatable Characters ..... 11

    Filmic Styles That Appeal to An Audience ..... 16

    Approaching the Science of Food Waste in Documentary Film ..... 18

3. CONCLUSION ..... 21

REFERENCES CITED ..... 22

## ABSTRACT

“Trash” does not exist in nature, as any waste generated by an organism is utilized by another. Humans have strayed away from the earth’s natural processes by exporting waste towards a dead end, allowing it to pile high in landfills where it most likely will never decompose. Documentary filmmakers have attempted to raise awareness about this pressing environmental issue of waste by illustrating the negative impacts of landfills on our lives and providing the viewer with attainable and sustainable waste diversion solutions. This study will describe, discuss, and compare the different aesthetic and thematic approaches adopted in *Wasted! The Story of Food Waste*, *Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story* and *Rot*, three documentary films that propose environmentally-friendly waste disposal strategies as possible solutions to our global food waste crisis.

## INTRODUCTION

We are routinely presented with visual advertising of food that is appealing, appetizing and alluring. Social media have used #foodporn to help centralize audiences towards sites that feature delicious recipes, supplemented with enticing pictures to make one want to cook up a similar meal for dinner. Imagery of food waste does not appear to have the same pleasant effect on us as, in our society, waste is most often put out of sight, discarded in the landfill. Although documentary filmmakers have attempted to raise our awareness about the global waste crisis for many decades now, we continue to avoid dealing with this pressing environmental issue. Is it possible to create depictions of waste that are “appealing” to our social consciousness and motivate us to adopt proper waste management strategies?

In the contemporary world, waste is anything that we throw *away* and cannot be used again. Yet, the natural function of the Earth is an inherently continuous loop of death and regrowth, providing the basis for life on this planet. As the separation of humankind’s waste management behavior and the Earth’s biological processes is increasing, we are urgently confronted with what we must do with our mountainous overflow of refuse. To fix the problem of overflow trash, we must be willing to change our approach towards waste. Rather than disregarding the value of a product by throwing it away, we must find new ways to recycle and reuse it to create new products, choosing more sustainable options to allow for easier fluidity of these renewable resources. Zero waste, a theory that was born out of this need to address our growing waste issue, could be a viable solution to this pressing garbage disposal problem that environmentally

conscious documentarians should describe and divulge widely through their filmic representations.

Zero Waste is a topic that has not been widely represented in documentary film, perhaps because of its lack of aesthetic appeal. *Wasted! The Story of Food Waste* and *Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story*, are an exception to the rule as their central focus delves into our global food waste crisis and what our society must do to combat this issue. Despite their attempts to raise awareness about the need to embrace a zero waste lifestyle, these films fail to provide current day solutions that can be done at the individual scale, leaving the audience with a feeling of helplessness. That is why I decided to focus on one aspect of zero waste in my documentary film: the process of composting. In *Rot*, I have tried to make the subject of composting approachable and accessible to the average person, by featuring characters who illustrate specific aspects of composting and, at the same time, serve the larger theme of food waste reduction and local fertility in the town of Bozeman, Montana.

In this study, I plan to demonstrate how documentary films can encourage an individual to adopt a zero waste lifestyle through depictions of characters who are actively taking steps to reach this goal. Instead of trying to solve the entire issue of food waste at once, *Rot* presents the viewer with manageable steps to embrace the single practice of composting. In weaving together the stories of individuals who embrace composting on a smaller scale, *Rot* showcases how the larger issue of food waste can ultimately be solved by putting all these efforts together toward a common vision.

## RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT FOOD WASTE THROUGH DOCUMENTARY

Documentary filmmaking is a powerful means to communicate environmental issues and advise an audience about how to approach a zero waste lifestyle. Incorporating the science of zero waste in film offers a chance to captivate new audiences and inspire them to open up to a broader discussion on the topic of waste management. In documentary films tackling this urgent issue, social characters can help explain environmental concepts by humanizing the science and making overwhelming topics conceivable and relatable. Documentary films effectively use scientific explanation as a tool to drive conflict and story development. “Stories only assist with science outreach as much as the science itself contributes to those stories,” it has been said; that is, the more connected audiences are to the character, visuals or story of a documentary, the more likely they are able to absorb the scientific concepts at hand (Berlin 256).

Documentary filmmakers who are campaigning to raise awareness about zero waste have primarily adopted the conventions of the participatory and performative modes, utilizing social actors to explain the science behind zero waste strategies. Coined in the 1980’s as a model to offer guidance on how one can live a waste-free lifestyle, zero waste provides eco-conscious citizens with a sustainable approach that fosters environmentally friendly choices about garbage disposal (Zero Waste International Alliance). It is designed as an obtainable solution for an individual that can be scaled up and adopted by larger entities. This fairly recent movement has gained traction on social

media platforms through influencers such as Bea Johnson and Lauren Singer. These are two individuals who are actively living zero waste lifestyles and provide guidance for the average person who wants to attempt this journey. Through social media, website blogs, and books, zero waste influencers have “sold” the idea of zero waste to the masses through appealing imagery and DIY tips. What makes their model for zero waste so attainable is that they offer simple steps and strategies that one can immediately implement in their own life. Rather than accepting the narrative that there is a global waste issue that is unaidable, Singer and Johnson have taken upon themselves to be the change in their own communities and as a result have influenced a wide audience to take action as well. Inspired by this character-driven strategy, I have designed my film *Rot*, to approach food waste at a local level by featuring individuals who have made a difference in the community of Bozeman, Montana. I was also influenced by documentary films such as *Wasted!* and *Just Eat It*, upon which I will elaborate in the following sections.

### Unreliable Models for Approaching Food Waste

In the documentary *Wasted! The Story of Food Waste*, the filmmakers tie the topic of food waste to celebrity chefs such as Anthony Bourdain, Mario Batali, and Mark Bittman, capitalizing on their notoriety to attract large audiences. At the beginning of this film, we are presented with a notable voice before we even see a face. Anyone who has invested time in modern day food culture can identify the voice as Anthony Bourdain’s, as he answers a question about his thoughts on this film topic. Even Bourdain states he

has an aversion to approaching food waste because it is such a serious issue. Bourdain has a cult following and is seen as an authoritative figure to gourmands and gluttons alike. *Wasted!* exploits Bourdain's fame to educate the viewer on how food waste is dealt with across the world. Yet, Bourdain is a celebrity which makes him less relatable to the average viewer who is interested in dealing with food waste. Why should the audience want to engage in a subject that not even a celebrity is comfortable facing? The enormity of the issue that food waste presents is daunting, and by using the personas of celebrity chefs to explain it, this film detracts from wanting to take immediate action.

Additionally, *Wasted!* tends to glamorize food waste through the creation of dishes from around the globe that feature "unwanted" parts of the animal. Through the participatory mode, we engage with the world's most influential chefs as they demonstrate the utilization of everything in the kitchen by transforming even the lowest of food scraps into a delectable, enticing meal. We first follow Dan Barber, who is a chef in New York and works closely with a farm called Stone Barns. He intersects the connection between food and farming to create meals out of produce and animals that generally would not be used in the average kitchen. He is offered the opportunity to explain about different aspects of a plant and utilizes the entirety of the plant through the collaboration local farmers and talented chefs. To deliver this message, the filmmakers rely on imagery that tempts the senses and attracts the mind through closeups of colorfully designed dishes. Although the chef's model to reduce food waste is based on a sustainable food system through whole animal cooking, it is exotic and aspiring, but thus not realistic for most. The average person shops at a grocery store where, behind the

scenes, there are standards for what can be displayed. The filmmakers glorify the chef's sustainability efforts through fancy cooking with ingredients that are not commonly offered. In doing this, they glamorize solving the food waste issue in a way that is not relatable for the average person, ultimately failing to offer manageable steps that one could take to make a difference with their own food waste at home.

Statistically speaking, *Wasted!* presents us with facts about the global food waste crisis mainly through talking heads. Celebrity chefs inform us of the food waste issue, yet, they neglect to give us specific advice on how to embrace a truly sustainable lifestyle. For example, *Wasted!* presents the statistic that about 10 million tons of produce goes unharvested each year. These facts are useful in proving that there is a pressing need to address this issue: however, for the average person, many of these stages of waste are out of our hands. Rather than focusing on what a person can do at the individual level, the filmmakers focus on larger businesses and farms. In other words, even though *Wasted!* showcases businesses and farms around the globe that have taken food waste into their own hands, they rarely address what can be done at the individual or community level to impact this. Overall, *Wasted!* is successful in raising awareness about our global food waste crisis, and in showing how chefs, farmers, and brewers are inventing tangible ways to deal with the excess. The documentary film falls short, however, in providing the individual viewer with specific steps for success in reducing food waste in their own home.

### The Limitation of the Performative Approach

By failing to offer specific solutions to the issue of waste while stressing its gravity, the documentary film *Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story* ends up deterring audiences and leave them to feel hopeless. *Just Eat It* uses the performative documentary mode by following a couple who has vowed to survive only on food waste for six months. The couple's "embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general process at work in society," allowing the audience to emotionally connect with the character's experience, as they provide insight to their struggles and findings throughout the challenge. (Nichols 131).

The storyline instantly engages the audience with the two main characters, Jen and Grant, who kickstart a journey that seems daunting and slightly impossible. They film each other as they uncover information behind food waste and navigate through the policies that govern our society. We quickly learn that, beyond the awkwardness of dumpster diving and asking local grocers for pulled produce, it really is not difficult to maintain a diet of food waste. This is because our society's standards for what is "good" or "edible" is based on a "sell by" date rather than the food's actual expiration. By the end of the film, Jen and Grant are faced with a plethora of food, which uncovers its own host of problems. Because there is so much food waste, these characters feel as if they should take as much as they can. They end up having too much and are faced with the possibility of throwing out the food that they claimed. They even offer their kitchen as a makeshift grocery store to help reduce the amount of food they have looted.

By using a performative approach, *Just Eat It* allows the spectator an inside view on how this journey has affected Jen and Grant. We feel their pain when they see a dumpster full of edible “trash,” and are engaged with their frustrations with which they inevitably are faced. Although it is inspiring to witness what the characters gain from this experience, this documentary film does not provide viewers with a sustainable model of zero waste living, leaving them with a “what now?” mentality. Why start out on a journey that is neither successful nor sustainable for the average person? In addition, Jen and Grant had no intentions of maintaining this lifestyle long term, taking us back to square one: there is a food waste issue and we do not know how to deal with it at the individual level on a scale that works for most.

Besides following Jen and Grant’s performative act as they tackle food waste, *Just Eat It* employs imagery that shows how depressing and vast this issue is. In one scene, Grant finds a large dumpster filled from top to bottom with packages of hummus. It is an image that speaks volume to this global crisis, but also is one that leaves you feeling helpless and unable to act. Grant notes how sunken he felt by both the sight and the guilt that comes from only being able to salvage two or three packages from the larger mass. Just as the characters display feelings of defeat, the audience does, too. This symbolic scene is both intimidating and disheartening; thus, it ends up discouraging the individual from acting. If environmental documentaries want to induce change, they need to restructure their narrative to empower individuals, giving them practical advice on how to approach the issue at hand in their own lives through manageable steps.

Although *Wasted!* and *Just Eat It* help raise awareness about food waste, their supporting discussion around the issue does not provide the average person with manageable and approachable steps to induce change. Both films tackle the substantial extent of food waste that plagues our globe. Through the filmic conventions of the participatory and performative modes, they successfully raise awareness about this pressing issue (Nichols 132). Yet, how many people have they actually convinced to take action in their own lives by adopting a zero waste lifestyle? These documentary films' approach to the food waste issue calls a specific viewer to the table: the activist. This derails the call to action that forms the basis of most environmental films. Why garner a vast audience through celebrity chefs and home challenges if you are only going to convince those who have already been converted?

Despite their limitations and shortcomings, *Wasted!* and *Just Eat It* contain stylistic and thematic elements that inspired the direction of my film. For example, *Just Eat It* features two engaging characters, who are actively making a change in their lives to inspire the viewer to look inward at their waste disposal choices, and to be more aware about recycling options around them. This character-driven element is also featured in *Rot*, as it focuses on individual characters who illustrate specific aspects of composting, and at the same time, serve the larger theme of food waste reduction. With regard to *Wasted!*, it influenced my film *Rot* because of its overarching theme of how starting small can lead to a larger impact. As one of the characters interviewed in *Wasted!* eloquently puts it, "You don't just change a child, you change a family, which changes a

community which changes a city. Enough cities could change this nation. And a nation could change the planet.”

ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *ROT*

The film *Rot* uses the participatory mode to highlight one aspect of zero waste that has been building within the community of Bozeman, Montana. By focusing on the subject of composting, *Rot* identifies the issues of waste within the Bozeman community and offers a solution for how it can be managed. This film addresses the diversion of organic materials from landfills through composting and offers a variety of ways to get involved. Through interviews with relatable community members who practice various composting methods, *Rot*, is able to build awareness around this practice and show that it is achievable by the average person. Most importantly, viewers not only learn how composting is an approachable way to reduce waste that promotes natural ecosystems, local fertility, and builds community, but they learn how to compost and take action towards this new zero waste lifestyle.

Relatable Characters

The characters featured in *Rot*, were chosen because they each represent an attainable active participation in the practice of composting. They all follow a different form of composting, providing various ways to approach this method, leaving the viewer to observe and decide which method could fit best within their lifestyle. For example, *Rot*, explores how an individual can build a composting system in their own backyard through Kareen Erbe's character. Erbe is the owner of Broken Ground, a business that

offers consultation of edible garden design rooted in the idea of permaculture, a practice that mimics natural systems. She discusses how composting is inherent to permaculture because it is a natural, closed looped system. Erbe focuses on her own backyard composting system, explaining key factors when building one and how to create a maintainable pile. Erbe quotes in the film, “The problem is the solution,” when offering advice on how to compost in your own backyard. In Bozeman, winters are long and not a catalyzing time for these piles. During this season, Erbe recommends having a separate pile where one can accumulate, building up enough materials for a compost pile once spring arrives. Rather than expending energy on a pile that generally cannot be processed in Montana winters, she suggests a focus on preparing for the season of growth. She also recommends to the individual who may not have the time or space to create a backyard composting system to reach out to composting services in town. Kareen is a great example of a regular person living in Bozeman, who has enough property to maintain her own composting system in her backyard. She explains the trials and errors of dealing with this traditional composting method for the backyard composter, by taking out the troublesome winters and encouraging the individual that it takes little maintenance to keep a pile.

On the other side of the spectrum, *Rot* shows an alternate way for those who want to participate in composting but do not have the time or space. Happy Trashcan and Yes! are two Bozeman-based businesses offering curbside composting services to the general public. Curbside composting takes the farming and science out of the equation for the

customer. To participate, one needs to sign up for the curbside pick-up program and learn what is considered compostable by their service provider. It then becomes an in-home sorting process like separating your trash from recycling. Curbside composting is a relatively simple practice to learn and the curbside pick-up makes it very appealing to those who do not have the room, time or interest in learning the science and farming of compost.

Happy Trashcan, started in 2016 by husband and wife team Ryan and Adrienne, was one of the first businesses of its kind offering curbside composting service to the Bozeman community. Adrienne and Ryan, have a deep passion for diverting food waste from the landfill and making it into what they call “black gold” or soil. They are a year-round service, providing an alternative for those who do not want to maintain their piles in the winter but still want to compost. They have grown within Bozeman to be able to provide businesses and individuals ways to reach their zero waste goals and have built a model that has inspired many to partake. Their goal is not only to divert food waste but also to inspire people in the Bozeman community to build good habits. Their business focuses on encouraging people to buy only what they need and to utilize everything, rather than letting it go to waste. Ryan and Adrienne designed their business because they saw a need in their community as many people don’t have the time, resources or knowledge to take on composting practices in their everyday life. Thus, they developed a service that takes out all the guesswork and makes composting more approachable.

Karl Johnson’s company, Yes! Compost was built off of the same curbside service idea as Happy Trashcan but utilizes a different method of composting rooted in

the practice of vermicompost. Vermicompost uses worms to create a product called worm-castings, a rich soil that is great for farmers and gardeners alike. Johnson currently offers a fee for curbside pick-up; however, he wants to grow his business into one that offers free food waste collection with an ultimate focus on selling his worm castings. Not only does he want to divert food waste going to the landfill, but he wants to promote local fertility as well. Through Johnson, the audience learns the benefits of having a vermicompost versus a traditional composting system. Both outputs produce rich soil; however, the time span in which it takes to create this product is quite different, with vermicompost having a faster yield. In addition, vermicompost is scalable for the average person—it is something that can be done in an apartment setting as well as on a larger scale. The viewer first learns through Adrienne, Ryan and Kareen that composting is a great way to divert waste. But Karl introduces the idea of composting as a means to produce soil for your garden. He has added another level of the benefits of composting that is relatable for most, and achievable by all.

*Rot* features a lesser known form of composting called bokashi that offers wide scalability. Kathleen Rauch informs the viewer of the Japanese composting method that uses anaerobic fermentation to create a product that can be converted into soil. The timespan and space that this process requires are vastly shorter and smaller than both the traditional method of composting and vermicomposting, making it easily accessible to someone who lives in an apartment, but it can also be scaled up to an industrial level. Not only does Rauch implement this into her home life, but she has introduced this composting process at her work with Springhill Community Gardens. A self-proclaimed

“cultural inoculant,” Rauch has inspired and encouraged many people in the Bozeman community to take part in this aspect of zero waste. Through potlucks and community events, the audience sees how Rauch offers another way for people to come together through food and soil. Through Kathleen, we become aware of living our lives in a cyclical pattern. She states, “We talk about the farm to table movement, but I think it’s really fun to close that loop. So, then table to farm. How do I get what’s leftover on my table, what’s left over from my cooking, what’s left over from my daily life? How do I get that back into the soil? How do I close that loop? On a scale that works for me.”

Kathleen re-centers the film back to the self, asking the viewer to act more consciously in their own lives.

*Rot* defines many methods of composting through interwoven stories, building towards a larger sense of collectiveness. Kareen, Karl, Kathleen, Adrienne and Ryan, are real people who have dedicated a portion of their life to caring for the earth through the diversion of waste, and the creation of soil for the Gallatin Valley. They are relatable because, unlike in *Wasted!* and *Just Eat It*, they are not celebrities with onscreen personas and are not performing temporary challenges. Food waste diversion is their job and their passion. The audience is not learning about composting through a scripted narrative but through individuals who, day in and day out, are outside working on turning food scraps into soil. In coming together, these characters have raised awareness about an issue that is global but narrow the focus to their local community to fuel change. Through their actions, they set a new precedence for the city of Bozeman. An individual living in

Bozeman that is working towards a zero-waste goal, can take composting, using any of the methods explained by the personalities in *Rot*, as a first step. As Bozeman continues to grow, we will keep finding people like the characters in *Rot* who are paving a path towards zero waste and providing options and guidance for the community.

### Filmic Styles that Appeal to An Audience

The characters in *Rot*, raise awareness about composting through community events and gatherings. Curating events where Bozeman locals come together provides opportunities for people to learn about the zero waste options that are offered locally. In *Rot*, Kathleen and Kareen throw potlucks during the growing season to share in the produce that their communities grow, and to also share tips for cultivation and composting. Through these occasions, they are encouraging the individual's efforts to grow their own food and fertilize their gardens with their leftovers. Adrienne and Ryan hold the annual pumpkin smash event shortly after Halloween to encourage people to compost their carved pumpkins. It also adds a playful element of smashing up old pumpkins and is enjoyed by children and adults alike. Once again, they are engaging the community by offering a service of convenience. Not only can locals drop off their pumpkins, but in doing so they are reducing waste sent to landfills and promoting the abundance of local fertility. "Films often make their appeal through the senses to the senses, circumventing the intellect," says Gaines, meaning that in documentary, filmmakers can appeal to the emotional strings of the audience to align their motives with

the characters' on screen. In order to employ the audience on this level, it is necessary to approach topics in an accessible way with practical steps. (Gaines 93).

Filmic style and editing can determine how a film can appeal to its audience. *Wasted!* has a high level of filmic quality to it that makes it beautiful and seamless. It is clear that it was filmed with a reasonable budget as it contains exciting time-lapse of title creations and travels the globe to feature different restaurants and businesses that have worked to combat food waste. These features, combined with the use of celebrities, only adds to the film's unattainable quality. *Just Eat It* offers a raw look into the lives of Jen and Grant, as much of their storyline is filmed handheld. They edit these moments between segments of more stylized, higher-quality footage and titles that ultimately distracts from their personal struggle. The viewing experience of the film is choppy because of its inconsistent cinematic style, making it hard for the viewer to remain engaged with the process that Jen and Grant are going through. Both films are great in developing upon the idea that food waste is an issue that needs to be addressed but fall short because they are not relatable.

The style of filmmaking and editing used in *Rot* is another way to showcase the raw and tangible nature of composting and its accessibility to the individual. *Rot* features images that are meant to feel intimate and demonstrate the raw, organic nature of composting. These images are best seen when the characters are working in the dirt, such as the close-up of Kareen holding soil in her hands. Through this imagery, the viewer can feel the connection she has with the soil and understand the historical context of it, as she has seen it in the many stages that have brought it to the point. Similarly, there are a

variety of wide shots and close-ups of Kathleen as she plants vegetables and works with her compost. Although *Rot* showcases the participatory mode, much of it is also observational. Rarely were scenes acted out for the camera. Instead most of the footage is capturing the individuals as they go about their everyday routine in making compost. Due to its raw, shaky and intimate nature, the filmmaking style is one that brings a sense of realness to the storyline, allowing audiences to connect. Each character can resonate with the average American and at a diverse age range. Specifically, they are presentable to everyday Bozemanites, but their stories can reach an audience on a broader scale.

#### Approaching the Science of Food Waste in Documentary Film

*Rot's* approach to the science of food waste does not encase the audience with fear because the facts are supplemented with solutions that are easily understood. Science drives the narrative in environmental documentary films, which use it to create a conflict that needs to be resolved. All documentary films require a connection to the characters and images, but these are only tools to help the audience absorb the scientific concepts. How the science is approached is something that is dealt with differently in every film depending on what documentary mode is being used and how present the science is throughout the film.

In *Just Eat It* and *Wasted!* the science is typically presented through titles and figures overlaid on specific imagery or through interviews. In *Just Eat It*, most of the facts are delivered by food waste experts or scientists who the viewer typically is not

aware of. They are featured as knowledgeable talking heads, but the information that they deliver gets lost because the audience is not able to connect to the interviewees. In contrast to when Jen and Grant share a fact about food waste, it is much easier for the audience to absorb as they have created a connection to them and their story. In *Wasted!* the filmmakers showcase a creative way to depict factual information that is engaging to the viewer. They use time-lapse to show an artist creating life-size charts that segments the film into five different categories. They come back to this before each segment, allowing the viewer to easily follow along and shift gears onto the next subject. This method of processing information is more successful than when they use titles to state facts. Using titles to translate information to the audience is useful, but not always the best approach because it is intangible and unrelatable.

In *Rot*, science is approached with less extremity and is shown through the action of the characters. *Rot* does not dwell on the amount of food waste that is rampant across the world. It approaches the topic of food waste as an issue through an interview with Adrienne and Ryan, but when addressing it, they also combat it with a solution. This is not meant to undermine the crisis, but to highlight ways that people can help lessen the issue in their everyday life. In addition, *Rot* focuses on the food waste at a local level. By narrowing the focus of the film to the community of Bozeman, it provides the citizens of that city with the appropriate steps they can take to contribute to lessening their edible refuse and inspire other places of a similar size how to take action in their own cities. Overall, by approaching the issue of food waste with less apocalyptic undertones, it does

not dissuade the participation of the audience because they are not left with a feeling of helplessness and gain knowledge that their individual efforts do matter.

## CONCLUSION

*Rot* is inspired by the performative and participatory approaches that *Just Eat It* and *Wasted!* followed respectively but is able to engage with the viewer on a level that excites change in their own lives. Both *Wasted!* and *Just Eat It* take apocalyptic measures to address the severity of global food waste. They both showcase characters who are trying to combat this issue by such methods as eating only food waste, creating beer from waste bread, and feeding pigs food waste. These methods, however, albeit great ideas, are not a reality for the average person. Neither films address how to deal with food waste at home, and how individuals can engage in this conversation through actively engaging in composting. This approach is where a documentary like *Rot*, comes in as it features individuals who are actively living a life that is governed by what they can do to reduce waste and how they can make it accessible to the city of Bozeman, Montana.

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