

[Lichens Are the Way — Ondřej Vavrečka \[FIDMarseille '24 Review\]](#)

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As documentaries go, the subject of plant life tends to suffer from a lack of tangible movement. Inertia, ascribed to the slow-moving, still hearkens back to the animate, whereas vegetative existence — although a step up from the mineral — takes stillness to be the norm, and movement its exception. Rocks, ferns, mushrooms, the like: to casual observers, these pale in comparison to the compelling narratives of survival, shot with breathtaking intimacy, on *Animal Planet* or *National Geographic*. But they too offer insight, if not into vivid spectacles of evolution armed and sped-up, then at least in and of themselves. 2014's *The Creeping Garden*, for starters, dug into the reclusive world of slime mold; *Last Things*, Deborah Stratman's 2023 meditation on extinction, does so through the humble if enduring existence of the rock.

With *Lichens Are The Way*, director Ondřej Vavrečka attempts something a little more than mere fact-telling. For one, its subject matter — the hardy, perpetual lichen — isn't strictly a plant; it's the curious synthesis, or more accurately symbiosis, between plant and fungal life. Algae, with chloroplasts and thus able to photosynthesize, provide carbohydrates for the superstructure it nests within, while the partner fungi *are* the former's superstructure, safeguarding fragile plant matter from the elements and also sustaining it through the moisture and other nutrients they draw. With the scientific pleasantries out of the way, Vavrečka proceeds to fashion a more ambitious thesis situating the lichen's symbiotic relationship alongside humanity's own with its environment. "They're not a culture of more; they're a culture of enough," argues one of the film's two narrators, the lichenologist Trevor Goward. (The other is Trevor's partner, Curtis Randall Björk, and between them are 10 full acres of land on which several species of lichens, among other plants, grow.)

There's an intimate quality to the film's approach, whose economical runtime (at just 43 minutes) manages nonetheless to articulate a quiet ecological wisdom. Humanity, convinced of both its evolutionary superiority and incessant demand for resources, sees the world as its own preserve and a playground for unlimited exploitation. Against this anthropocentric individualism, *Lichens Are The Way* posits a more deferential attitude of our constituent parts to nature's whole. Contrasting the average leaf which "grows" with the lichen which "is built," Goward and Björk suggest that a more reflexive stance toward our environment, akin to a conversation between partners on equal footing, might pave the titular way for a more sustainable future. Avid cinephiles may have come across Bas Devos' *Here* (2023), a film about chance encounters bookended by clumps of fresh moss. But whereas moss figures in Devos' film as a narrative device at best, Vavrečka's charming — if equally slight — documentary frames the lichen in all its simplicity as *the* possible centerpiece for a time to come.