Jonathan Nossiter’s documentary, *Mondovino*, is a fascinating and frustrating film. From beginning to end, his film on the contemporary world of wine poses important questions about the fate of wine making in a global marketplace and uses interviews with all manner of winemakers across three continents to provide grounded answers. If you have never spent much time thinking about the history, culture, economics, and politics behind your choice of a bottle of wine, this film will be a great introduction to an infinitely complex world. Ultimately, however, Nossiter’s combination of exposé and nostalgia never quite creates a truly nuanced portrait of the social life of wine today.

*Mondovino* was released early in 2004 and was included in that year’s Palme d’Or competition at the Cannes Film Festival. The film quickly garnered a number of reviews in major French, English, and American newspapers and went from being a “low-budget documentary” to the “next big thing,” running in major movie theaters throughout the world. *Mondovino* is the third film by director Jonathan Nossiter; he also made the feature films *Signs and Wonders* and *Sunday*, as well as several films for television. *Mondovino*, however, is his first documentary; it was inspired by personal experience. Nossiter attributes his decision to travel and interview people involved in making wine to a trip he took through Burgundy with a friend (he also has some training as a sommelier). Both he and his friend were impressed at the intense commitment of the winemakers they visited. They were equally struck by the involved relationships among wine families, by the values and practices passed on from generation to generation: “What survives, what does not, what is lost and what is consciously rejected.”

The film has no clear overarching narrative. Rather, it introduces a series of people involved in the wine world—winemakers, importers, critics, consultants—as Nossiter interviews them. A theme does emerge, though, about the various assaults on small-scale, family-based wine making (especially in France), encroachments on a certain order—or, as a winemaker in Sardinia put it, the decline of a certain “savoir vivre.” In the world of wine, he says, people have lost their identity: “They don’t know where they come from or where they are going.”

*Mondovino* is concerned with change: changes in how people make wine, changes in the people who make wine, changes in where wine is made, changes in how people drink wine. And although ostensibly a form of *cinema vérité*, this film leads the viewer inevitably toward certain conclusions. Nossiter’s favored subjects—the small, peasant-style winemakers—are always filmed in their homes or outside in the fields, passionately defending their commitments. Hubert de Montille, the patriarch of a small Burgundian domaine, says, “Wine was an absence of barbarism.” Another new French winemaker says she wants to celebrate love and pleasure through planting grapevines and making wine. Aimé Guibert of Mas du Daumas Gassac in the Languedoc strides through the vines asserting, “Wine is dead.” He rails against the increased reliance on theories of consumer preference in selling wine, especially those winemakers who have changed their practices to attain higher ratings by powerful wine critic Robert Parker. “It takes a poet to make great wine,” says Guibert. By contrast, when Nossiter visits the larger, more corporate wine establishments—Château Mouton-Rothschild in Bordeaux or Mondavi in Napa Valley—the viewer is introduced to the public relations people first, shown trying to manage the interviews. Michel Rolland, a well-known “flying winemaker” who consults all over the world, is shown being driven from vineyard to vineyard in a chauffeured car or sitting behind a massive...
glass desk in his wine laboratory. “Languedoc sure is Hicksville,” he says at one point, hands folded in front of him, before breaking out into a huge belly laugh. As the film unfolds, the most powerful underlying change is revealed: the loss of a localized peasant tradition of wine making to a newer globalized corporate mentality.

For Nossiter, and for many of the people he interviewed, changes in wine making have changed the very taste of wine, removing the vital importance of terroir. The influence of wine consultants like Michel Rolland (who is repeatedly shown telling his clients, “just micro-oxygenate the wine”) and wine critic Robert Parker (whose reviews are now powerful enough to make winemakers change their practices to please his palate) has created a trend toward uniformity in taste. Winemakers all over the globe vie for the consumer market, now found as much in the United States and Japan as in France and Italy, and many, if not most, of these consumers have no idea about terroir (or the taste of place). The film includes several wonderful scenes of people explaining terroir and its importance to taste; a scene with two Haitian immigrants working in a wine importer’s warehouse, where they explain the terroir of mangoes in Haiti, is particularly evocative.

L’Affaire Mondavi lies at the center of the film. The Mondavi family began expanding their wine making beyond California almost twenty years ago. As part of this expansion, they decided to try to make a grand cru (super-premium) wine in southern France, in the Languedoc region. After much research a parcel of public land above the town of Aniane was identified as ideal, and negotiations for a long-term lease were arranged with the mayor of Aniane. When townspeople, wine growers, and vineyard owners heard of the plan, there was a huge outcry. A campaign to halt the plan and depose the mayor, led in large part by Aimé Guibert, was launched. The mayor was deposed, the press had a field day, and the Mondavis abandoned their plans. In the film Guibert introduces the story, claiming that the family was planning to install huge billboards on the top of the hills. Michel Rolland, another Frenchman, but with very different points of pride, accuses Guibert of “stirring up a lot of ignorant people.” He asserts that “Rejecting Mondavi was a historic mistake….Mondavi is a PR powerhouse.” L’Affaire Mondavi has been described as a David and Goliath story, which fits well into Nossiter’s view of the wine world today.

The scenes at the Mondavi Winery in Napa, California, and the interviews with Robert, Tim, and Michael Mondavi are the most revealing of the strengths and the weaknesses of Mondovino. The scene begins with Nossiter’s car driving up the long driveway to the winery entrance. Then, Nossiter is shown talking to Robert Mondavi’s assistant, Mary, who is concerned that the filmmaker not show the Band-Aid on Robert Mondavi’s face, where he just had a mole removed. Then, along comes Nancy Light, the press attaché, who says that Mondavi is more than just a winemaker or a businessman—he is a philosopher as well. Next, the film jumps to a shot of John, the tour guide, giving a tour of the Mondavi’s face, where he just had a mole removed. Then, along comes Nancy Light, the press attaché, who says that Mondavi is more than just a winemaker or a businessman—he is a philosopher as well. Next, the film jumps to a shot of John, the tour guide, giving a tour of the winery. He points to the vineyards and the nearby Mayacamas mountains and intones: “Look at this beautiful place. When you drink our wine it should remind you of this beautiful place, or maybe a chateau in Bordeaux.” Next, Nossiter is introduced to Tim Mondavi as the press attaché scurries forward to point out that Tim has another upcoming obligation that cannot be missed. The next shot has Tim Mondavi
explaining why the Mondavis pulled out of the Languedoc several years ago, but then his explanation is interrupted by the tour guide. “Hello, how are you?” asks Tim Mondavi as John walks by, tourists in tow. John replies, “Super, how are you? I know what you are saying is much more interesting.”

The scene shifts inside to patriarch Robert Mondavi and his other son, Michael. Robert Mondavi seems to be behind his son, not clearly visible, as Michael discusses l’Affaire Mondavi in the Languedoc. Robert does not say a word as Michael explains: “[People in Aniane] said, ‘we don’t want any more globalization. No more Danone, no more Mondavi.’ So we said fine.” He adds, “There was a combination of jealousy and fear that we might make some great wine.” At another point father and son return to discuss their decision to take the business public and involve shareholders beyond the family. This scene with Robert and Michael reveals a genuine pathos, a sadness that the family’s desire to follow the European familial model of running a large winery while making some great wines could not be successfully integrated into the strong pull of a corporate model. This scene’s subtlety is lost, however, amid the frenetic scenes that come before and after, making the whole encounter resemble a farce more than it does a tragedy.

Seeking out consumers and creating arguments for what makes high-quality wine is the order of the day for everyone in the film. Nossiter, however, lines up the “good guys” and the “bad guys” and shoots away. Winemakers like de Montille and Guibert end up as the twenty-first-century version of the noble savage, pure in vision but victims of others’ greed and quests for power. Although the film consists primarily of interviews with winemakers in their homes or outside in the vineyards, I couldn’t help noticing recurring shots of dogs—barking, sniffing, sitting, running. Nossiter seems as persistent, single-minded, and loyal as these dogs. The contemporary pressures in the world of wine, he argues, are threatening a way of life and, possibly, an end to a certain style of wine that is informed by the land and tradition as much as it is by the market. I agree. And, to an extent, I share his sense of loss. But does change always signal decline? Drinking wine is now a global practice, and new people are getting involved in making and drinking it. Winemakers in Argentina, the United States, and Australia are creating excellent wines that reflect their own terroir.

Mondovino cleverly tells an important story about contemporary wine making, but ultimately, Nossiter’s narrative is too easy, moving the viewer to familiar emotional responses and not demanding that everyone—from producer to consumer—begin to think differently about wine.