

PRODUCING A PRODUCT, CONSUMING VALUES:
FOOD FILMS' CRITIQUE OF AMERICA'S INDUSTRIALIZED FOOD SYSTEM

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I examine three films that construct a particular social critique of how Americans relate to food in contemporary society. I examine the documentary films *King Corn* and *Super Size Me* because they incorporate a unique depiction of America's industrialized food system and Americans' relationship to food. I analyze the fiction film *Big Night* because its depiction of recent Italian immigrants' relationship to food serves to expose the contrasting values that Americans have with regards to food, therefore providing insight into contemporary American food culture. *Big Night* represents food as a cultural construct, embedding it in a traditional narrative structure in order to portray the conflicting ideologies that surrounded food preparation and eating in post-WWII America. In contrast, the documentary film *King Corn* incorporates a scientific representation of food by highlighting a series of tests and experiments that expose how the industrialized food system has separated consumers from the land, the soil, and their food. *Super Size Me* combines these two approaches by depicting food as nature and culture, critiquing our industrialized food system through an investigation of fast food's deleterious effect on public health and an exploration of how it has penetrated our public institutions. By using *Big Night* as a framework for reading *King Corn* and *Super Size Me*, we construct an understanding of contemporary American food culture and American taste preferences. An analysis of these three films suggests that there are serious problems with our industrialized food system and the way in which Americans relate to food. After watching *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me*, I hope that the public is motivated to make informed choices that will support the creation of a healthier, more sustainable food system in our country's foreseeable future and to reconsider the relationship that we have with our food.

INTRODUCTION

Documentary films play a key role in exposing social problems that confront our society. While the end goal of documentary films' rhetoric may vary, generally they serve to record, analyze, persuade, or express ideas to the viewer (Renov 21). It is through poignant references to the historical world, the juxtaposition of images and sound, and the rhetorical argument contained within the film that the filmmaker constructs a social critique and comments on cultural phenomena. While it is expected that documentary films create a critique or social commentary, I also believe that fiction films can play this role. Fiction films can construct a social commentary through the actions and interactions depicted by their characters, which represent the ideologies contained within their narratives.

In this thesis, I examine three films that construct a particular social critique or commentary of how Americans relate to food in contemporary society. Food has become a growing concern for much of the American public in recent years, with consumers growing increasingly concerned with what kind of food they should eat and how to eat it, as demonstrated by the emergence of literature such as Warren Belasco's book, The Future of Food. Belasco summarizes: "Food is important. In fact, nothing is more basic. Food is the first of the essentials of life, our biggest industry, our greatest export, and our most frequently indulged pleasure [...] food is also the object of considerable concern and dread. What we eat and how we eat it together may constitute the single most important cause of disease and death" (vii).

Based on the contemporary dialogue surrounding food in America, I examine the documentary films *King Corn* and *Super Size Me* in this paper because they incorporate a unique commentary about Americans' relationship to food, while simultaneously raising some of the key issues and problems surrounding food production and consumption in America today. I analyze the fiction film *Big Night* because its depiction of recent Italian immigrants' relationship to food serves to expose the contrasting values that Americans have with regards to food (in comparison to the Italians, or to Europeans), therefore providing insight into contemporary American food culture. While a number of other fiction films, such as *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Babette's Feast*, and *Eat Drink Man Woman* also focus on their characters' relationship to food, these films' narratives comment on the food cultures of other countries, (i.e., Mexican, Danish, and Taiwanese food cultures) rather than on American food culture as *Big Night* does.

I therefore believe that *Big Night* is the best fiction film to deploy against the documentaries *King Corn* and *Super Size Me* because together these three films allow us to gain an insight into contemporary American food culture. Over the course of their running-times, these films collectively expose a number of problems in America's industrialized food system and allow the viewer to examine American tastes preferences. By positioning *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me* in this way, I argue that they construct a social critique of how Americans relate to food in modern America and what our relationship to food says about our culture as a whole.

Over the course of this paper, I expose a series of contrasts by using *Big Night* as a framework for reading the documentaries *King Corn* and *Super Size Me*. In the first

section of this thesis, “Producing a Product,” I look at how *King Corn* utilizes food production scenes to discuss a central metaphor, Americans’ distance from food, while conversely *Big Night* utilizes food production scenes to highlight recent Italian immigrants’ proximity to food. Specifically, *King Corn* illustrates how America’s industrialized food system distances us from the soil, from the land, and from our food sources. As the film demonstrates, this distance was created in part by the introduction of the machine (i.e., tractors, combine harvesters, and large-scale planters), which removed the human hand from food production. Shifting cultural values placed on food production practices during the latter half of the 20th century, which emphasized efficiency, convenience, quantity, and cheapness, also contributed to distancing Americans from their food sources. In contrast to the central metaphor of distance embedded in *King Corn*, *Big Night* highlights proximity to food by depicting the relationship that recent Italian immigrants have with food and their community in a small, east coast town in post-WWII America. This proximity is illustrated in a scene where the cooks hand-select and acquire food from local producers that they will later use to prepare an elaborate dinner at their restaurant.

In the second section of this thesis, “Food Processing by the Body,” I discuss how *Super Size Me* depicts the sickness that results from consuming large quantities of fast food, while *Big Night* portrays the nourishment homemade Italian food provides to the soul. In *Super Size Me*, we witness director Morgan Spurlock’s substantial weight gain, in addition to dramatic increases in his blood pressure and cholesterol level over the course of his 30-day experiment, while simultaneously observing how he begins to suffer from

fatigue and depression. Spurlock's negative reaction to fast food stands in sharp contrast to the reactions of Primo and Segundo's guests at Paradise restaurant's big dinner in *Big Night*, who relish a glorious feast consisting of homemade Italian food and show perceptible signs of pleasure and contentment.

The final section of this paper, "Consuming Values," explores the values that surround different food consumption habits that are depicted in *Big Night* and *Super Size Me*. In *Big Night*, a group of Primo and Segundo's friends and neighbors are pictured savoring *Il Timpano*, a quintessential Italian dish, whereas in *Super Size Me*, Spurlock is shown vomiting up McDonald's fast food alone in his car. The guests' consumption of this homemade Italian entrée in the Paradise restaurant epitomizes the sense of community that is fostered by shared meals that are prepared with love and care, while Spurlock's consumption of cheap fast food alone in his SUV represents the isolation that coincides with an industrialized way eating.

I argue that the distinct ideologies and arguments surrounding the representation of food in *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me*, when viewed collectively, contribute to our understanding of how Americans relate to food in contemporary society. I investigate how these films utilize narrative conventions, such as storytelling devices and rhetorical arguments, to construct compelling representations of food. I use my analysis of these films to explore how the American populace has been impacted by the industrialized food our society has chosen to cultivate and consume over the last half-century, and how this impact is depicted cinematically. I also discuss what these films' representation of food says about American taste preferences.

I believe that film, both fiction and documentary films, can play a key role in constructing a social critique and facilitating change. By watching *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me*, I hope that the viewer is prompted to facilitate change in our industrialized food system by adopting an alternative ideology relating to food that takes into account the value of proximity, quality, and community, as illustrated in the fiction film *Big Night*. Taking into consideration increasing concerns over the ecological diversity of our soil, the viability of our rural economies, and the health of our bodies under the umbrella of an industrialized food system, a growing number of consumers are beginning to advocate for a paradigm shift in food production and consumption in America. Fernandez-Armesto supports this notion, maintaining: “The excesses of industrialism need to be reversed. Reason and instinct are combining irresistibly to reverse them. The role of the next revolution in food history will be to subvert the last” (Near a Thousand Tables 244). It is my hope that the critiques embedded in *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me* raise awareness on the consequences of America’s industrialized food system and while also allowing us to better understand (and potentially change) how Americans relate to food in contemporary society.

PRODUCING A PRODUCT

Food production scenes in film tell us a lot about how a particular culture relates to the land and to food. By examining the *type* of food that is cultivated, and *how* it is cultivated, we gain insights into the consumption habits of a nation. Food production scenes in film illuminate ideological beliefs surrounding man's relationship to the land while simultaneously revealing how people relate to food.

Our current food system in America has its root in the industrialization of the nation. A series of revolutions in America's production industry (the invention of the factory assembly line), transportation system (the development of the railroad and interstate highway system), and agricultural system (the incorporation of farm machinery and petrochemicals into production practices) changed the face of America's food system during the 19th and 20th centuries (Baker-Clark 5). These changes paved the way for our current industrial food complex by facilitating the development of a dominant ideology that favored efficiency, convenience, and cheapness in our food system over community, quality, and sustainability. War or the prospect of war in the 20th century also spurred government efforts, in addition to efforts by the food industry, to conduct nutritional research and to develop new food products made of refined flour and sugar to replace rationed meat products (Fernandez-Armesto 51). These inventions and innovations fundamentally altered the way Americans produced food, leaving production largely in the hands of corporate agribusiness and breaking ties between producers and consumers by shipping goods around the country (Montanari, *The Culture of Food* 155). In this

fashion, the industrialized food system was founded on and continues to create an increased distance between consumers and their food.

In this section I explore how the documentary film *King Corn* and the feature film *Big Night* utilize food production scenes to discuss a central metaphor of distance from and proximity to our food sources. Specifically, *King Corn* highlights how America's industrialized food system distances people from the land, the soil, and their food, whereas *Big Night* illustrates recent Italian immigrants' proximity to their food and their community. Together these films illuminate how producing food within an industrialized food system has resulted in consumers having little knowledge of where their food comes from and what it takes to produce it. *Big Night* points to the fact that consumers can gain a better understanding of food production and can get closer to their food sources by establishing a relationship with local producers.

The first notable scene in *King Corn* which illustrates the distance facilitated by America's industrialized food system is the scene in which Ian and Curt plant an acre of corn as part of their effort to learn how corn passes through the food system. While driving a monster-sized tractor around a tiny field, Ian and Curt time the process of planting the corn seed in the soil and find that it only takes 18 minutes to complete the entire job. Needless to say, they are a little surprised at the speed of the endeavor. Ian and Curt's voice-over narration in the film reflects on the process after they turn off the tractor, stating, "Planting 31,000 seeds was not exactly a hands-on experience..." This scene aptly illustrates how farmers no longer "get their hands dirty" when producing food within America's industrialized food system. In essence, the human hand has been

largely removed from the process and extricated from the land and soil by the introduction of mechanized agriculture.

In contrast to the distance highlighted by *King Corn*'s planting scene, *Big Night* demonstrates recent Italian immigrants Primo and Segundo's proximity to food. *Big Night* briefly alludes to food production in the scene where Primo and Segundo visit a neighbor, looking to purchase fresh basil for the coming night's celebratory dinner at their restaurant, Paradise. The scene doesn't show the viewer *how* exactly the basil was grown or produced, but we are left with the feeling that it has just been picked from the producer's garden, as the negotiation occurs outside and the farmer stands talking with the brothers while holding a small basil plant in his hand. The viewer also observes that the cooks barter directly with the farmer in a very personal way.

This scene in *Big Night* demonstrates the proximity that Primo and Segundo have to their food by illustrating the direct contact they have with small farmers in the area, as they hand-pick the ingredients which they will later incorporate into their restaurant's dinner entrées. In contrast, *King Corn* demonstrates the distance Ian and Curt have from their food, by showing how the machine has largely removed their hands from the production process. The imposition of the machine on the land, referred to by Leo Marx in The Machine in the Garden, has succeeded in allowing man greater control over nature while simultaneously distancing him from the land. This control, although at times dictated by the seasons (as demonstrated by the fact that Ian and Curt have to wait until the snow melts before planting their corn), nevertheless allows man to carefully plan out all phases of the production process and to leave implementation largely in the "hands" of

machinery, chemicals, and other technological tools which control and regulate the crop cultivation process. In sum, human labor has been replaced by technological innovations (i.e., bigger, faster, and more sophisticated machines) that exert increasing control over the food production process.

Ian and Curt's planting experience demonstrates that they are, in fact, quite alienated from the production process because the machine controls the seeding of the field, with the most difficult task allotted to them as farmers being to keep the tractor going in a straight line. We can compare their experience to Michael Pollan's exploration of the industrialized production of corn. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan writes about his experience driving an eight-row planter:

“...planting corn feels less like planting, or even driving, than stitching an interminable cloak, or covering a page with the same sentence over and over again. The monotony, compounded by the roar of a diesel engine well past its prime, is hypnotic after a while. Every pass across this field, which is almost but not quite flat, represents another acre of corn planted, another thirty thousand seeds tucked into one of the eight furrows being simultaneously etched into the soil by pairs of stainless steel disks; a trailing roller then closes the furrows over the seed (36).

Ian and Curt's experience planting industrialized corn in *King Corn* (2007) is an adaptation of Michael Pollan's experience planting industrialized corn in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006). Both the documentary and the book convey the efficiency of modern farm machinery and how far corporate agriculture has diverted from the hands-on production practices utilized by our grandparents half a century prior. As Douglass North summarizes in *Growth and Welfare in the American Past*: “the mechanization of many production processes greatly increase[d] output beyond subsistence” (123), thus freeing man from the bodily toil of a subsistence lifestyle and allowing for increased sales to a

large consumer base in a market-based economy. Proponents of a mechanized agricultural system believed that through the application of science, the use of human innovation, and the advent of new technology, significant improvements could be made to our food and agricultural systems to improve the lives of mankind. As Ian and Curt show us in *King Corn*, this type of agricultural system dominates the production of commodity crops, such as industrialized corn in America today, and has produced an abundance of cheap food for the American public.

The corn production scene in *King Corn* contributes to the film's critique of our industrialized food system by reinforcing the connection of industrialized agriculture to the machine, rather than to human beings, underscoring our distance from our food. It also conveys the man/nature dualism expounded upon by Val Plumwood in Environmental Culture by depicting the control man exerts over the land and over food production via the machine. In an industrialized system, the focus is on creating an abundance of food, with farmers being paid by government subsidies to produce the biggest yield possible, rather than being fundamentally engaged in a relationship with the land that focuses on ecological processes, sustainability, and producing high-quality food.

As detailed above, we can see that *King Corn* illustrates some of the values Americans have placed on industrialized food production, whereas *Big Night* gives us a glimpse at an alternative perspective on local food production, one which is hinted at by the Italian immigrants' negotiations with area producers. Primo's emphasis on quality, in particular, reflects a divergent ideology regarding food. The viewer notes that he is extremely picky when purchasing food products from local producers, initially claiming

that the basil his neighbor offers him isn't good or fresh enough for him to consider buying it. Segundo pulls him aside and tells him that he can't afford to be this picky, as they have a dinner to prepare in a matter of hours. While Primo may be acting difficult partially to spite his brother's enthusiasm for the "big night," Primo's quality standards allude to the Italians' preference for quality when engaging in food acquisition and preparation. This ideology, which is embodied in Primo's persnickety attitude, contrasts to the American ideological belief system embedded in the industrialized food system, which places more value on quantity and price than on the quality of the food.

This brief scene in *Big Night*, therefore, can also be applied to facilitate a critique America's industrialized food system, as it presents the viewer with an alternate ideology surrounding food. This ideology is embodied in Primo's character, as he demonstrates that by concerning oneself with the quality of food that is purchased, prepared, and consumed, one might have access to a high-quality experience. Although never stated directly, this ideological stance is inferred by the viewer when watching this scene and raises questions about the way Americans commonly relate to food, which does not place nearly as much value on knowing where one's food comes from, nor on the quality of the food that one purchases and subsequently prepares. In contrast to Primo, most Americans would be more concerned with buying the biggest basil leaves, the most nicely packaged, the pre-washed and most economical, rather than basing their purchase on where, how, and by whom the basil was produced.

Our critique of the industrialized food system and Americans' relationship to food can be furthered by looking at a few additional food production scenes in *King Corn*,

which illustrate how both food production techniques and food ideologies have changed in modern America. Ian and Curt decide to taste test some of their corn before sending it off into the food system. The results of these first bites of corn are far from promising. Curt chews the kernels slowly, making a disgusted face. He spits out his mouthful of corn, declaring, “It tastes like chalk!”

A further explanation of this taste test appears in an expert interview with Michael Pollan shortly thereafter in the film. Pollan explains that commodity corn is merely a raw material that is used for other processes; it has to be processed before it is consumed and cannot be eaten directly. Pollan’s explanation of the distance that commodity corn must travel in order to be rendered edible illustrates how far removed we are from the logistics of modern food processing, thus highlighting the distance metaphor contained in *King Corn* once again. Pollan’s comments also point to how little knowledge the average consumer has over the multitude of chemical processes most food passes through before appearing on our supermarket shelves.

This taste test scene portrays food as nature by illustrating its qualitative properties. Ian and Curt’s informal “experiment” sheds light on the quality of the crop being produced on their acre of conventional corn. As demonstrated by the filmmakers’ candid reactions, the corn actually tastes *bad*. This taste test scene, combined with Pollan’s interview commentary, demonstrates the irony created by the practices of our industrialized agricultural system. Under this system, the average American farmer is no longer able to feed himself from his own crop. Again, we notice how distant even farmers are from food production in modern America.

King Corn features an interview excerpt with such a commodity corn-producing farmer, who is one of Ian and Curt's neighbors in Greene, Iowa. When asked about the product he grows, the farmer interjects, "We're not producing quality; we're producing crap!!" As he rightfully points out, instead of growing healthy, high-quality produce that could be used to feed and sustain the American public, these Iowa farmers are growing a low-quality, low-nutrient, inedible food product that will be converted into sweeteners to support America's junk and fast food addiction.

This new model of agriculture is a far cry from the more subsistence-based agricultural system that was in place in America before the onset of industrialization. Under this prior system, Americans relied on family, friends, and neighbors to help provide food and other material goods. The introduction of large-scale, mechanized agriculture changed that by increasing Americans' dependence on outside entities, such as large corporate farms, to produce their food. Robert Heilbroner comments on this shift in The Economic Transformation of America: "consider that in 1700, well over three-quarters of all families grew the food they consumed... [whereas] today [in 1977], 95 Americans out of 100 are unable to provide their own food" (3). This alteration of economic relationships, skills, and production responsibilities in the agricultural sector leaves the contemporary American farmer unable to feed himself off of his own food. This situation encapsulates the distance the food industry succeeded in creating between farmers, consumers, and their food.

King Corn also includes a home scientific experiment as part of its rhetorical discourse to critique America's industrialized food system and to highlight our distance

from food. After several unsuccessful attempts to gain permission to visit a high fructose corn syrup plant (“We don’t allow cameras in our plants”), Ian and Curt decide to try making the mysterious concoction in their own kitchen. They follow a series of step-by-step instructions to make the brew, sending the corn kernels through a multitude of chemical reactions on the stove to ultimately convert them into high fructose corn syrup (HFCS). This scene in particular has a high shock value, as we see the poisonous signs on the packaging of sulfuric acid (i.e., battery acid) that is added as an ingredient during the process of making the syrup.

Ian and Curt’s home science experiment demonstrates for the viewer the sheer number of chemical processes that industrialized corn undergoes as part of modern food processing. Their experiment also serves to expose the convoluted nature of the food industry, as they are repeatedly denied access to visit HFCS plants in the film. Ian and Curt’s office meeting with a corn processing plant representative, whose semi-secretive and elusive responses (“It’s all science...it’s all part of a complex, innovative system...”), also underscore the covert nature of the industry. As the scene demonstrates, in an industrialized food system the consumer is kept separate from and in the dark about many of the techniques and processes utilized to create processed food. The rhetoric developed in these scenes prompts the viewer to question the quality of processed food that contains HFCS, as this experiment depicts it as more chemical than food. The food industry rep, with her vague, empty statements, also offers little insight into the process to quell any fears the viewer may have developed after witnessing Ian and Curt’s experiment. After processing this scene, the viewer starts to formulate a critique of the

industrialized food system in his or her own mind, regarding the food industry with a high amount of skepticism. This skepticism stems both from health concerns that are raised after seeing poisonous products being added to the HFCS mix, and from the fact that one senses the HFCS rep would only be so elusive if she had something to hide.

The Corn Refiners' Association recently produced an ad in defense of HFCS to boost the image of this controversial sweetener, illuminating the "truth" about HFCS for the viewer. This ad supports *King Corn's* assertion that the HFCS industry has something to hide (namely the fact that consuming HFCS has been linked to obesity (Critser 140)). This odd ad uses a very poor argument to maintain that there is nothing "wrong" with HFCS. First, the ad asserts that HFCS is made from corn and doesn't have artificial ingredients. While it is true that HFCS is made from corn, this fact doesn't necessarily mean it is good for you. It is deceptive to assert that HFCS is not "artificial" because it simply does not exist in nature. HFCS itself is an artificial ingredient because it can only be made in the lab; it is a manufactured substance that was invented by food scientists in Japan in the early 70's (Critser 10).

The high fructose corn syrup ad also asserts that "like table sugar, [HFCS] is fine in moderation." This is simply not true. To begin with, HFCS is completely unlike table sugar. Table sugar is made up of sucrose, while HFCS is a processed mix of glucose and fructose. The fructose in HFCS causes a number of troubling health ramifications, including producing higher triglyceride levels in the blood. It is also difficult to digest the ad's claim that HFCS is fine in moderation. For starters, it is next to impossible to consume HFCS in moderation, as it is in absolutely everything. In Fat Land, George

Critser comments on how HFCS has infiltrated soda, salad dressings, bread, snacks, ice cream and a myriad of other items commonly found on our supermarket shelves (138). He also quotes nutritionist John Bantle's estimate that Americans now obtain at least 17 percent of their calories from fructose (139), largely due to our high consumption of fast food, soda, convenience snacks, and other processed foods that make up the heart of our industrialized food system. Due to the overwhelming prevalence of HFCS in everyday food items, the only way to really moderate or minimize one's consumption of HFCS is to therefore avoid the products produced by the food industry altogether, or to eat them only on rare occasion.

We can compare this HFCS advertising campaign to the ads created by the tobacco industry, which assert that nicotine isn't addictive, even though scientific evidence says otherwise. A number of parallels can be drawn between the two industries' marketing tactics, as both the HFCS and tobacco industries make a point to emphasize that their products are made from plants and are therefore "natural," when in reality both tobacco and HFCS are heavily processed. Both the HFCS and tobacco industries also maintain that their products are fine in moderation. Unfortunately, studies have shown that both products – high fructose corn syrup and tobacco – are very detrimental to human health to the point that some experts claim they should not be consumed at all, since the former is linked to Type 2 diabetes and obesity, and the latter to laryngeal and lung cancer (Derthick 10). One can only wonder how far the Corn Refiners' Association will go in pursuit of profit to obscure, or distance the consumer

from the health risks posed by high fructose corn syrup consumption, just as the tobacco industry has done by obscuring the health risks posed by smoking cigarettes.

In sum, distance or proximity to food is a key theme highlighted in both *King Corn* and *Big Night*. While the films' conclusions are different (*King Corn* points to the drawbacks of the industrialized food system by asserting that it has distanced us from the land, the soil, and our food, while *Big Night* alludes to the benefits of acquiring food locally by pointing to the high quality product that one can obtain), both films prompt the viewer to consider, at a deeper level, where the food that one purchases comes from and how it is produced. Unfortunately, in contemporary American society, many people don't want to know or prefer not to think about where their food comes from. Our choice or preference to remain oblivious of the source and the quality of our food only maintains the distance that the industrialized food system creates between producers and consumers. Perhaps Americans' choice to remain oblivious of the quality and source of their food is merely a way to avoid dealing with what we already know: that there are troubling problems with our current food system that need to be addressed should we wish to create a more viable and sustainable food system in the future.

FOOD PROCESSING BY THE BODY

Food is intimately connected to public health. Both the quality of the food we put in our bodies and the way in which our bodies process the nutrients in that food affects our physical appearance, physiology, and even our emotional state. Increasingly, we find more and more evidence that many of our modern ailments can be traced back to the industrialized food we put in our bodies as part of the Western diet. These ailments, such as coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, cancer, and obesity are particularly acute in America and other industrialized countries (Pollan, *In Defense of Food* 92-101). In this section, I explore how Morgan's Spurlock's consumption of industrialized food leads to sickness in *Super Size Me*, while Primo and Segundo's dinner guests' consumption of homemade Italian food leads to nourishment for the soul in *Big Night*.

Super Size Me devotes a considerable amount of its rhetorical discussion to expose how industrialized food, specifically fast food, negatively affects the human body. Director Morgan Spurlock embarks on a month-long crash diet, consuming nothing but McDonald's food products in order to find out what kind of effect this food has on the body. We witness directly how McDonalds' food reacts with Spurlock's body on the second day of his "McDiet." Spurlock goes through the drive-thru of McDonald's and sits in the parking lot eating his lunch. While he begins by gulping down his Coke and chowing down rapidly on his cheeseburger and fries, before long he begins to feel ill. He tells the camera: "See, now's the part of the meal when you start getting the McStomachAche. McGurgles. The McBrick's in there (he points to his gut) and right now I've got some McGas rockin'. I'm feeling a little McCrazy!" Then, at about 20

minutes into the meal, Spurlock pukes out the window of his car, leaving a pile of vomit in the McDonald's parking lot.

As demonstrated above, the scene of Spurlock vomiting in his car in *Super Size Me* points to how the consumption of a large amount of fast food (which is made using pre-packaged, processed ingredients) can result in sickness, whereas the final dinner scene in *Big Night*, in which the dinner guests feast on an elaborate meal, points to how consuming homemade food made from primary ingredients provides nourishment for the soul. In *Big Night*, the close up shots of the dinner guests' smiling, ecstatic faces reveal how the food's exquisite flavors are pleasing to both the mind and body. The guests' lips part, their eyes swoon, and they chew slowly, savoring each delicious bite, and the viewer is left with the sense that the body processes homemade Italian food in a very positive way. While *Big Night* does not directly explore homemade Italian food's effect on the body, it clearly alludes to the sensual feelings and emotions that this food evokes in those who consume it.

By focusing on how the body processed these distinct types of food, both *Super Size Me* and *Big Night* function to advance the critique of America's industrialized food system and the type of food Americans commonly consume. *Super Size Me* constructs a critique by making an explicit point that fast food is not healthy for you; rather, it makes you sick. The viewer sees what this type of food does to Spurlock's body when he eats McDonald's fast food in his car (he turns gray in color, he displays signs of nausea, he starts to sweat, and eventually he vomits), and the viewer also hears, via the film's

soundtrack, how his body reacts to the food (his stomach makes strange gurgling sounds, he belches loudly, and finally we hear him vomiting out of the car window).

In contrast to *Super Size Me*, *Big Night* contributes to a critique of America's industrialized food system by presenting homemade food which one can choose to consume in the place of industrialized food. By emphasizing how the consumption of traditional, homemade Italian food results in pleasure and contentment, *Big Night* furthers an ideology which maintains that food prepared in a thoughtful, caring way and consumed with family and friends serves as nourishment for the soul. As Margaret Coyle summarizes in "Il Timpano," *Big Night* highlights the richness of the Italian food tradition, while simultaneously asserting that the American food tradition suffers from commodification and processing (45). In this way, the film emphasizes that the American food tradition is based on an unhealthy spread of processed food products, whereas the Italian, or European food tradition, in comparison, is based on a healthy blend of whole food and homemade dishes prepared using local, primary ingredients.

Super Size Me directly supports Coyle's conclusion by demonstrating that the processed food which Spurlock consumes in his experiment negatively affects the body. Spurlock's fast food binge provides data for his experiment, which poses and attempts to answer the question, "Is fast food really *that* bad for you?" We see from the film's footage that fast food produces chemical and physical reactions in the body that cause a variety of different types of sickness, both short-term (vomiting) and more long-term (weight gain, depression, and so on.)

In the latter half of the film, Spurlock exhibits these long-term symptoms of sickness, which include chest pain, difficulty breathing, fatigue, weight gain, and depression (for no apparent reason). He does, however, feel better after eating McDonald's food, which is a sign that he is becoming addicted to the fare. After 18 days on the "McDiet," Spurlock checks in with the physicians he has brought on board to monitor his health during the experiment. He meets with a cardiologist, gastroenterologist, general practitioner, and also an exercise physiologist. During this visit, Spurlock also undergoes a variety of tests to see how his body is reacting to the "McDiet." In just two and a half weeks, his blood pressure has gone up to 150/110 (120/80 is considered normal), his cholesterol has skyrocketed to 225 (up from 165 at the start of the experiment), and he has gained 17 pounds, weighing in at 202 pounds. Spurlock's degrading health represents the trends witnessed by Greg Critser in Fat Land, "...today almost everyone in America is too rich in the fundamentals: Almost everyone has access to maximal cheap calories, and almost everyone has the opportunity to expend minimal calories" (175). In other words, Spurlock's health trends illustrate how Americans' health and physiques are changing by consuming high-calorie diets and getting little to no exercise.

In addition to visible weight gain, Spurlock's "McDiet" presents other adverse health effects that manifest themselves on an internal level. His general practitioner in particular is horrified by the effects that McDonald's high-fat diet is having on his liver function. He tells Spurlock:

“Anybody would say right now that you’re sick. You’re fatigued and lethargic. If somebody was theoretically doing this to this level with alcohol, they could wipe out their liver. I’ve never heard of anybody doing this with a high-fat diet, but I don’t know, I guess anything is possible... My advice is to stop doing what you’re doing; it’s hurting you. You’re sick and you can make yourself unsick by stopping what you’re doing.”

These scenes in *Super Size Me* illustrate the more long-term sickness that results from consuming large quantities of industrialized food by highlighting the results of Spurlock’s medical tests, which provide a glimpse into how fast food is processed by the body. These test results reveal the detrimental effect that consuming a high-fat, high-sugar, and high-fat diet has on one’s blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and body weight. Critser supports the data Spurlock presents in *Super Size Me*: “Today Americans are the fattest people on earth [...] about 61 percent of Americans are overweight – overweight enough to begin experiencing health problems as a direct result of their weight” (4). Spurlock’s tests results therefore serve to advance the film’s critique of America’s industrialized food system and emphasize the sickness which can result from Americans’ consumption of large amounts of processed, pre-packaged, and fast food.

Before concluding this section, I would like to point out that McDonald’s fast food is not meant to be eaten every day at every meal. The McDonald’s corporation recommends that their food be consumed in moderation and that it should be part of a balanced diet. Taking this information into consideration, Spurlock’s 30-day splurge of eating nothing but McDonald’s fast food in *Super Size Me* may represent an extreme scenario, at least in terms of the health ramifications he faces from consuming large quantities of McDonald’s fast food. While studies have shown that many of our modern ailments can be traced back to the industrialized food we consume, it is fair to say that

too much of anything is not a good thing and will most like carry with it negative health ramifications. In any case, putting Spurlock's experiment into context should not undermine the fact the America is indeed facing a serious obesity epidemic, and that sadly, like Spurlock, a substantial percentage of Americans do consume large quantities of fast food on a regular, if not daily, basis.

In light of Spurlock's consumption of large quantities of McDonald's fast food, I want to point out that consuming large quantities of rich Italian food every day at every meal would not be good for your health, either. This type of diet would most certainly result in weight gain at the very least. However, there are certain benefits that consuming homemade food (Italian or otherwise) does provide, which are exemplified in *Big Night*. The lesson we should take away from this film is that eating whole food, or food prepared using local, primary ingredients, is much more beneficial to one's health than consuming food which has been heavily processed and is composed of artificial ingredients. In addition, we should note that there is a connection between the type of food that one consumes and the type of experience the eater has when consuming that food. As *Big Night* illustrates, eating homemade Italian food at the Paradise restaurant provides the guests with a sensual, sensory experience that is beneficial to their emotional well-being, while Spurlock's method of rapid and isolated fast food consumption does not result in positive emotions, rather it results in depression, which negatively impacts his emotional well-being.

Both *Super Size Me* and *Big Night* focus on how distinct types of food are processed by the body over the course of the films' running-times. These films portray

visceral representations of their characters' reactions to the food that they consume in order to highlight food's connection to one's physical and emotional well-being. As *Super Size Me* demonstrates, consuming large quantities of fast food, which is a product of America's industrialized food system, can lead to sickness. Eating too much of this type of food is detrimental to the body and carries with it a series of health ramifications. *Big Night* presents the viewer with an alternate type of food, one which is homemade and prepared using local, primary ingredients, as a recipe for good health, and utilizes communal eating scenes in the Paradise restaurant to illustrate how eating food that is prepared with love and care serves as nourishment for the body and soul.

CONSUMING VALUES

“Chi mangia bene sta molto vicino a dio – To eat good food is to be close to God”
-quoted by Primo in Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott’s *Big Night*

Cultural practices and rituals surrounding food consumption create a detailed commentary of a culture’s ideological beliefs. In *In Defense of Food*, Michael Pollan comments about food’s connection to culture: “Food is...about pleasure, about community, about family and spirituality, about our relationship to the natural world, and about expressing our identity. As long as humans have been taking meals together, eating has been as much about culture as it has been about biology” (8). Food scenes in movies play an integral role in communicating culture and values. While often not stated explicitly, by reading between the lines, the viewer may observe how a character’s relationship with food mirrors their outlook on the world, shows us their priorities, explores their relationships with others, and reflects what they believe constitutes a good life. In my analysis of *Big Night* and *Super Size Me*, I expose how these films present unique depictions of food consumption to reveal divergent cultural values surrounding food and eating.

One of *Big Night*’s most important scenes which illustrates the cultural values associated with food consumption takes place on a typical evening at the Paradise restaurant. In the mostly empty restaurant, Segundo waits dotingly on an American couple, but despite his best efforts, they do not have a positive experience at Paradise. To start, they are annoyed by the fact that the food has taken such a long time to arrive. The woman jokes that she thought that Segundo went all the way back to Italy to get the food.

Once the food is finally delivered to the table, the exchange between Segundo and the couple continues to degrade. The man drowns his pasta dish in cheese, while the woman complains that there are no visible scallops or shrimp in her seafood risotto. To make the meal more desirable for her tastes, she asks for a side of spaghetti with meatballs and grows increasingly irritated when Segundo informs her that the spaghetti comes *without* meatballs.

Back in the kitchen, Segundo brings Primo the news that the customer would like a side of spaghetti with her risotto. Primo explodes with frustration, asking “Who are these people in America?” He goes on to call the woman a criminal who does not understand how to eat properly, for he cannot comprehend why she would want to have two starch dishes for dinner. Segundo tries to convince him that the woman should be allowed to order what she wants, as they are the first customers Paradise has had in several hours (Ferry 32). Primo concedes, releasing his frustration with American consumer taste by throwing a pan across the kitchen as the scene ends.

The interaction between the Italian brothers and the American customers illuminates the American people’s hesitancy in trying new ethnic food. These more conservative, established taste preferences trace back to the industrialization of food in America, which over time molded tastes to favor standardized, mass-produced processed dishes developed by the food industry out of excess commodity crops. This change was accomplished largely as a result of the carefully planned and coordinated efforts of the 32 billion dollar food marketing machine, i.e., the food and advertising industries (Pollan, *In Defense of Food* 6). We see these taste preferences reflected in the homogenized, uniform

products that fill our supermarket shelves: rows of brightly colored canned fruit; bags of frozen, microwavable vegetables; and factory baked white bread (226).

In changing what type of food filled our supermarket shelves, the food industry prompted a change American consumer's eating habits to emphasize consumption preferences which favored consistency, familiarity, and the value of convenience. This emphasis on convenience, over all else, has revolutionized both the type of food we find in our food system (a surplus of processed, pre-packaged food) and also how it is prepared (often in the quickest manner possible, facilitated by the invention of time-saving devices such as the microwave). As Pollan summarizes, "...in our time cooking from scratch and growing any of your own food qualify as subversive acts" (*In Defense of Food* 200). Primo and Segundo's homemade entrées depicted in *Big Night* therefore represent a type of food preparation that has largely been obliterated by the federal government and the food industry in modern America. This slow, old-world way of cooking, which produces a diverse range of flavors and textures, is no longer the norm, with the average American consumer having grown unaccustomed to this type of standardized fare.

In addition to showing how the Italians' palate differs from the Americans' newly homogenized tastes, this scene in *Big Night* reveals how food preparation, artistic expression, and cultural identity are intricately connected in the minds of the recently immigrated Italians, in Primo's case in particular. His unwillingness to alter his traditional and varied culinary repertoire merely to satisfy the homogenized palate of the American customers shows that he values the art of cooking and the process he goes

through when making food to get closer to God much more than he cares about pleasing individual customers. Segundo, in contrast, focuses his efforts to assimilate into contemporary American society and therefore views the situation a bit differently. He believes that in order for the restaurant to survive, Primo must learn to adapt his cuisine to fit the taste preferences of the American customer (Ferry 35). This presents a conundrum for Primo, as in his mind, altering his Italian way of food preparation represents abandoning family, community, religion, and his own cultural identity (Gabaccia 54).

Primo's reaction to the American customers and their seemingly bizarre menu requests supports the ideology embedded in *Big Night*, which maintains that there are problems or drawbacks with the type of standardized, homogenized food that Americans now demand and that there are merits to embracing a type of food preparation based on artistry and cultural identity. By highlighting Primo and Segundo's ideological struggles over how to prepare and serve food in Paradise, filmmakers Tucci and Scott represent the clashing values which existed in America during the time when our food system was becoming increasingly industrialized. The Italians' emphasis on creating unique, varied cuisine, along with the passion, dedication, and exuberance that they bring to cooking, leaves something to be desired in the standardized fare Americans request and their efforts to minimize or eliminate much, if not all, of the time they spend in the kitchen.

Another value embedded in the Italian way of preparing and consuming food is that of community. In *Big Night's* celebratory dinner scene, we see how sharing food with friends and loved ones fosters relationships and builds connections between

community members. In this scene, Primo and Segundo whip out course after course of drinks, appetizers, salads, and pastas. Just when the guests are starting to wonder if they can possibly eat any more, they roll out *Il Timpano*, the main dish.

The guests gasp in awe upon viewing Primo's creation as it is brought out to the table. In many ways, this stunning entrée contains a series of Italian values (concerning food) baked right into its crust. As Coyle states, "*Timpano* seems like the quintessential Italian dish, for it takes time to prepare, tastes wonderful, and is reserved for festive occasions when family and friends gather around the table to share their lives. It is a labor of love" (43). The pleasure the guests obtain from sharing this magnificent dish inside of a glorious restaurant bonds them together and they end up dining together into the wee hours of the night.

By pointing out the merits of an Italian way of eating in *Big Night*, which "takes effort, time, passion, and is meant to be shared with loved ones and family (Coyle 42), directors Stanley Tucci and Campbell Scott create a stark contrast to the industrialized way of eating that Spurlock exemplifies in *Super Size Me*. The relationships built and sense of community fostered by consuming *Il Timpano* in *Big Night* are nowhere to be found in Spurlock's isolated consumption of McDonald's fast food in his car in *Super Size Me*.

Michael Pollan comments on the type of isolated fast food consumption that Spurlock epitomizes in his book *In Defense of Food*. He writes, "Most of what we're consuming today is no longer, strictly speaking, food at all, and how we're consuming it – in the car, in front of the TV, and, increasingly, alone – is not really eating, at least not

in the sense that civilization has long understood the term” (7). As Pollan attests and Spurlock exemplifies, a good portion of our meals have become extricated from the dinner table and removed from a communal setting, finding a new home within the seats of our oversized, and for the most part, empty vehicles. While meals and eating have long been viewed as communal events which bring people together, providing a forum for conversation and the exchange of ideas, this definition of eating is slowly eroding away in contemporary American society, only to be replaced by the isolation created by an industrialized way of eating that Spurlock exemplifies in *Super Size Me*.

The value system which stems from Americans’ habit of eating on-the-run, in our cars, and oftentimes alone, reflects how our culture as a whole has placed the value, success, and goals of the individual ahead of one’s family or community. Working increasingly long hours in a corporate world eliminates the amount of time a person can devote to preparing and consuming elaborate meals with friends and family members. The American ideology surrounding food and eating has shifted away from the central family meal and has focused more on accompanying the schedule, tastes, and needs of the individual. We eat quickly to satisfy biological hunger and, as a result, miss the other benefits that eating can provide, such as fostering a sense of community and a place for the exchange of ideas, growing connections between loved ones, and providing a forum for discussion. In sum, Americans’ on-the-go lifestyle has sacrificed the family meal in favor of a mobile meal of fast food, which, in favoring the preferences of the individual, has served to isolate him or her from the community that is fostered through shared meals.

The design of our cars (in particular the inclusion of oversized cup holders in modern vehicles, which accommodate half-gallon sodas purchased at convenience stores) acknowledges and reinforces the extent to which consumption habits have changed in modern America. Food is in fact *meant* to be eaten in our vehicles, as we move from activity to activity over the course of our day. As Spurlock exemplifies in a number of scenes in *Super Size Me* where he is portrayed eating on the run, food consumption has indeed become mobilized in contemporary American society. We are always on the go, and oftentimes don't take the time to sit still and eat with our family. We are always on the move, in pursuit of something, and as a result oftentimes fail to take the time to concentrate on the small pleasures of life (i.e., sharing meals with loved ones and engaging in sensory pleasures such as gardening and cooking).

In addition to the value of increased mobility that fast food favors, Spurlock explores how this type of fare has penetrated public institutions and American pop culture. A great example of the phenomenon would be the group of people that Spurlock encounters in front of the White House who cannot recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Notably embarrassed by their unsuccessful efforts, Spurlock offers them a shot at redemption, asking them if they know McDonald's Big Mac slogan. Immediately they respond, reciting in a sing-songy voices, "Two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, and onion on a sesame-seed bun!" Afterwards, the whole family, Spurlock included, starts laughing hysterically, noting "That is a shame...that is a shame!!"

This scene exposes how McDonald's food consumption has not just infiltrated the stomachs of American consumers, but also their minds. By demonstrating in the film that fast food plays a stronger influence in these Americans' lives than politics, Spurlock shows us just how deeply fast food has shaped the development of contemporary American culture. Eric Schlosser also comments on the extent in which fast food has penetrated societal institutions in Fast Food Nation: "Fast food is now served at restaurants and drive-thrus, at stadiums, airports, zoos, high schools, elementary schools, and universities, on cruise ships, trains, and airplanes, at K-Mart, Wal-Mart, gas stations, and even at hospital cafeterias" (3). Like Spurlock, Schlosser attests that the fast food industry has targeted and hooked the young for life by gearing their advertising towards children through the creation of Ronald McDonald characters and the use of songs and catchy jingles.

As the film demonstrates, children can more easily identify the face of Ronald McDonald than they can pick out the caricatures of the president, our founding fathers, or Jesus Christ. In this way, *Super Size Me* highlights how fast food has and continues to play a significant role in human history through its intensive advertising campaigns and aggressive marketing campaigns aimed at children, which get them not only physically, but emotionally addicted to the rhetoric of McDonalds since the time that they are very young.

Big Night and *Super Size Me* represent food as a cultural construct in the scenes detailed above in order to explore the values that surround different food consumption habits in contemporary American society. *Big Night* focuses on the relationships and

sense of community that is fostered by shared meals that are prepared with love and care. In contrast, *Super Size Me* represents the loneliness and isolation that coincide with fast food consumption. The film also depicts just how deeply fast food has penetrated our lives to the point where it has affected the design of our cup holders in our vehicles and influenced the type of songs children sing and the caricatures with which they identify. By positioning these two films together, we can examine how these two types of food – homemade Italian food made from scratch and McDonald's fast food – represent shifting cultural values that have altered the way Americans consume food in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to look at how a series of “food films” depict food production and consumption in modern America. By positioning *Big Night* together with *King Corn* and *Super Size Me*, I argue that these films construct a critique of America’s industrialized food system and of how Americans relate to food. This critique is accomplished through the films’ rhetorical discourse, by depicting food as both as a product of nature and a cultural construct, and by illustrating ideologies concerning Americans’ relationship to food through the actions and interactions of the films’ characters.

By using *Big Night* as a framework for examining *King Corn* and *Super Size Me*, we can explore the ideology that surrounds contemporary food culture in mainstream American society. Collectively these three films suggest that there are serious problems with the structure of our industrialized food system by lamenting the loss of small family farms, the breakdown of rural communities, the disintegration of the family meal, and our general disassociation from farming, the land, our communities, and our food sources. *King Corn* and *Super Size Me* in particular also strive to reiterate the connection between the consumption of industrialized, processed, and fast food and the increase of diet-related diseases in the American populace. In addition, *Super Size Me* and *Big Night* point to the emotional well-being that coincides with different eating habits, and suggest that the American way of wolfing down fast food alone, in our cars, and as quickly as possible results in feelings of isolation and depression.

A growing number of consumers are therefore beginning to advocate for a paradigm shift in food production and consumption habits in America in the 21st century, as their concerns about how the industrialized food system negatively affects the environment, rural economies, and public health continue to increase. Historically, a prior paradigm shift concerning food production occurred in the meatpacking industry in the early 20th century upon the release of Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel, The Jungle. Consumers demanded major reforms in the meatpacking industry in response to learning of the appalling sanitary practices of the Chicago stockyards, which compromised the health of both stockyard workers and consumers of stockyard meat products. These practices came to a sudden halt in 1906, as the meatpacking industry was forced to undergo federal inspections by the USDA as legislated by Roosevelt in direct response to the public outcry that ensued upon publication of Sinclair's novel (455).

Just as consumers reacted forcefully to the filthy stockyard conditions that compromised public health, we are starting to see a similar reaction from consumers in regards to some of the horrors stemming from the production practices that comprise our industrialized food system. Factory farming (concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFO's); the heavy use of antibiotics in feedlots; the application of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers in corporate monocultures; and infiltration of high fructose corn syrup into popular food items have all contributed to Americans' growing concern over their food.

As C. Clare Hinrichs argues in Remaking the North American Food System: "Food can and should be connected to community vitality, cultural survival, economic development, social justice, environmental quality, ecological integrity, and human

health” (1). To embrace such an interdisciplinary, holistic view of food requires rejecting the industrialized food system at some level and assuming a new model of food production and consumption in America. In In Defense of Food, Michael Pollan encourages the American public to do just that, motioning that we have reached a unique point in history where it is now possible to create such a resistance, making alternative food choices that promote a food system that is more environmentally-sound and beneficial to public health. He states:

“Most of my suggestions come down to strategies for escaping the Western diet, but before the resurgence of farmers’ markets, the rise of the organic movement, and the renaissance of local agriculture now under way across the country, stepping outside the conventional food system simply was not a realistic option for most people. Now it is. We are entering a postindustrial era of food; for the first time in a generation it is possible to leave behind the Western diet without having to also leave behind civilization. And the more eaters who vote with their forks for a different kind of food, the more commonplace and accessible such food will become” (14).

As Pollan eloquently summarizes, I believe that Americans need to readjust how they relate to food by not only choosing a postindustrial type of food (organic, local, and whole food), but also by changing how they consume that food. In some ways, the two choices go hand-in-hand. It is hard to picture a person drinking kombucha (fermented tea), recently purchased at a local farmers’ market, while driving away in their car. It is also difficult to imagine continually eating meals on the run if one has made the commitment to spending time washing and chopping whole produce and salad greens acquired directly from local producers, for example. In sum, by taking the time to connect with local farmers and learning how to grow, cook, and prepare food again, Americans will be forced to slow down their food preparation and consumption habits.

By implementing these simple changes, Americans will be empowered to place food in the forefront of their lives (as the Italians and many other Europeans do), rather than going through their daily motions and relegating food to a mere after-thought.

I believe that both fiction and documentary films can play a role in constructing a social critique and facilitating change in our society. By watching *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me*, I hope that the viewer considers advocating for change in America's industrialized food system while simultaneously reconsidering the relationship they have with food. Potential changes include the adoption of a new food ideology, or culture, in America that takes into account the value of proximity, quality, and community as illustrated by the Italian immigrants in the fiction film *Big Night*. It is my hope that the critiques embedded in *Big Night*, *King Corn*, and *Super Size Me* serve to raise awareness of the consequences of America's industrialized food system. By viewing these films, I hope that the public is motivated to make informed choices that will support the creation of a new and more viable food system in our country's foreseeable future and to consider redefining the relationship that they have with food.

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