THE MYTH OF THE HEROIC AMERICAN FARMER IN CONTEMPORARY FOOD DOCUMENTARIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Documentary has been a key catalyst in the modern 21st century food movement as a driver for change and awareness towards a new gastronomy. These types of films employ a variety of approaches to purport that our current system is flawed; built around industrialization and commodification of sustenance and living things. One universal method these films use to elicit audience reaction is through the use of the heroic cultural memory of farmers. I explore three very different contemporary food documentaries; Food, Inc., King Corn, and The Real Dirt on Farmer John as well as my own film Pork.0, as case studies to reveal how current social activist/issue documentaries represent the farmer by using the agrarian myth as a base, then use novel storytelling devices to show the necessity of change in the food industry. This contributes to the success of these films as effective works in the social issue/activist documentary genre.
"The screen was a pulpit, the film a hammer to be used in shaping the destiny of nations" (Renov, 2004). This view of documentary as a social mission is Michael Renov’s description of how one of the genre’s founding fathers, John Grierson, constructed films. Grierson viewed documentary as a creative treatment of reality, a vehicle for reform and education. This socially useful storytelling became known as the Grierson mode, and even though film has changed greatly from his day in the early 1900s, social issue/activist documentaries continue to adhere to his statement.

Because this paper is focused heavily on this type of film, it is of worth to first define it. It’s arguable that every documentary film, on some level, advocates for its subject, even when that subject is not necessarily an "issue" of some kind. In this paper, the "social issue/advocacy documentary" is defined as a film that “sets out to examine, explore, or expose a social, cultural, and/or economic issue and, in turn, to advocate (explicitly or implicitly) a perspective and/or action regarding that issue” (Corbett, 2013).

These films are not to be understood solely as an altruistic response to a societal problem, though. In an effort to appeal to audiences, entertainment media professionals tend to present issues that are current, relevant, and often controversial (Collins, 2009). To survive, these issues reflected in film lean heavily on their medium. Whether it was newspaper headlines in 1954, television broadcasts in 1969, or web postings in 2004, social movements have depended on media coverage to transmit messages and foster support (Stover, 2015). As access to high quality filmmaking tools becomes easier,
Documentaries are increasingly becoming a part of the broad 21st century social movement industry, built on disseminating social movement agendas through film. These documentaries “are a significant, successful way activists advance social justice via the framing of their own messages” (Stover, 2015). The issue and the documentary feed each other, and work together to make a subset of the media industry extremely effective and useful.

One powerful contemporary social movement represented via social issue/activist documentary is that of ethical food production and consumption. “Food, as the sustenance of body, spirit, and culture, it is an agent of change - for better or worse” (Cobb, 2011). It isn’t necessarily history’s central moving force, but according to author Tom Standage, “everything that every person has ever done, throughout history, has literally been fueled by food"(Standage, 2009). When the production of such a universal necessity can compromise ecological sustainability and ethical treatment of animals, many people become aware of needing a change.

Documentary has been a key catalyst in the modern 21st century food movement for change and awareness towards a new gastronomy. These types of films employ a variety of modes and methods to purport that our current system is flawed; built around industrialization and commodification of sustenance and living things, the disappearance of taste, and the degradation of the environment. One of the most common techniques filmmakers use to elicit audience reaction is through the compelling representation of individual farmers. As one of the most traditional pillars of American society, the farmer is our connection to food production and is often romanticized as a heroic archetype. It is
the goal of this paper to explore four documentaries that use very different methods; *Food, Inc.* (2008), *King Corn* (2007), *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* (2005), and my own film, *Pork.0* (2016), as case studies to reveal how modern documentaries use this representation of the farmer as an agrarian ideal, but use novel storytelling devices to show the necessity of change in the food industry. It is my contention that this updated romantic trope contributes to the success of these films as effective works in the social issue/activist documentary genre.
Over the course of human history, food has often become a political symbol in times of rapid social and economic change. Examples include late 10th century revolts against the Italian monarchy in response to increased bread tax, and food riots in pre-Industrial England following the withdrawal of guaranteed prices on basic commodities for the poor. These responses were related to social and economic inequality and the resultant inequality of access to food. However, collective action around food is often motivated by ideas of social justice within moral economies, rather than more pragmatic concerns such as hunger or scarcity (Leitch, 2003). Over the past decade, consumer consciousness and demand for variation, flavor, goodness, and health has increased. Powerful players in the food system such as Whole Foods, Safeway, and even Wal-Mart, are beginning to respond to these demands by moving away from global standardization to continual diversification and localization. The formation of economic networks between small farmers, community groups, and specialized food outlets has become commonplace around the United States (Khare, 2008).

This new approach to food production can be seen as being popularized by a variety of food movements. Two of the most relevant and important to this paper are the Local Food “Locavore” Movement and the Slow Food Movement. Popularized in the past decade, the Local Food Movement can be seen as a response to the development of global supply chains over local food. It is based off the fundamental critique of the dominant modern agricultural system in the United States as unsustainable, unhealthy for
the environment and people, and unnecessarily expensive (Richardson-Kolar, 2011). Historically, food came from local and regional sources, but now it's from wherever land and labor costs are cheapest. Farmers are now selling differentiated food products directly to consumer through specialty co-ops, food service companies and retailers in a survival strategy to spark a renewed interest by consumers about who produces their food and how. This resurgence is working; a recent study shows that two thirds of consumers are interested in buying local to support local economies, and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has exploded. It has even led to a groundswell of new urban agriculture that provides healthy food to marginalized communities. (Pirog, Miller, Way, Hazekamp & Kim, 2014). The Locavore Movement has been popularized by celebrity authors, organic farmers, chefs, and food activists, they believe that “less transport and storage of fresh food decreases on fossil fuel consumption, promotes sustainable practices, and fights back against the despicable practices seen by ‘Big Food’ ” (Hoffman, 2009).

The Slow Food Movement shares key beliefs with locavores, but finds its difference in the emphasis on taste. It’s a non-profit organization with headquarters in multiple countries around the globe. Slow Food began in Italy as a jocular protest to the opening of a McDonald's near Rome's Spanish Steps in 1986. Formed by activist Carlo Petrini, he bemoaned the homogeneity and fast-paced lifestyle that fast food seemed to represent (Gilsinan, 2008). Since its inception, Slow Food has grown into a global movement involving millions in over 160 countries (Slow Food International, 2016). Its bottom line is simple:
The protection of taste; its core principle is the notion that food should be "good, clean and fair." "Good" in that it should give pleasure like a rousing three-hour Italian supper; "clean" in that its mode of production and its components should harm neither ourselves nor the environment; "fair" in that food producers should receive an adequate wage for their work.

It is a moral statement against the globalized, mass-market food system that tends to dilute local food cultures and traditions (Schneider, 2008). To the Slow Mover, food is seen as being the link to the outside world and nature, with a right to enjoying pleasure outweighing industrialism. Next to sex, eating is one the most pleasurable acts a human can commit (Petrini, 2009). It’s a worldview that shows flashes of relation to hedonism, except with an emphasis placed on self-restraint when chasing the pleasure in food.

Along with these key food movements came documentaries centered on their core values. This marriage can be seen as a reflection of the times; both grew in response to technological advancements and of controversial policies at the end of the millennia. “Periods of high activity in the agricultural policy and development arenas generally correspond to increases in the numbers of films and television series released in the following decade; this phenomenon is most apparent between the 1940s and 1950s and between the 1990s and 2000s. The trend also suggests that despite the seeming lack of perceived importance of agriculture to the majority of society during some of these years, agricultural issues continue to impress filmmakers as valuable and possessing entertainment value” (Specht, 2013). As we entered a new millennium, agricultural issues came to the forefront of many around the nation. To confront these issues, food movement advocates sprung to action using documentary as their medium of choice.
Food as a basic need appeared in documentaries as early as the Lumiere Brothers’ 1895 movie, Repas de bebe/Baby’s Breakfast. But, it was Cricks and Martins’ 1906 film, A Visit to Peek Frean and Co.’s Biscuit Works, following canned biscuit baking, that is arguably the first food documentary. Nearly a couple decades later, documentaries took a more ethnographic approach to food acquisition and preparation, such as Nanook of the North (1922). Further into the 20th century, films broadcast on television took a more synthetic approach, while some provided a historical overview of certain foods and traditions (Murray and Heumann, 2012). Contemporary films early in the millennium also use a variety of these methods described, but “this recent group of films offers a broad-based critique of mainstream foodways...common to all of these films is a concerted effort to engage people as active citizens and political agents of change” (Lindenfield, 2011). This new narrative is a new morality, a remoralization of consumption in recent years through notions of consumer activism or ethical consumption (Smaill, 2015).

One way this ethical consumption is promoted in these documentaries is by structuring the film like a trial. They introduce the plaintiff and defendant, explains what the issue is, provides witnesses and cross-examinations, presents evidence, and sums up proceedings (Rabiger, 2004). This becomes a way to inform an audience about the topic, using a tried and true method for eliciting truth through diligence. “Employing the discourses of science and education, food documentaries provide modes of visible evidence to inform a constituency of viewers about the process of food production.” (Smaill, 2015).
Along with the damning evidence, these films appeal to the viewers’ emotions. Documentary film is a mimetic technology that has the power to “reproduce the world before us as well as to reproduce its intensities on screen, and to reproduce them most strategically in the bodies and hearts and minds of viewers” (Gaines, 2007). Eating and the process of eating is one of the most somatic and experiential acts that we do as humans, and to watch documentaries about this can draw the viewer into sympathetic experiences, knowing that this is one of the few commonalities shared through cultures and classes around the world. More than a narrowly conceived notion of epistephilia, the genre has a capacity to foreground sensorial meaning as a way of accessing the world (Smaill, 2004). Emotional connection is a key driver in these films. As agents of change, social issue/activist documentaries about food commonly employ romanticism of a shared cultural trope we are all familiar with: that of the American farmer. They are presented as heroes that undergo a transformation and arc we are acquainted with after years of absorbing stories through all mediums. This gives the viewer a familiar avenue for intense connection about a subject some may not previously care as deeply about, and it is very useful as a filmmaking method to extract audience response.
Documentaries function in many ways; to analyze, to record, to reveal, to express (Renov, 1993). But, the function of the social issue/activist documentary, particularly films about food, is to persuade. They take up public issues from a social perspective, and recruit individuals to the film to illustrate or provide a perspective on the issue (Nichols, 2001). When a film creates an individual character it is very powerful; it allows the audience to identify and follow along in their experiences, often giving a strong sense of suffering and succeeding along with the character. In food documentaries, the individual is often the farmer, and tends to follow an age-old tradition of how they are seen in American cultural memory.

Cultural memory is the mechanism used to store the mosaic of a society’s historical snapshots. Because of its selective nature, memory relies on manifestations or recordings of an event or era, and this takes on patterned and identifiable forms. These messages reinforce elite ideology, and are intended for repetition and re-use. This practice of memory - a personal, cultural, or collective act that engages with, reproduces, and invests meaning in memory (Specht, 2013).

A key part of this cultural memory are the myths that we propagate. Mythic vision is a powerful source of identification. It provides the means whereby social relations are sanctified, and gives a strong sense of collective identity. (Peterson, 1990). The myth becomes part of the cultural memory, and becomes engrained in our daily structure as a country. Food production has been at the center of life in America since the inception.
We were founded by people deeply connected and dependent on the land, and it was here that the agrarian myth permeated the U.S. consciousness.

The origins of this myth have strong root in early Christianity, and can be seen as America’s “creation story”. The myth began when early settlers saw the New World as an analogue to Israelites entering the “Promised Land”. If they wished to enjoy paradise on the new continent, they would have to transform it out of the wilderness, much as the Children of Israel transformed the desert through physical and spiritual labor. Most societies have a version of earthy paradise, and the image of which they hoped to form their New World was that of pastoralism, which shared qualities which the Edenic Garden (Peterson, 1990). This follows a “recovery narrative”, which is the slow process of returning humans to the Garden of Eden through labor in the earth, by conquering the wilderness and bending it to man’s will (Cronon, 1996). It was the belief in the rightful claim of dominion of nature and the mandate to convert wilderness into a “fruitful garden” (Tobias, 2011). This pastoral garden image was complete fantasy and unattainable, but became ingrained as an early symbol of American culture by the 18th century as a transition point between wilderness and civilization.

The pillar of this myth is the farmer, long presented as a supremely heroic and divine profession with the uncommon capacity to “save” our society by bringing salvation to the wilderness (Peterson, 1990). He tames the land, faces the unknown and turns it into a bountiful acreage of production. The myth of the hero is one of the most common and best-known myths in the world, where three specific patterns emerge for the archetype to undertake. The hero must embark on a quest, experience an initiation of
passing from the past self to intelligence or knowledge, and sacrifice the self in order to acquire the desired goal (Whillock, 1987). The farmer has almost always been represented as just that in our country’s history, but also as a noble victim. Farmers are presented as civilization’s caretakers who understand the essentials required for its continuation. They require little but independence, and with that independence they plunge into battle against evil forces assembled to destroy our heroes and the civilization they represent. They suffer for all of humanity, and the agony they suffer evokes our sympathy (Peterson, 1990).

This myth persists mostly because of our “culture’s tenacity in protecting values and traditions” (Peterson, 1990). As Whillock explains:

“Mostly because we embrace the mythical hero as a symbol for ourselves. As we become involved with the everyday encounters that make up our life we compare our initiating experiences of existence with those of our chosen heroes...this the hero archetype is important because as a society and as individuals we use heroes to reflect our successes and failures. They are “checkpoints” in our daily life.”

The myth of the hero farmer has penetrated almost every facet of American life, mostly thanks to media representation, and has affected our view of what a farmer really is. In 2001, the W.K. Kellogg foundation conducted a study of perceptions of American rural life. The study, conducted with over 200 participants, found three primary themes related to perceptions of the rural United States connected to the food system: the pastoral landscape fantasy, the danger of the disappearance of the traditional family farm, and the decline of agrarian tradition because of corporate antagonists (Specht, 2013). To many, the myth has become true. The farmer has been simplified into an ideal, a hero we see
suffering from losing an idyllic way of life because of capitalism’s never-ending thirst for production.

This nostalgic myth has rooted itself in the cultural psyche. From fictional films, literature, verbal stories, and even supermarket labels, we are told and presented with images of what a farmer is. But, social issue/activist documentaries centered around farmers as main characters are using this cultural memory of a myth to its advantage.

Most food documentaries draw on a rhetorical form that argues through a nostalgic vision of the pre-industrial farming period. It’s a powerful tool that placates and paralyzes the disenfranchised, an essential narrative function (Murray and Heumann, 2012). It can be seen as romantic simplicity, but documentaries made on the onset of the new millennium are using it as a weapon to transmit their voice. By using the familiar myth of the farmer as a backbone we recognize, contemporary documentaries then improve on it. They play on this nostalgia, then present it in a novel way to tell stories of farmers that encourages the viewer to seek for change in the food system.
Robert Kenner’s *Food, Inc.* is one of the most successful food documentaries ever made, grossing nearly five million dollars in US theaters (IMDB, 2016). An exploration and exposé on the source of food production, the documentary reveals surprising and often shocking truths about what we eat, and what the cost is to our health and environment (Cameron, 2010). It asserts clear positions through the “talking heads” approach to exposition, where experts are interviewed in front of the camera and their voice is given weight due to their position in society. This position is influenced heavily by the Locavore Movement. The film is headlined by many of the movement’s biggest proponents, emphasis being placed on demonizing industrialized food and promoting the return to local production. We hear from authors, CEOs of Big Organic, and even food safety advocates that all toe this line.

Although the film relies on its nostalgic pastoral vision, it at least recognizes the power of it. We are presented with images of farmers and farms that used to sell a multitude of supermarket products, 47,000 in an average grocery store. The narrator explains that a deliberate veil has been constructed between food and its source, that the food doesn’t come from this idyllic picture on the label, but from “enormous assembly lines where both animals and works are abused” (Murray and Heumann, 2014). Kenner recognizes the power of this image that we see on your egg cartons, milk, or meat packaging. It stands for a way of farming that is the antithesis of how these products are
produced, and immediately devalues the corporations who take advantage of this mythological view that we hold collectively in our cultural memory.

But, Kenner also takes advantage of it in a less nefarious way. He illustrates how corporations control food on most every level, and one way he does this is by profiling the traditional American family farmer. Through multiple perspectives, we can find each step of the hero farmer’s journey represented by a certain individual, differing from the mold of using just one individual as a hero.

Used by a system and appropriated for sales, farmers are forced into mass-producing a tasteless product that encourages them to posses little care for their job or their animals. First, is farmer Troy Roush, who grows genetically modified soybeans and corn. He explains that people like himself are simply growing what the market demands. In order to stay in business as a farmer, it was in his best interest economically to produce the most popular crops desired by the masses. But, he also said that if the market began demanding non-modified harvests, farmers would make that happen. “People have got to start demanding good wholesome food of us and we’ll deliver” (Food, Inc., 2009). This is the film’s starting point of the farmer on a heroic journey against the villain. He is suffering, a victim to the system of which he is dependent on.

Then, the farmer begins the quest to fend off the evil forces that are suppressing the farmer from their true purpose as guardians of the pastoral vision. Represented by chicken farmer Carole Morison, she ends her contract as a grower for Perdue poultry. Carole and her husband live on their family farm that has been generationally owned, yet she has never been an independent farmer. After 23 years of subjecting herself and
animals to practices she could no longer live with, she became positioned in a rare position as a whistleblower. Her contract ended with Perdue and she decided to open the doors to how the chickens were raised in confinement, allowing the camera to document appalling conditions. Carole is fighting back against those that controlled and subdued her, and is setting out on a journey of self discovery and suffering to reach a goal of producing a product she can morally be proud of. It’s the hero farmer deciding to take back what is rightfully theirs.

This last stage of the hero’s journey can be represented by Joel Salatin. But, through Salatin, we also find a novel representations of the farmer in a contemporary food documentary, an addition to the myth. Traditionally, if Salatin were to adhere to the myth, he would be the last stage of the hero he demonstrates the acquisition of knowledge and sacrificing for humanity. Known as the “High Priest of the Pasture,” Salatin’s farm in Virginia is a model of sustainable animal and crop production. He is world-renowned, a writer and public speaker, and is the face of the alternative agriculture. A fourth generation farmer, he struggled for years before fame, toiling to make his farm a functioning system of symbiosis. He has sacrificed monetary gain by rejecting farming for corporations, and instead struck out on his own path to find a way to circumnavigate what he sees as immoral practices.

A new facet to the myth is that of the intellectual and entrepreneur. He’s highly articulate in his vision, and makes salient and intelligent points during his screen time in the film. Becoming popular a few years before the release of this film, Salatin has used his fame to his advantage, preaching from a sustainable pulpit and allowing his farm to
thrive sustainably by an increase in business. He supplements his farm with public speaking, bringing food production issues to the public around the country. He’s outgrown the mold of just a farmer. Rather than silently suffering for humanity on the fringes like the hero farmer of myth, he brings it into living rooms around the country. This new facet of the hero farmer has increased in recent years. We see many farmers who take to a sustainable system that become faces of new movements in the media, lauded as pastoral intellectuals who have the secret to how to return to a better way of food production. This new image of the hero farmer can be seen as positive, bringing the face of farmers into even more media outlets and representing them as smarter than their simplistic profession, but noble for staying on the farm and trying to change it.
King Corn displays the farmer not as the man in overalls, glasses, and hat that has cemented itself as the stereotype, but rather, two young men who return to their Midwest roots to prove a point. The film follows two best friends who decide to move to Iowa to grow an acre of corn after finding out, through laboratory analysis, that their bodies are primarily made out of corn. The two learn about the process, but also about the farm subsidies that support the corn industry. “Like Food, Inc., King Corn relies on nostalgia as a rhetorical tool, contrasting the industrialized corn production expected today...with traditional farming techniques practices in the same area when their great-grandparents farmed the land” (Murray and Heumann, 2014). The film ruminates on a better time when small farms thrived and production was varied and bountiful.

We watch the mythical hero farmer representation play out, but it is especially evident in this film how contemporary storytelling has changed to challenge traditional perceptions. We still follow the hero’s journey, adhere to a shared cultural memory of the traditional farmer, but we do so by watching members of the film team become farmers themselves, evoking a participatory method of documentary.

Producers and writers of the film, Ian Cheney and Curt Ellis, directly participate as characters. They are not life-long farmers; they are college kids who are on a mission. Through this act of participation, the myth is turned on its heels. Throughout the film you meet and hear the stories of traditional farmers that are more in line to the traditional representation, but the farmer as an inexperienced college kid is a novel representation to
the contemporary genre. The farmer is no longer seen as an individual disconnected from society. Instead, it is members of society who become the farmer.

But, these new farmers still follow the mythological hero farmer path. Victimization by an immoral system is the most prominent methods employed by the film. By showing how the Farm Bill was changed 30 years ago to emphasize industrial-style mono-cropping, they paint the picture of the family farm in danger of disappearing. We see other farmers who are multi-generation planters get caught up in the farm subsidy system, and at the end of the film we learn that Cheney and Ellis have lost money on their acre and that modern farmers can’t remove themselves from this system without losing everything they have. They are trapped producing corn because they are encouraged by a government who thinks this is the best idea to producing vast amounts of food. Most of the blame is placed on Earl Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture under Richard Nixon who encouraged farmers to plant massive amounts to meet the global demand for their corn, soybeans, and wheat. This is unique in which we are presented with one individual who seems to be the cause of much suffering. Although it may be an oversimplification to the subsidy problem, this presentation of a villain as one man instead of a whole system gives a tangible enemy at whose hands the farmer toils.

The quest is the central point of the film. The two friends become farmers to set out on a journey to show the flaw in one part of the food system, and of industrial agriculture as a whole. On the land that they lease, they sign up for the subsidies from the government and quickly get to work on their acre. They experience the ins and outs of what it means to grow food everyday as a career, and show how almost every aspect of
the system has changed from times of old, reflecting on how it used to be. Their journey is a long one fraught with challenge and disillusionment, yet they persist.

Cheney and Ellis suffer for all of humanity, knowingly crucifying themselves for the audience. They willingly enter into the life of which they know there is little reward. We see traditional farmers that have suffered their whole life for all of humanity, and now humanity is standing hand in hand with them on the battle lines. This makes the two even more like sacrificial lambs, knowing full well what they have gotten themselves into. It can be seen as the population joining forces with the farmer against the system, evoking a strong sense of identification through their shared struggle.

Cheney and Ellis inject humor throughout the film mixed with a poetic take on agri-civics, and *King Corn* in many ways oversimplifies the pastoral view and myth of the hero farmer, but the way they convey their message through a participatory mode of an atypical farmer is a very modern take on an age old myth, and one that led to it becoming a critically acclaimed social issue/activist food documentary.
THE REAL DIRT ON FARMER JOHN

In the social issue/activist documentary, we are used to exploring a problem through the use of an individual as a character. But, through the use of the “talking heads” approach, we are presented with a more objective point of view. Bill Nicholls adds a new subset of films to the social issue/activist documentary, and that is the personal portraiture documentary. These exist in the same realm of social issue/activist documentaries, but take up social issues from a personal perspective that is more subjective. Individuals recruited to the film attest to or implicitly live out the underlying issue without necessarily identifying it (Nichols, 2001).

Taggart Siegel’s *The Real Dirt on Farmer John* is one of the more unique ways of which the hero farmer myth is told, using the style of a personal portrait film. It is a story about a man, his farm and his family, a story that parallels the history to American farming. Taggart films this documentary over 25 years using multiple media methods to tell the story of Farmer John, and it is in many ways similar to the plight of the hero farmer. The farm has been in his family since the early 1900s, and John inherits it in the 70s. In the 80s, John loses it. It was a common problem through the US with unrelenting economic pressures, but that is where the commonalities stop. John Peterson is far from typical. He is a performance artist, writer, and even an actor. He rides his tractor in latex and his purple boa. He is fundamentally different to all of his neighbors that surround him on his Illinois farm. And yet, he completely embodies the myth.
Peterson was victimized by the industrialized food system that eventually caused him to lose nearly everything in the 1970s, selling off his farm equipment and leaving him with very little land. We also see something new compared to the previous documentaries, in which fellow farmers also victimize him. Neighboring farmers ostracize him for his strangeness, doing all they can to get him to leave. This is a rare instance in which we see them as the enemy, turning against a fellow farmer for being a unique individual and not adhering to what they think it means to be a farmer. This can be seen as the American masses confronting the myth head-on. The myth is all they know of what a farmer is, and when confronted with something different, they fight against it. The enemy criticizing John does not want a change from the myth, and John is disrupting the status quo. This argues the point of the film even more, emphasizing that something different is exactly what the food industry needs.

John’s quest is a lengthy one. Trying to cope with his economic and personal failures, he was forced to take a journey of discovery, eventually leading to Mexico and the realization that he must keep the farm alive. He returns back home to much hostility and begins a massive transformation. He notices the multinational takeover of American farming, and thinks he can do better as an organic farmer, revitalizing the land he once had forsaken due to economic despair. Mirroring his experience of bringing people to his farm as an arts commune, he becomes a CSA farm where he can educate people about farming, employment opportunities, and bring family shareholders together in a farming experience, broadcasting a message that is the embodiment of the Locavore Movement.
John brings the farming experience to the rest of the world, breaking down the barrier that has kept the farmer as an isolated individual of society.

Much of the time is spent with John shattering the perception of a farmer, the film is built on it. But, when it comes down to it, he is strikingly similar to the hero myth. His story is enunciated through his personal narration and dramatic writings, and Taggart weaves a tale that really plays on audience empathy to tell a story of the importance of the local food movement.
PORK.0

*Pork.0* is a personal portraiture documentary about a farmer who is changing the pork industry by creating some of the best meat in a sustainable way. I follow him along as he pursues a new chapter in his life and strives to use his fame to leave behind a system that will outlast him. More than the other documentaries discussed, this film is focused more on the degradation of taste, but still addresses the conflicts at which industrial farming has with the environment, the animals themselves, and the people whom they displace. Carl embodies the Slow Food Movement, focused on bringing back a pleasure and taste to eating, making it a more personal experience like it used to be before the fast food takeover. The film uses two modes to present the story; the observational mode of watching Carl go about his daily life, and the expository mode when he is more formal and addresses the camera (along with his audio interviews). These two modes combine into a subjective point of view that provides the audience a passenger view to an individual responding to a problem.

The myth of the hero farmer once again plays out, and like John in *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*, Carl is a unique individual. At the beginning of the film, he is immediately shown as a success, a man who has beat the system to produce a better pig that people want to eat, and for that he has reached a certain level of notoriety. He grew up on the farm, but he’s not a career farmer. He only got back into it after his car accident, and spent most of his life as a computer engineer.
He can almost be seen as the Cheney and Ellis in *King Corn*, becoming a farmer to make a point. Instead of expecting failure like those two did, Carl knows he is going to change the pork industry with a bold confidence. As Carl begins his farm anew in a new location, he immediately struggles. We also see him as a victim of one thing he can’t control: nature. He battles the rain, the heat, and states “everyday we spend our time trying to figure out how to beat all the forces that come together to try to stop you from doing what you're doing. I’d rather go through the hell of trying to get it set up than to produce a confinement based pig. That’s just not going to happen” (Pork.0, 2016). He knows it will be a fight, but one that he undergoes willingly, even if that means suffering greatly. We also learn that one of the reasons he moves to Missouri is that he had little alternative because of the lack of processing available for small farmers in Iowa. The industrial food system is again cast as the notorious villain that Carl is fighting against, making him leave his home state to find a safe haven where his system can thrive out from under the thumb of corporate control.

His quest is that of making sure he can use his fame to his advantage to get people to start eating better pork. He is constantly trying to keep his head above water to meet his goal, and he works all through the summer growing a side business for his pork, where he roasts pigs for events, and even wants to begin recruiting other farmers to his cause. This struggle for income to keep the farm alive harkens to traditional myth perceptions, and even his entrepreneurship is reminiscent of Joel Salatin in *Food, Inc.* his sacrifices are for the people eating meat.
He could have stayed in Iowa and adhered to the industrial system for pork production, but his belief in a better, more sustainable system encourages him to relocate. He knows that he isn’t going to become a millionaire, but continues with his quest because he believes that the public deserves better, and he won’t stop his mission until he has changed the industry. He embodies the American hero farmer who selflessly works for the people of the country.

My film uses the familiar hero farmer representation, but it recognizes that myth. Carl knows his public persona: he wears his one-bib overalls, John Deere shirt, ponytail, and blunt persona everywhere he goes. He is very aware of how he presents himself, and is cognizant that he has achieved success to the rest of America looking like a “bad-boy” farmer. There has been numerous articles and shows that talk about how unique of an individual he is, and this representation of the farmer as something very different is what I strive to achieve in my film. The hero farmer is no longer the pitchfork wielding man from a Grant Wood painting. Carl has a larger than life personality and is no-nonsense. He curses and spits, loves rap music, but still wants everything in his fridge to be from his farm. He holds the traditional ideals of wanting to bring back small farms and a system that is better for the land, but is very aware of what his media presence can do. He uses it to branch out into business opportunities to build his name, all so he can keep improving his own system to bring back a tastier meat.

My film also provides the opportunity to see how media representation and portrayal affects a farmer. Carl isn’t a Joel Salatin type who ruminates on the philosophy of food and has a public speaking tour around the world. He is just a man who knew deep
down that something had to change and he could be the one to do that. He never planned on the fame, but when it arrived, he embraced it fully. In my film, we’re looking at the aftermath of that. So often is there an individual who becomes a media darling for doing something atypical and progressive in the food industry. They have their fifteen minutes of fame, and then seem to disappear. I got the chance to film Carl as his fifteen minutes are winding down. We see how much being in front of the camera can help his business by getting him recognized, but it also seems to push him even harder. His fame has set a bar for him, and as a former computer engineer he always wants to improve. So, his personal drive is pushing him back toward the limelight before he becomes a fad like those before him. It’s a dangerous game, especially for a farmer beginning anew at a different location. But it is also great for the food industry because it makes his quest for sustainability even closer to being realized. So, for better or for worse, I think I offer a rare opportunity of a glimpse into the life of one of these media glorified farmers that are heralded by the alternative food industry, and we can see how this fame really does affect lives.

My film illustrates what the contemporary farmer is really like. He isn’t a savior as shown in *Food, Inc.*, he isn’t someone suffering under the commodities market like in *King Corn*, and he certainly isn’t an artist bent on free expression like in *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*. If anything, he is a reflection of what media is turning the modern farmer into, and how that is working.
CONCLUSION

The cultural memory of farmers is changing in contemporary social issue/activist documentaries about food. This can be seen as an influence of the current climate around food movements that is encouraging society to become increasingly conscious about food production and acquisition. But, the myth of the hero farmer still persists as evidenced in food documentaries with farmers as a central character.

It’s important to see behind preconceptions as to what the modern farmer is: not just a romantic stereotype, but someone who is bridging the gap to seeing a whole nation of farmers in a more humanistic way, a person worthy of connection and not just for being admired on screen. When we can recognize a stereotype for its use and then see beyond it, it allows us to identify at a more personal level with a character, realizing they are not much different from ourselves. We live in a progressive time where identities of humans are fluid, no longer adhering to narrow-minded preconceptions, and it is vital that contemporary documentaries do the same. Parts of the myth will always survive, but it is useful for our culture to see that the people in the trenches of food production aren’t just glorified archetypes that current media puts on a pedestal. For a truthful portrayal, it is paramount that contemporary documentaries represent their characters with depth, not just topical stereotypes that we all recognize, even if they are effective storytelling devices.

But, that does not mean that documentaries should strive to deny myths that our culture is familiar with. With ethical eating and production continuing to grow, it is vital
that these different representations of the hero farmer continue while retaining a semblance of the skeleton of the American hero farmer. The trust generated in the processes of agriculture through this heroic method is important for public acceptance because if we were to see negative portrayals “public perceptions of agriculture as a bastion of traditional values may erode, lead to decreased trust in the farmers” (Specht, 2013). It is actually beneficial to society to keep viewing farmers as the victimized hero. It plays on a time tested, empathetic storytelling trope to elicit the changes that are at the heart of the social issue/activist documentary, which is the goal of any film in the genre.

So, finding middle ground between the myth and reality is critical. Like the four documentaries discussed, social issue/activist food documentaries should strive to move beyond the one dimensionality that is all too common in the quick cycle of stories we see daily. If the myth and the reality are mixed correctly, it can come off as an effective piece of storytelling that blends together common story structures with true accounts, not just to glorify a pillar of America’s rich agricultural tradition. When that rare balance can be created, viewers can see food production problems as a tangible problem that can affect them personally, not just a character onscreen.

Entertainment will continue to impact the manner in which society views production agriculture while reflecting real occurrences that impact the industry (Specht, 2013). These social issue/activist documentaries serve to raise awareness of the consequences of America’s industrialized food production, and by using the myth of the hero farmer in atypical ways, these films have effective value in eliciting public response to an issue that impacts every member of our country’s food system.
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