

Advance Screening of “Food, Inc”

A Documentary by Robert Kenner with Eric Schlosser

April 21, 2009

Summary and Observations

The screening was held in an auditorium at the National Geographic Headquarters in Washington, D.C., and was attended by approximately 150 to 200 people. The film will be released in theaters nationally on June 12, 2009. A companion book is also available (published by Perseus Books Group).

The movie was co-produced by Magnolia Pictures and River Road Entertainment and promoted by Participant Media (which also worked on “An Inconvenient Truth” and “Syriana”). The film director is Robert Kenner. The stars and narrators of the film are Eric Schlosser of “Fast Food Nation” fame and Michael Pollan (“Omnivore’s Dilemma”). Others interviewed include Barb Kowalczyk, a food safety advocate, and Joel Salatin, an organic farmer.

General observation: This is a very well-made movie featuring compelling stories, appeals to emotions via graphic depictions of the growing and slaughtering of farm animals, worker abuse, mild humor, and encouragement for Americans to demand better food and more accountability from the companies that produce it and the government agencies that regulate them. Agribusiness companies are generally depicted as showing “disdain, disrespect and a callous type mentality.”

The movie focuses primarily on meat production practices and the uses of corn and the growth and control of the corn industry. It is particularly harsh toward meat producers (chicken, beef, and pork), portraying them as unethical, money-hungry individuals who are willing to subject animals and workers to horrifying conditions in order to make more and more money. The corn industry is portrayed as a subsidized, GMO-dominated monopoly that acts as a vehicle for the development of cheap food and ingredients which contribute to obese humans and sick animals. Much attention is focused on Monsanto with other food companies mentioned, but less often.

The movie opens with the YouTube trailer and sets up the underlying theme of the movie, which is “The food industry doesn’t want you to know where your food is coming from.”

The movie was broken into vignettes with catchy titles such as “Hidden Costs” that walk through the issues surrounding the industrializing of the food supply and what is the hidden truth. The section headings below correspond with these vignettes.

The following is a summary of key points made in the “Food, Inc” movie, as they are depicted by the narrators.

- Food today is much more “dangerous” than in the past.
- A few very large multinational companies control everything we eat and everything we know about what we eat—this is a world that is deliberately hidden from us.
- History of fast food in America is based on the assembly line process of efficiency and “sameness” of food—obtaining, cooking, and serving food with ingredients that are identical.

- To meet the needs of fast food restaurants that demand large quantities of identical food, big food production companies borrowed these assembly-line techniques from early fast food companies and demand compliance by farmers.
- Only 3-4 large companies control food production. They use workers who won't complain and exploit low-income, illegal workers. They manipulate farmers who are in debt and don't have a choice.

"Cornucopia of Choices"

- There is an illusion of diversity within the food production and distribution world, but in fact there are only a few companies and crops. Clever rearrangements of corn make it part of many foods for humans and farm animals.
- Thirty percent of farm land in America contains corn crops. Ninety percent of foods contain corn or soy-based products.
- "In tracing the source of my food, I always end up at a corn field in Iowa." (Michael Pollan)
- Animals are fed corn because it is cheap and makes them fat quickly. Because of this and unsanitary living conditions, they become sick and develop infections such as *e coli*, which become part of the food we eat.
- "Obscure ingredients" in processed foods can all be made from corn. Among the recently engineered foods, HFCS is the biggest advance.

"Unintended Consequences"

- Increased incidence of food-borne illness is cited.
- Numerous meat recalls are mentioned. USDA is not empowered to close plants that are repeat offenders.
 - Barb Kowalczyk, mother of son who died from *e coli* after eating a hamburger: "The industry is more protected than my son was."
- Regulatory agencies are being controlled by the very companies they should be supervising (former company employees/clients serving in government roles).
- Our regulatory agencies are "toothless" and that's how the industry wants it.
- Part of the blame can be the reduced funding for FDA and reliance on self-policing of the industry.

"The Dollar Menu"

- Consumer perspective provided by low-income family: "When you have no money or time, you fill up on fast food—fresh food is too expensive." This leads to obesity and chronic health conditions such as diabetes.
- The industry cites "personal responsibility" as the primary factor in the obesity epidemic, but commodities used in snack foods such as corn, wheat, and soy are subsidized and can be sold cheaper than the cost to produce them, which means "processed food" products are less expensive than fresh produce that is not subsidized.
- Our modern-day food system is skewed toward bad calories.
- People gravitate to three tastes: salt, fat, and sugar. Too much sugar, refined carbohydrates, and HFCS wear down how the body metabolizes sugar.

“In the Grass”

- This section features Joel Salatin, the owner/farmer of Polyface Farms, an organic farm in the Shenandoah Valley, who feeds his animals grass instead of corn and views the farm as a self-regulating system. He contends that food grown, harvested/slaughtered and distributed organically is ideal and possible for all (including developing countries). “We have hit the bull’s eye of the wrong target;” “We’re a culture of technicians with an emphasis on the ‘how’ not the ‘why.’”
- “Corporations are not living with the consequences of their decisions.”
- The large companies keep their animal production process behind closed doors – “There’s no integrity or accountability in the food system.”
- Organic growing is increasing by more than 20 percent annually.
- In giant meatpacking plants there is the same attitude toward the workers as toward the hog—both are expendable.
- When you make the move toward mass-production, you look at your product, the animal, and the customer in a different way.
- Small and local is better: healthier, more humane, and safer.
- Illegal immigrant workers are brought in and exploited, then arrested. Companies are not held responsible for employing them.

“Hidden Costs”

- “Business is causing all the pollution.”
- “There is nothing honest about the US food system. Subsidizing the food system creates the illusion of cheap food, but this creates a greater cost to health and the environment.”
- Pollution of water from industrial farms is a major problem and contributes to food safety recalls due to *e coli*.
- Organic food companies are being bought by big food companies, all of whom are running to the organic food business as fast as possible, but there is disdain by the small producers and organic farmers and the makers of this film for these “big” food companies producing organic foods—the film’s preference is for locally grown organic foods.
- The rush to add organic product lines by large companies is not a moral decision; it’s economically motivated.
- The average meal travels 1,500 miles.

“From Seed to Supermarket”

- One company (Monsanto) produces 90 percent of all soybean seeds.
- The movie cites the 1980 Supreme Court decision that “you can patent life” as part of the problem.
- Private and university crops are harder and harder to come by. Even those who want to go back to conventional soybean cannot find any.
- Tactics being used to ensure market dominance and protection of patented products through threatening patent infringement lawsuits to keep farmers in compliance.
- Hired private investigators spy on and put small farmers out of business by accusing them of cleaning and reusing seeds.

- Farmers that are blacklisted can't buy anything and so have nothing to plant and have to fold.
- It's cheaper to settle and pay the fine than to fight.
- Whoever has more money wins. Farmers cannot compete with large multimillion dollar food companies.
- Non-GMO farms next to GMO farms are still responsible for patent infringement if seed blows into their crop.

"The Veil"

- There is a revolving door between the food industry and regulatory agencies. Companies with close ties to presidential administrations keep industry out of trouble.
- Companies fight to avoid labeling. This is the most important battle because it is the only way for consumers to find out what is in their food.
- Significant discussion is included about "veggie libel" laws forbidding criticism of food products or the food industry; the Oprah Winfrey/beef lawsuit was cited.
- One state has a proposal to make it illegal to take pictures of industrial cattle fields.
- The assertion is made that a breakdown of the system is inevitable as even FDA acknowledges that we can't effectively trace the source of outbreaks.

Shock to the System

- It is observed that the food system in America is tightly controlled but highly vulnerable because of the small number of crops (corn, soybeans), varieties, and companies. "This highly efficient machine can't withstand shocks such as the cost of oil."
- Huge environmental costs are cited; it takes 75 gallons of oil to bring one steer to slaughter.
- Single virtue of efficiency is that when a problem occurs no one thinks about going back to see what might be done. Rather, new technology is created to fix the problem.

Concluding Observations

- With each [food safety] outbreak, consumers are learning more and starting to turn toward alternatives.
- The average consumer doesn't feel powerful, but in fact, consumers are powerful in that they can vote with their purchase choice.
- Changes are needed at the policy level.
- "The tobacco industry is a model for how the food industry's irresponsible behavior can be changed."
- The public fought to break the tobacco industry's control and can break the control of the food industry.
- The farmers are going to deliver what the marketplace demands. Consumers need to demand fresher food.

Recommendations for Consumers

- Buy from companies that treat food and workers with respect.

- Buy organic or sustainable foods with little or no pesticide use.
- Read labels; know what's in your food.
- Protect family farms; visit your local farmer's market.
- Plant a garden.
- Don't just buy organic; buy local and small.
- You can change the world with every bite.