Chew on This: Disgust, Delay, and the Documentary Image in Food, Inc.

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Toward the end of Food, Inc. (Kenner, 2008), activist and author Michael Pollard (The Omnivore’s Dilemma, 2007) describes the impact of journalistic endeavors of which this film is one example: ‘A month doesn’t go by where there isn’t a story in the news that peels back the curtain on how ... industrial food is made. Every time one of these stories comes out, America learns a little more, you know, [about] what’s going on in the kitchen where their food is being prepared, and every time, they turn away in revulsion, and start looking for alternatives.’

That ‘turn away in revulsion’ is precisely the subject of this essay, because Food, Inc. is, in many ways, so inoffensive. It doesn’t aim purposefully to make viewers turn away or avert their eyes at scenes of distasteful, disgusting, immoral, or outrage-inducing practices in the food industry, including animal abuse and shoddy health standards. In comparison to films like Earthlings (Monson, 2005) and Super Size Me (Spurlock, 2004) and any number of YouTube-posted clips of mistreatment of farm animals (the likes of which serve as evidence in arguments by PETA, Farm Sanctuary, and other activist groups), Food, Inc. seems positively tame.

Is Food, Inc. less effective as a consciousness-raising documentary because it doesn’t dwell (at least, directly and at length) on farm animals being tortured or consumers made violently, fatally ill by food-borne E. coli, for example? Or is the film’s politeness and its refusal of activist tactics a sign of its producers’ desire not to offend audiences in hopes of winning broad appeal?

Either or both may be true, but there’s another possibility, as well: I want to suggest that Food, Inc. shows us neither subjects nor objects of disgust, but instead enacts the movement of disgust itself. Disgust, like the documentary image, is less about objects or subjects than it is a relation in space and time. If disgusting things and images make us ‘turn away in revulsion,’ I want to emphasize not the revulsion, but the turn away, a movement that characterizes the temporal ‘lag time’ intrinsic to disgust, as Sara Ahmed describes, and connects as well to what Malin Wahlberg calls ‘documentary
time.' Rather than show us the object(s) and subject(s) of disgust, *Food, Inc.* provokes and, indeed, performs physical and moral disgust by its paradoxical (and perhaps quintessentially documentary) combination of proximity and immediacy with distance and delay.

**Disgust as Movement**

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that disgust is a property neither of the offensive object, body, image, or fact, nor of the offended person who experiences it, but of the encounter between them. That encounter is emotional and embodied at the same time; as she writes, 'disgust involves the “weightiness” of feelings, the way in which feelings are, in some sense, material' (85). However, as easy as it would be to describe disgust as something that emerges in the material contact of two bodies pressed against one another, Ahmed emphasizes instead the space and time *between* those bodies. It has a way of turning us ‘inside out, as well as outside in,’ such that the border between subject and object is itself turned into an object (86). Intercorporeality and intersubjectivity are hallmarks of disgust. The body is ‘over taken [by the object] precisely insofar as it takes the object over,’ she writes, ‘in a temporary holding onto the detail of the surface of the object: its texture; its shape and form; how it clings and moves. It is only through such a sensuous proximity that the object is felt to be so “offensive” that it sickens and over takes the body’ (85). Then the body recoils, and that ‘movement is the work of disgust; it is what disgust does’ (85).

Nearness is the crucial element in this relation, above and beyond any actual contact. The proximity of the “disgusting object” may feel like an offence to bodily space, as if the object’s invasion of that space was a necessary consequence of what seems disgusting about the object itself. Pulling back, bodies that are disgusted are also bodies that feel a certain rage, a rage that the object has got close enough to sicken, and to be taken over or taken in’ (86). Thus disgust involves above all nearness—the possibility and threat of contact—more so than contact *per se*. It arises in and as the proximity between two fleshy bodies, which the subject then attempts to overcome in the act of pulling away. On the act of turning away in revulsion, Ahmed cites Sylvan Tomkins, who writes that ‘the response intends to maximize the distance between the face and the object which disgusts the self. It is a literal pulling away from the object’ (86).

In the cinematic experience, we ordinarily think of the spectator’s body pulling away from disgusting, horrific images. Julian Hanich has noted that this aversion on the part of the spectator can be mental, physical, or both, in reaction to images (in horror films, for example) whose ‘obtrusive nearness’ renders them disgusting (2009). However, in the case of *Food, Inc.*, the film occasionally performs that pulling away as if on our behalf. It behaves
ambivalently, at times confronting us aggressively with images that come too close for comfort, but more often retreating from and reflecting obliquely on visible markers of abuse, pain, and death. In other words, occasionally the film seems intended to disgust its viewers, but more often and more powerfully, it is disgusted; the difference can be seen in its movements and in the way it relates spatially and temporally to the objects of its attention, including both spectators and documentary subjects.

In some of its most interesting moments, Food, Inc. plays out the dialectic that Ahmed describes as characteristic of "disgust": a dialectic between drawing toward, holding onto, and pulling away from the surface of the object. In an early segment of the film, for example, chicken farmer Vince Edwards, who is under contract with Tyson Foods, Inc., gives a tour of his chicken farm. As he tells us, in a voice-off, that these chickens never see the light of day, the hand-held camera slowly moves alongside one of Edwards’s chicken houses, nearing a single panel in the long wall that has been pushed in slightly, creating a dark opening on either side. The camera turns toward that panel and moves closer. The film dissolves into an even closer shot, and the camera continues its trepid forward movement. The wayward panel is the only thing between the camera and the chickens whose living conditions the film wants to show us. The camera holds on this image and its ominous promise for a protracted moment, long enough for these words to appear on screen over the center of the panel: ‘Vince had offered to show us inside his chicken houses.’ Only now does the film cut to a reverse shot, looking back at the path it had taken alongside the chicken house. ‘But after multiple visits by Tyson representatives, he changed his mind.’

The slowness of the approach to Edwards’s chicken house and the suddenness of the cut away express both the attraction to the object of disgust (in this case, presumably disgusting conditions inside the coop, conditions we will see explicitly later in the film) and our repulsion from the possibility of getting close enough to see it, to which the camera responds by pulling away. When we turn away in disgust from an object because we are ‘disgusted,’ Ahmed writes, ‘the expulsion itself becomes the “truth” of the
reading of the object’ (87). This scene is reflective of the film’s overall rhetorical strategy: it makes its argument not by being disgusting, but by being disgusted. It performs the very attitude it seeks in its viewers, comporting itself in ways that reflect ‘disgust’ and encouraging viewers to empathize with its bodily movements and consequently to take on its attitude, rather than facing us point-blank with awful images in hopes that we recoil.

The disgust the film provokes at Tyson and ‘food inc.’s’ dirty secrets and these animals’ living conditions derives less from the act of seeing (and even less from the act of showing) than from the act of nearly seeing. Disgust, Ahmed tells us, exists and emerges in the ‘almost,’ in the approach and the turn away, rather than being constituted solely in the contact between subject and object. Thus, she says, disgust involves a ‘time-lag, as well as being generative and futural’ (87). It’s the dependence of disgust on proximity or contact that may explain its awkward temporality, the way it makes of the border an immediate, tangible object but, at the same time, lags behind.

In short, disgust has an ambivalent materiality (predicated on both presence and absence) and temporality (hovering between ‘now’ and ‘then’), which Food, Inc. exaggerates in this moment and others, and which disgust shares with the documentary form itself.

**Documentary, Time-lag, and the Trace**

In *Documentary Time: Film and Phenomenology* (2008), Malin Wahlberg explores the dynamic between immediacy and proximity, on the one hand, and distance and delay, on the other hand, that characterizes every documentary image. She teases out the phenomenological paradox we experience with every cinematic image, that it combines inscription and abstraction by presenting an indexical, material record of a past moment and rendering it a perpetual, flickering ‘not-yet-now,’ and argues that the slippage between index and trace to which this paradox points goes too often unaddressed in studies of the documentary film per se.

In her attempt to understand and mobilize the documentary image’s unique combination of materiality and intangibility, past and present, Wahlberg concentrates on the productive tension between the index or the imprint and the trace, in which tension she finds creative and ethical potential. The trace is reducible neither to the image nor to the index, she says. Borrowing from Mary Ann Doane’s link between the ontology of the trace and ‘Charles Sanders Peirce’s description of the index as a “hollowed-out sign” (2002, 230-231), Wahlberg points out that ‘the trace has less to do with the materiality of the vestige, than with its uncanny presence of absence’ (34, 35). Wahlberg turns repeatedly, of course, to the work of André Bazin.
and to contemporary work that resists reductionist readings of his work as naively realist, hung up on the indexicality of the filmic image. Pointing to pieces like ‘Death Every Afternoon’ and his review of Thor Heyerdahl’s 1950 *Kon-Tiki* (in which he dwells on what he calls moments of ‘denied vision’), she reminds us that ‘Bazin’s account of the trace is not even limited to the visual a priori of the vestige, because the trace is not necessarily dependent on what is actually shown’ (35). In the contingency and deferral that characterize the trace, Wahlberg finds an ethical possibility (39). Drawing on Paul Ricœur’s description, she argues that “the trace signifies without making anything appear” and yet it bears witness to something that happened and even to the passing of time itself (41). It is this aspect of the documentary image that produces its emotional and ethical power, for ‘although the spectacular aspect of the image-imprint depends on an excess of visibility and indexicality, it does not automatically become an affective sign of the past’ (41).

This description suits *Food, Inc.* particularly well, because, as close analysis will show, the film expresses and evokes visceral and moral disgust not with graphic images of disgusting objects and facts, but with moments of ‘denied vision’ that indicate not only past events within food’s production, but also the context that enabled and perpetuated such events. In other words, ‘the compiled material is not offered as a mere trace of the past but as a trace of another trace. The sociocultural and historical context, from where this documentary ready-made is taken, still clings to the inserted fragment’ (Wahlberg, 42). Here, it is the context of food production and consumption in addition to any one human or animal victim of it that the film treats with disgust, by emphasizing the trace rather than the historical fact per se.

Wahlberg sees ‘the phenomenon of the trace [being] both confirmed and questioned in contemporary media’ in a way that would seem to demand ‘a phenomenological approach to cinematic temporality [that would] acknowledge the creative possibilities of framing, extending, freezing, or fragmentizing the filmed event or gesture’ (143, 25). In particular, Wahlberg notes that contemporary documentaries draw our attention to and question the status of the trace by means of what she calls ‘frame-breaking’ events, ‘where experimental figures of isochronal representation, repetition, or altered speed are further marked by a significant reference to real events, people, and places’ (44). ‘Frame in this context,’ she writes,

is understood as a socioculturally constructed preconception that governs our definition of a specific situation and, therefore, our cognitive understanding and emotional reaction. Instead of living the situation and experiencing what it offers the subject becomes disturbingly aware of a frame-breaking event, which in turn may evoke a reflection on her being in this situation. Moreover, this frame-
breaking event may provoke thoughts about how and why this situation came about in the first place. (50-51)

She borrows this term from Erving Goffman, who developed it in the context of social situations where a disruptive ‘negative experience’ can provoke critical distance (Frame Analysis, 1974). However, Wahlberg says, ‘our frame of reference may just as well break down in receiving representations, narratives, and diverse kinds of performances. A negative experience may be provoked by changes in the spectator’s attitude or by the deliberate production of a frame-breaking event within the performance’ (52).

Filmmakers can create such an effect (intentionally or not, one supposes, although Wahlberg focuses on the pointed use of these devices) by such things as gaps in the image, black leader, and exaggerated long takes (58).

Frame-breaking events, in her account, are related to temporalization of the image: ‘In the context where screen attraction supposedly coincides with a thrill of the real, the frame-breaking event is often propelled by a combination of manipulated space-time (duration, tempo, rhythm, and repetition) and the enactment of the sound-image record as a trace of an ‘historical and social realm’ (53).

Let us return momentarily to the shot of Vince Edwards’s chicken house. As in a horror film, the slowness of the approach ratchets up the anticipation and dread. Indeed, in one interview Kenner admits that he didn’t set out to make a horror film but ultimately realized he’d done just that (Shallwani, 2009). But we cannot attribute the dread and disgust provoked by that scene to its connotations of the horror film. What is a convention in a horror film is a frame-breaking event in this context, for ‘time measurement in film may in itself provoke a frame-breaking event such as the duration of a static framing, which coincides with or outlasts the filmed event’ (53).

The exaggeration in the camerawork and framing there creates ‘a disquieting ambiguity within the image, as when the extended shot and static camera’—here, not technically static but ‘holding onto’ the surface of the dislodged panel—’make us aware of our intruding gaze’ (91). That sequence of shots ‘posit[s] a transgression between the time of the image and the time of film viewing that impinges on our understanding of, and emotional response to, the narrative’ (93). Thus, the film denies us the image that presumably would disgust us, so that we might be disgusted not only by (unseen but presumably) awful living conditions but also by the subterfuge that prevents our seeing them for ourselves.

There are other, even more dramatic, ‘frame-breaking events’ in the film, in which ‘a temporal thickness with implications both for the narrative and for the viewer’s affective response to the screen [is] obtained by exaggerating the length of a shot and by emphasizing the frame and the
camera gaze' (91), for example. All of these moments demonstrate the phenomenological similarity between disgust and the documentary image, both of which operate in and as the in-between space between presence and absence, here and there, now and then, subject and object. In these ‘frame-breaking’ moments, the film does not emphasize an immediate, tangible there, the site of abuse or illness or death from which we might turn away. Instead, it gives us the ‘almost,’ the ambivalent relation—approach and retreat, but always proximity—between us and the images, events, and facts that other documentaries might just as easily present as inherently, objectively offensive—thus inadvertently implying that they are separate from us. *Food, Inc.*’s argument rests on that hallmark of disgust that Ahmed describes as the ‘intercorporeality of the encounter,’ something the film expresses by lingering on the trace (86).

In the scene that follows the thwarted investigation of Edwards's farm, for example, the film presents a series of images inside a chicken house owned by a more forthcoming farmer, one who is not in compliance with what Edwards had described as corporate rules (instituted by Perdue Farms in this case) about keeping chickens ‘in the dark’ in windowless, tunnel-ventilated houses. Our initial view of this chicken house, shot in bright daylight, is deeply upsetting: chickens are packed into overcrowded pens, many of them unable to walk, the farmer tells us, because their bones and internal organs are unable to keep up with the rapid growth demanded by the corporation. So much dust fills the air that even the farmer wears a mask as she climbs through the pile of chickens, grabbing one dead chicken after another by its legs to toss on the garbage heap.

One image in particular, in which a chicken who has fallen under its own weight struggles desperately to get up, corresponds to what Wahlberg calls ‘Bazin’s formula of the representation of an irrevocable moment, which in the realm of moving images may be repeated again, in order to revitalize the ghostlike gesture of a body collapsing in the past’ (142). The image is ghostly by virtue of the fact that it is cinema: as we witness this animal’s heavy breathing and wide-eyed panic, a near-death image we can rewatch and reanimate with a flick of the remote control, we know that this same animal must be long dead by now. In a sense, its final breaths are the ‘trace,’ but that shot is not the ‘frame-breaking event’ that my next examples are.

I should note that, in fact, the film does not consistently ‘break frame’: its emphasis on the difference between presence and absence, and between immediacy and delay, is a matter of degree. The film does not disengage completely from the assumptions inherent in the classical documentary project, as do many of the films Wahlberg discusses. Indeed, the film does occasionally give us awful images of pain and abuse, such as the fairly direct and unmitigated image of that struggling chicken in its over-crowded coop,
and expects us to take those at face-value. However, its rhetorical power stems less from immediacy and presence (that is, from documentary film’s claim to those qualities) than from its thoughtful emphasis on delay and absence. The following examples reflect the film’s critical engagement with the status of the “documentary image,” both in images created by others and in footage shot by Kenner’s crew. This critical project gathers steam as the film investigates food industry practices and culminates in an intense sequence detailing one of ‘food inc.’s’ many human victims.

In the next scene, this same farmer speaks over footage recorded by hidden cameras while Perdue workers come late at night to collect her chickens for processing. The timestamp in the corner of the image reads: ‘Perdue Pickup, Hidden Camera, 1:00am.’ In shadowy images lit only by lights on the company forklifts and a handheld flashlight, Perdue workers whose faces are deliberately blurred grab three and four chickens in each hand and toss them carelessly by their feet into crates. A stray chicken on the floor, no more able to run than the collapsed chicken in the previous scene, is kicked toward the forklift by an unidentifiable foot.

The timestamp clearly marks this footage as separate in time from the activity of this film’s camera crew. The dark surroundings, stark lighting, extreme shadows, and skewed angles provided by the wall-mounted and surreptitiously handheld cameras set this off from all the previous footage of the chicken houses. That the workers’ faces are pixellated, making them individually unidentifiable in much the same way the chickens are treated as a collective, massed product rather than as individual creatures, is the beginning of the film’s argument that non-human and human bodies are mutually victimized by ‘food, inc.’ The farmer herself alludes to this connection: ‘These are undocumented workers,’ she says. ‘From their point of view, they don’t have any rights, and they’re just not going to complain. The companies like these kinds of workers.’ Her statement is direct, but the pixellation of faces is a trace of a trace, intervening in the documentary image by reminding us of the passage from the immediate presence of these workers and their animal charges before a documenting camera and the mediated, delayed, ghostly presentation of this image of the past. The timestamp, the shooting style, the pixellation: all of this contributes to the frame-breaking nature of this scene, which draws our attention to the trace of the trace, to the fact of representation in addition to the fact of the represented moment itself. In doing so it focuses our attention on the larger context of the immediate scenario in which these chickens and these workers and this cameraperson are involved.

Other images of animal bodies appear at a remove, as well, in a way that emphasizes the temporal ‘lag-time’ of the documentary image. Toward the very end of the film, we see an additional bit of footage of blatant, on-
screen animal abuse, which is something fairly rare in this film. As Michael Pollan makes the earlier-quoted statement about audiences turning away in revulsion from frank documentaries about where their food comes from, we see footage of crippled cows being beaten and prodded toward processing chutes and hogs stranded in their own manure. Though this footage is shot for clarity, in daylight and using close-ups to give gruesome details of individual abuse and long shots to give the awful 'big picture' of masses of animals affected, Kenner's film remains detached from the footage, as it had from the Purdue pick-up surveillance imagery. All these images are televised news footage. Each segment retains the original voice-over reporter's commentary, volume lowered to make Pollan's voice-over audible above it, and each segment appears as a square in the center of the frame, bracketed off by black space that clearly identifies this as television footage shot and broadcast by other people, at another time, in other places. The film's emphasis on these stark images of victimized animals is always on the temporal gap between recording and representation, a gap we're invited to consider as a trace of 'a historical and social realm.'

Lynn Higgins has described a crisis in post-9/11 documentary films wherein they must somehow come to terms with the absence of any stable, objective truth while continuing to work in a form that ostensibly seeks 'truth' (2005). Some documentaries respond to this crisis by making it their subject, by refusing and destabilizing any conventional notion of 'truth' and by depicting instead the truth as the very gaps, absences, and failures that conventional documentaries attempt to fill in. (For example, Michael Moore's 2004 Fahrenheit 9/11 depicts the Twin Towers' destruction as sound only, refusing us those familiar images, and though she doesn't mention this example, Werner Herzog's 2005 Grizzly Man withholds the indexical images and sounds of the moment of death around which the entire film is organized.) Then there are those social advocacy documentaries that respond to the epistemological crisis by turning relentlessly to the body itself, depicting it in all its fleshy materiality as the object that cannot lie. According to Higgins, Super Size Me and Earthlings may fit into this category, but I would argue Food, Inc. decidedly does not. In the chicken house sequences and in the following examples, this film approaches that body from an oblique angle and for the most part chooses not to meet it head on: it delays, it dodges, it declines. Whereas Morgan Spurlock makes his argument about 'food, inc.' by allowing his body to sicken, quite literally, on camera (though never allowing the straightforward presentational style of his film to falter), Food, Inc. provokes disgust through an emphasis on the trace, in a way that constantly exaggerates the nearness and 'aboutness' rather than or in addition to immediacy and contact that, according to Ahmed, characterizes the phenomenology of disgust. In this sense, Kenner's film is as much about
documentary ethics and rhetorical strategy as it is about the food industry in America today. Social advocacy documentaries traditionally make their arguments by presenting, point-blank and in real time, images to which they want their audiences to react. *Food, Inc.* contains very few images that will turn its audience’s heads or stomachs; instead, the film’s images perform the experience of disgust itself, that ambivalent but simultaneous push toward and turn away from that which we want to know but can hardly face. The film’s rhetorical argument is not only intellectual or emotional but embodied, visceral, and experiential.

‘Death is a motif that is both excessively visual and impossible to represent,’ writes Wahlberg. ‘The framing of violence and death posits the image as indexical sign invoking the existential meaning of the trace, and hence the motif of death emphasizes the status of documentary footage as “ethically charged”’ (47). In order to make clear just how ‘frame-breaking’ those earlier shots of animal misery are, we might look to one of the few sequences in which animals are put to death on screen. I offer this not as an example of frame-breaking, but by way of contrast. Midway through the film, we meet Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farms, who speaks out against the government policies and corporate practices the film seeks to expose. Salatin practices what he preaches, and his farm looks nothing like those we’ve seen thus far: he feeds his cows grass, slaughters his chickens in the open air, and brings organic products to local markets. Wearing suspenders and a t-shirt emblazoned with the word ‘grassfed’ and looking like a picture-book illustration of the farmer in the dell, Farmer Joel introduces us to his cows. Gesturing toward the pasture filled with grazing cows, he points out the elegant simplicity of the grass-based system: ‘There it is, there’s the whole thing! The cow is fertilizing, mowing, and . . . she’s harvesting it. It’s all real time, real silver dollars.’

Indeed, this entire sequence and the one that follows are ‘real time,’ and that is in large part their charm and their rhetorical power. *Food, Inc.*’s goal is to mobilize consumers to bring about change in the food industry, but it does not aim to make its audiences choose vegan or vegetarian diets over carnivorous ones. Salatin’s farm presents a challenge for this film, then, in that it has to present his organic farming, which includes animal slaughter, in an entirely different light, sometimes quite literally, than it does when criticizing Tyson’s or Perdue’s corporate practices, for example.

This challenge comes to a head when Salatin shows us the chicken slaughter process on his farm. There is not the video aesthetic we’ve seen earlier: these images are bright and warm, accompanied by the folksy plucking of a guitar. Under a cloudless blue sky and surrounded by lush green grass, workers in bright yellow rubber overalls collect pristine-looking white-feathered chickens from orange and yellow crates whose colors pop in
the direct sunlight. Even the bucket of blood beneath the slaughtering-station is pretty, more candy-apple red than anything else. An employee takes one chicken after another (handling them individually, not two and three at a time as the Purdue employees did) and places it in one of a series of tin funnels, its head sticking out from a hole in the bottom. He grasps the head of one chicken and slices neatly through the chicken’s throat, once on each side. The farmhand gets a close-up here, as the Perdue workers did not, just after he slices through the chicken’s throat. The chickens get one, too: the next shot gives us a close look at a vocal and very much alive chicken, who looks directly at the camera through the gaps in one of those brightly colored yellow crates. ‘The most provoking figure of death is not the image of a dead body but a body turning into a corpse,’ Wahlberg writes, summarizing Vivian Sobchack’s 2004 argument about the unique role of death in the phenomenology of documentary (47). The slaughter of Salatin’s chickens is precisely that kind of image, and Food, Inc. somehow has to mitigate that ethical paradox, which it does through an utter lack of bracketing. There is no grainy footage, no timestamp, no pixellation, no framing of the image as if it were shot elsewhere, at another time, by someone else. There is cutting but nothing that breaks the continuity of the event: the camera swish-pans with the farmhand’s movements from crate to funnel and back again to retain the complete movement, and we see that slice of the throat in a single shot. We even hear the real-time sounds of the event, including the squawk of the chicken at its moment of death, highlighting the real-time immediacy and materiality of this scene.

All farming cannot be disgusting, according to the logic of the film’s argument, so it must include a scene like this, one that distracts our attention from the trace of the trace that had been so emphasized in the scenes critiquing the violence of corporate farming. It’s still a hard scene to watch, for we are seeing the moment of death on screen, but paradoxically the intimacy and immediacy of this scene is what makes it less offensive than the earlier scenes of animal abuse, where the marked time-lag and trace invited disgust.

‘Aside from the filmic unveiling of vestiges in a landscape,’ writes Wahlberg, ‘the impact of the trace of the trace is perhaps even more intense, or at least more visually poignant, when the human body is in focus’ (59). Food, Inc. seems to know this, even though it tends not to give more emotional weight to humans than it does to farm animals. As I’ve suggested regarding its treatment of farm workers, the film’s handling of the human bodies implicated in the food industry’s practices is in keeping with the frame-breaking strategies it uses with regard to non-human ones. This applies as well to those adversely affected by those practices.
The film's account of the E. coli outbreak(s) affecting American consumers in the last decades makes this clear. The film presents this set of events in two ways: the indexical images of the crisis are shown almost exclusively through second-hand footage, and the audio commentary is divided between second-hand and first-hand footage, and between voice-off and sync sound. Our first introduction to the E. coli outbreak within the film comes via television news accounts, in which the bracketing occurs at a number of different levels. The images are set off as square images within the film's own rectangular frame, as were the news images of animal cruelty, and the *Food, Inc.* filmmakers timestamp each image by including the year of each news account in orange text at the top of the news image. The television networks include their own 'stamp' as well: the NBC and CBS logos appear in the corners of the bracketed images, for example. When the newscasters appear on screen to introduce and comment on the story, there is a further framing of the news footage: it appears in a square above the newscasters' shoulder, a square that is itself 'stamped' with the graphics designed for this particular news story (e.g., CBS's 'BEEF RECALL' designed to look like a timestamp that might appear on a package of beef).

*Food, Inc.* lets the first two of these news accounts play in 'real time,' although the notion of real time is immediately complicated by the format of the news broadcast: its 'original' airing of the story relies on footage shot earlier by news crews. At the end of the second new story, though, the film begins to overlap the soundtracks of the next few accounts, so that CBS's Dan Rather remains on screen while his voice is overtaken by another network's commentator a split-second before that network's images (to which the commentator refers) appear. Even when the film leaves the network commentators and returns to its own Michael Pollard, speaking about the E. coli outbreak, it does not leave behind the televised accounts: Pollard's voice is layered over more of these televised, bracketed images, and when he finishes, Tom Brokaw's voice returns over still more televised images. In the overlapping of sound accompanied by images whose source is further and further distanced in time and space, *Food, Inc.* brings forward the audio-trace in a way it has already done repeatedly with the image-trace. The layered mediation of these indexical images and sounds once again comes to the forefront, so that what we see and hear is the proverbial forest in addition to the trees.

The frame-breaking strategy used here to indicate the food industry's human toll becomes more poignant when we meet a singular victim, the first one to be given a name and a face. Kevin Kowalcyk is the son of food safety activist Barbara Kowalcyk, and we don't meet him in real time or in person, because E. coli killed him in 2001 at the age of two and a half. He is nothing now but a trace.
Our first image of Kevin is a wallet-sized photo extended by his mother to a legislator during a meeting to discuss food safety laws. The conversation began on screen a few moments earlier, but now her son's image appears just as Barbara introduces his story, which she frames as the reason for her political commitment to this cause. As the legislator ponders the photo, the film cuts to lakeside footage of a boy in his swimming trunks being swung playfully over the water's edge by an adult as the cameraperson looks on. The image has all the marks of home-movie video: fuzzy, wobbly, relentlessly focused on the apple of its cameraperson's eye, even when that requires an awkward zoom or unsteady pan. It's color footage, but the color is so muted that it might be remembered otherwise. The image seems dimmed and softened by the years that have passed. Barbara's voice-over describes the family's nightmarish ordeal—three tainted hamburgers, a race to the emergency room, a battery of tests, and death just days later—as we watch Kevin cavort on the beach. Only twice does the film cut away from the home-movie to a close-up of Barbara being interviewed about her son's death and her subsequent activism.

The editing is powerful. In the hospital, Barbara's voice-over tells us, Kevin begged for but could not have water. This news comes over a shot of Kevin splashing exuberantly in the lake, followed by a shot of Barbara's face in the interview, a single tear running down her cheek, and that shot followed by an extreme close-up of her son, drops of lake water streaming down his face. In voice-over again, Barbara recounts that his kidneys started to fail. She pauses for a shaky breath, and just at that moment Kevin's ghostly image turns to looks directly into the camera, his blue eyes the brightest spot in the image. The image of Kevin is, on its own terms, a beautiful one, but its juxtaposition with the shots and sounds of his grieving mother is something else entirely, an image of unbearable loss and delay. This sequence marks the in-between in a way similar to the images of surveillance and news footage elsewhere in the film. It indicates, perhaps even more precisely than other examples, the difference between the index and the trace. The index is a moment and a material fact, but the trace is that presence in addition to its absence. Unlike the images of the chicken's slaughter or the cow's abuse, these images of Kevin are beautiful in their own right. But it isn't in their own right—immediately, materially, in real time—that they function rhetorically: they function rhetorically as a trace. As such they make clear the difference between index and trace: the indexical presence the image marks is beautiful (that blue-eyed boy at play on the beach), but it's only a trace of someone now gone. That loss registers violently; it is disgusting. This is the only way I can find to explain, in precise if quite personal terms, my ambivalence in watching this scene. I find it beautiful but it repulses me, and that must be because, as Ahmed argues,
disgust emerges in movement, time, and time-lag rather than in the object (these images, this boy) or the subject (me). The beauty of the image and its horror are inextricable, as are its function as index and trace.

The film’s insistence on the ‘intercorporeality of the encounter’ (Ahmed, 86) impels me to leave one of its most beautiful images for some of its ugliest. I refer to a segment that brings together humans and animals even more directly than it has before through ‘frame-breaking’ devices that emphasize the indirect trace. Following on the heels of, and in direct contrast to, farmer Joel Salatin’s organic farm, we arrive in Tar Heel, North Carolina, home of the Smithfield hog processing plant. Our first image of the ‘largest slaughterhouse in the world’ is an extreme long-shot courtesy of a helicopter. That the image is too distant for us to make out even a single car on the massive parking lot of this massive complex is not insignificant, nor is the next shot, which puts us up-close and personal with a hog on its way to Smithfield, its snout sniffing its new environs through the metal slats of the transport truck that bears it to its final destination.

After the local union representative introduces us to the town’s key employer by telling us how far the company goes to collect its work force of uneducated and poor men and women of color, whom we see being bussed into the plant’s parking lot from up to 100 miles away, the film cuts immediately to a handheld image. ‘Shot by workers’ hidden cameras,’ says the title placed over the image. (The film doesn’t point out that these cameras are hidden successfully in part because the workers themselves are ‘hidden,’ invisible in this larger process, but it will make that fact clear retrospectively, if subtly, in its final scenes.) The first image we see, shot from shoulder-height and well-lit, depicts several employees making their way toward metal-detectors, presumably at the entrance to the work-area. This shot is full-color, with the employee just ahead of the cameraperson dressed in a brightly colored striped sweater. The film cuts immediately to a murky, unsteady image, shot from chest-height and close to the back of the employee who walks ahead of the cameraperson. That employee is still in stripes, but its colors are now muted into shades of grey, thanks to the poor lighting, as he dons a hairnet and hardhat. All of this employee-made footage is bracketed as a square, fuzzy-bordered image, surrounded by black.

Almost immediately we see the title ‘Voice of Smithfield Workers’ and hear an off-screen interviewee saying, ‘They have the same mentality toward the workers as they do toward the hogs.’ These words accompany a poorly lit, unsteady image of workers’ backs as they move through the plant, but immediately after the speaker finishes, there is a cut in sound and image. Suddenly we hear a loud squeal and see a pigpen, an image that scarcely registers before the camera zooms in rapidly. The sound quality, sound editing, cutting, and sudden zoom all highlight the ‘trace’ as a form of
violence. The Smithfield worker then reappears on the soundtrack, over a string of handheld canted-angle images of this hog pen, to remind us that the corporate farm isn’t concerned with the longevity of hogs (meant for slaughter) or workers (just as disposable).

As in the E. coli segment, here the film uses continuous audio over discontinuous image to make a point about the proximity of animal and human, visible not in individual images but in the trace that all of these images leave behind. We are introduced to the ‘kill floor,’ where 32,000 hogs are slaughtered per day. The camera, which the awkward framing reminds us is handheld and hidden, looks down on the backs of these hogs. Suddenly, a metal hydraulic panel hisses from off-screen and emerges frame-right. Without hesitation (even the resistance one might expect from the animals’ fleshy weight), the panel presses the hogs down the chute, off-screen to the left. This shot is accompanied by high-pitched squeals but the camera doesn’t move until the hogs have been pushed completely out of the frame. The camera moves then—physical movement, without editing—to the other end of the chute, where hogs now flail and flounder on their way to processing. The image still doesn’t cut, so that over these same images, we hear the same employee complain that workers get infected by handling these ‘guts’ all day. Only mid-way through that statement does the film cut to images of workers standing in an assembly-line, eviscerating dead hogs that hang above them. ‘Basically you’re treated as a human machine,’ the never-seen voice continues. The lag-time between the voice-over’s shift to human terms and the image’s lingering on the image of pigs suggests the film’s underlying theme, which is that ‘food, inc.’ isn’t disgusting in its treatment of this animal or that one, but that it devalues everyone and everything—hog, human, and truth—in its relentless drive toward profit.

With a folksy guitar riff, the film cuts to a black and white photograph of an early 20th-century slaughterhouse, then scans the image slowly. The film continues this sequence with the voice-over of critic Eric Schlosser, the author of Fast Food Nation (2001) and a recurring presence in this film. Schlosser recounts the early slaughterhouse scandal unearthed and exposed by Upton Sinclair, whose book The Jungle (1906) helped ensure that, in Schlosser’s words, ‘things got better.’ However, as quickly as he and the film chart this progress, they admit its ultimate failure. Their ambivalent attitude toward this early progress, borne out by history, comes across in the bracketing-off of several late 1950s images (after it ‘got better’), which are offset within the film’s own image in such a way that the conclusions they might ordinarily promise are presented at one remove.

The images and easy conclusions presented in that short sequence of early to mid-20th-century images are to be taken with a pillar (rather than a mere pinch) of salt, which the film makes clear in the next sequence. Here,
the images of violence at the Smithfield slaughterhouse gets explicitly tied—visually and auditorily—to the experience of the workers who slaughter and, later, consume them. Over images of uniformed employees slicing up carcasses, Pollard and Schlosser discuss the corporation's aggressive hiring of illegal labor and the fact that the recent campaigns against illegal immigration paradoxically target the workers rather than the companies who lured them here. Here, local union representative Eduardo Peña, who first introduced us to the Smithfield plant, reappears driving late at night to a trailer park, where immigration authorities arrest several Smithfield workers. (According to Peña, Smithfield regularly provides immigration authorities with workers' names in order not to be on the hook, so to speak, for their own hiring practices.) This night sequence bears some resemblance to the earlier 'Perdue pick up' scene. The footage is in color but shares that earlier scene's video aesthetic, skewed angles, obscured images, low lighting courtesy of flashlights and headlights, and sense of surreptitiousness. The on-site dimly lit interview with Peña, with the arrests taking place behind him, enhances the immediacy of this sequence, which clearly has not been produced and re-circulated by a TV crew or worker's hidden camera. As the arrest continues into daylight hours and workers are shackled upon emerging from their trailer homes, Peña watches from the sidelines. 'These workers,' he says in voice-over, 'they've been here 10, 15 years, processing your bacon, your holiday ham, and now they're getting picked up like they're criminals, and these companies are making billions of dollars.'

If these images emphasize immediacy and on-the-spot journalism via color footage and an on-the-spot witness, for example, the last shot in the sequence returns us to the trace. As the arresting officers' SUVs drive away and Peña's powerless voice-over ends, the film cuts to an image of the pork-processing plants and the workers in question. It's a slow-motion image of workers doing exactly what Peña had described: stripping pork into slices of bacon for America's breakfasts. A title appears over the slow-motion image: 'Smithfield declined to be interviewed for this film.' This sequence enacts and provokes 'disgust'—as a temporal relation of turning-away and being-in-between—as something that exists neither here nor there, but in between a subject and object. Peña's use of the word 'your' gestures outside the film itself and to its viewers, addressing us even more directly than the film's own graphics and titles do. What's disgusting is not the death of an animal or a young boy, not the practices of an independent farmer or a corporation, not a consumer or a producer, but a set of practices and policies that bind consumers, workers, producers, products, and policy-makers together and, in fact, obliterates the categorical differences between them. As the film quotes farmer Joel Salatin, 'A culture that just uses a pig as a pile of protoplasmic inanimate structure, to be manipulated by whatever creative design the
human can foist on that critter, will probably view individuals within its community, and other cultures in the community of nations, with the same type of disdain and disrespect.’

Food, Inc. thus relies on the trace to undo not only the potential conflation of image and index, but also the boundaries between subject and object, consumer and producer, animal and human. It’s the trace that expresses our mutual imbrication, involvement, interconnectedness that the industry would seek to ‘disappear.’ Whereas some laudable activist documentaries relish and rely on the ‘in your face’ immediacy of documentary images, Food, Inc. succeeds instead by recruiting the ambivalent nature of the documentary image and disgust itself, neither of which are a matter of strict division between subject and object, but rather involve the movement between them.

I’d like to turn finally to two sequences that seem scarcely to qualify as ‘disgusting’ in any conventional sense. Shot in a brightly lit modern-day grocery store, these two moments are emblematic of the film’s tendency toward images that defer, dissociate, and delay so as to emphasize the ‘trace’ and express the mutual imbrication of production and consumption, animal and human, industry and consumer, and finally, business and bodies. Relatively early in the film, in a segment the film calls ‘Cornucopia,’ Michael Pollan argues that, wandering through our local grocery store, we see a cornucopia that is really anything but. What looks like a vast amount and variety of product is, he says, really the product of a limited number of companies and ingredients. He speaks over a series of leisurely forward-moving tracking shots through grocery aisles, each one smoothly overlapping the next, so that brightly colored boxes and bottles on each side of the frame dissolve into nearly identical shots with more brightly colored boxes and bottles, to reveal the homogeneity of which Pollan speaks. The last lap dissolve reveals the source to which Pollan traces all these products: ‘a cornfield in Iowa,’ where the camera travels forward along a dirt path that neatly bisects two corn rows, moving at the same speed it had moved through the store aisles. The composition, too, matches the polished grocery aisle to the dirt path as the images dissolve into one another, dramatically exaggerating the effect of the stark contrast between multi-colored shelves full of Cap’n Crunch and Hunt’s tomato sauce and the deep green landscape of the cornfield. In the continuities and contradictions between these two shots lies the reality that escapes either image alone: that of the limited number of producers and ingredients concealed beneath the image of a plethora of food products. The lap dissolve between garishly bountiful grocery shelves and the lush cornfield marks not the index but the trace of the production practices and marketing strategies—in short, the violence, deception, intimidation, and cruelty—that characterizes the relationship.
between them, and that constitutes the food industry as this grass roots documentary understands it.

In the final sequence of the film, we return to the produce section of the same grocery store. In a stable deep-focus shot that lasts only a few seconds, shoppers appear to flit and buzz like hummingbirds around attractive bins and baskets full of brightly colored fruits and vegetables. The human figures are indistinct blurs, their bodies artificially accelerated as they move among the still and sharply focused produce displays. I believe this shot is a composite image, but regardless of its status as either CGI or old-fashioned undercranking, the image points more explicitly than any other in the film to the time-lag that characterizes both documentary image and disgust. In the process, it points our attention to the disgusting traces of disgusting practices and policies that disappear beneath the illusion of healthful food and our wholesale purchase of both the food and the deception. The fruits and vegetables may be shiny and bright in this grocery store and the one in your neighborhood, but in moments like this, *Food, Inc.* encourages a kind of double-vision that brings both index and trace into view simultaneously, such that we might ‘turn away in revulsion’ as we consider the alternatives.
Bibliography


Filmography


