

## **Food Documentaries and Green Anxieties: Actively Promoting Environmental Literacy.**

A Case Study reading of *Food  
Inc.* (2008), *Cowspiracy* (2014) and *Our Daily  
Bread* (2005)

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*Our Daily Bread*, Nikolaus Geyrhalter, 2006 © AFC - Australian Films / KMBO

This paper will explore how popular and long established environmental documentaries through their use of direct address and creative aesthetics and imaginaries foreground a range of cautionary tales that speak to the environmental importance of food production, waste, and (over)consumption. The central problem for ethical food production is that it appears politically unacceptable to get across complex environmental and ethical messages around food security, much less that the global meat-based economy ought to shrink, while struggling to become more environmentally sustainable and reducing carbon-based energy sources for food production. Most citizens remain addicted to a form of 'affluenza', including unlimited wealth, affluence and expecting freely available cheap food, while embracing a more destructive form of conspicuous consumption that certainly does not stack up against the growing need for environmental

sustainability. Alternatively, calling for a resilient or frugal form of de-growth, involving a more holistically conceived, balanced and organic production-consumption model, remains both difficult to visualise, much less promote on film.

While one suspects the future will lie somewhere between such polarising extremes, Western lifestyles in particular will have to change and this can be assessed by a radical transformation of environmental literacy in helping to influence public perceptions and behaviour change around consumption and food waste. Some evidence of this transformation can be garnered from the growth of vegetarianism, organic farming and the slow food movement for example. Eco-film and media strategies have developed across a range of academic scholarly readers, which examine Hollywood fictional narratives and media generally through the lens of environmental debates while especially focusing on the spectre of climate change. This essay will draw on this scholarly preoccupation within mainstream documentary media, while presenting a close thematic and narrative analysis of three contrasting, even polemical eco-documentaries. All are chosen because of their apparent influence on mass audience viewers, as suggested by several studies. Environmental documentaries can play an important role in promoting a tipping point towards supporting a more sustainable, even organic mode of food production. But as will be demonstrated in this paper, some aesthetic and narrative strategies appear more successful than others in imagining this transformation. The contrasting documentaries all have different strengths, including incisive use of aesthetic strategies and audience appeal - from the relatively popular and successful *Food Inc.*, to the more experimental art-house poetic style of *Our Daily Bread*, together with *Cowspiracy* - with its first-person narration and immersive style that remains particularly appealing to many new generational citizens, who in turn recognise the environmental need to become vegetarian. All three are chosen because of their differing formats, from a polemical and preachy style, to a more subtle audience address, alongside more well established immersive modes of storytelling evident in *Cowspiracy*. All of these techniques can be called upon as a benchmark for ongoing textual environmental studies, together with more empirical audience studies which seek to illustrate the effectiveness of such audio-visual stimuli, all of which in turn serve to gauge and promote effective levels of environmental literacy and learning around food.

## ***Literature Review***

Foregrounding the importance of documentary films in speaking to an environmental food agenda, while teasing out how different aesthetic formats of factual filmmaking are co-opted for this project, remains the focus of recent scholarly analysis. Meanwhile, the food industry and for that matter the media and film industry in essence create their own synergies, while explicitly foreground the pleasures and inherent benefits of consumption. There are of course lots of powerful fictional films and more recently reality televisual shows and online environmental shorts that are explicitly concerned with food, including for example feature films

such as: *Chef* (2014); *Julie and Julia* (2009); *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1995); *Chocolat* (2001); *Babette's Feast* (1989). Yet all these fictional narratives, whether consciously or not, ignore agricultural policy and most certainly deny the labour issues that underlie the production of cheap industrialized food. Often purely fictional stories treat food as fashionable and exotic, even sublime and thereby help to erase the modes of reproduction that underlie our dominant production system, while supporting various forms of commodification that promote the fetishisation of food.

Furthermore, big budget Hollywood movies, even environmentally sensitive co-promotions such as *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009), surprisingly include partnerships with globally branded companies ranging from McDonalds to Panasonic, while for instance *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008) had financial connections with Burger King – as evidenced in the storyline and explicit product placement - being the first meal the super-hero has desires on, arriving back home to America. Branding integration with fast food and other consumer products has also been historically central to the *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* tent-pole franchises and is further recalled through the success of Spielberg's *ET: The Extra-terrestrial* (1982), among many other recent examples.

Stepping outside this bubble of a globalised consumer culture, incisive and critical documentaries are badly needed as a ballast to such sugar-coated analysis of food and can in turn remind audiences that agriculture is part of nature and culture, which further calls attention to a predominant underlying message and attitude embedded within the ongoing growth of environmental literacy. At its most basic, environmental literacy constantly draws clear connections between food production and consumption. Incidentally, publications like *Silent Spring* (Rachel Carson, 1962), *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (Wendell Berry, 1977), *The End of Nature* (Bill McKibben 1989), *Stolen Harvest* (Vandana Shiva 2000) and other seminal texts continue to influence the underlining drive of environmental documentaries, such as the ones explored in this paper, towards expressing the hopes and most importantly the fears and concerns of the sustainable agriculture movement.

As already suggested, mainstream fictional movies appear to mask out concrete representations of industrial modes of agriculture, with the food industry simply situated as supporting the maximizing of profits, by directing attention towards its well packaged end-products, rather than highlighting the often-unseemly means of procurement and production. Radical documentaries on the other hand, like those explored in this paper illustrate how eco-food solutions most effectively go back to basics, while exploring and dramatizing ways in which mainstream and big agriculture remains an intrinsic part of nature and of human consumption. [1]

## ***Food Security and Sovereignty***

Unfortunately, in the struggle to enhance profits, food companies tend to obscure, if not actively hide, direct links between the farm gate and the dining table. Yet it has to be continuously recognised that without a food safety net, 80% of the world's population are immediately at risk of hunger, recalling threats of natural disaster, war etc. The concept of food sovereignty challenges the dominance of agribusiness and the legitimacy of an unjust global trade system, while alternatively seeking to promote a counter-system of small-scale, localised agriculture, being a fairer solution to hunger, poverty and also towards actively addressing climate change. As a broad structuring narrative or master frame, food sovereignty posits clear ethical positions concerning land redistribution, the rights of women, resistance to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the defence of local economies. It is frequently suggested that structural inequalities are primarily responsible for food price hikes, violations of the rights of agricultural workers and the decline in the ability of states to protect their citizens' rights to food.

While fictional food films usually draw attention to such issues around food and culture from a more general perspective and tend to place greater emphasis on eating and drinking as 'an intellectual experience', food documentaries more actively foreground concerns about food security and emphasise that 'the act of consuming food is first and foremost a biological necessity'. The three case study documentaries examined in this paper are specifically chosen because they represent such primal tensions in varying ways.

## ***Slow Food Movement and Class Imbalance***

Contradictions are keenly apparent in the Slow Food movement for instance, through its predominant class and elitist dimension, which privilege the eating experience beyond primary sustenance for the body. This is affirmed by Carlo Perini, an Italian leftist, who argued that slow food came to be associated with the pleasure of eating, divorced from any social-political context. A one-time union organizer from the Piedmont region, this founding figure had come to realize that the slow food concept around the right to pleasure in eating had to be broadened to include, all those who had the right to such pleasure and thus not become divorced from specific socio-political contexts. [2] Echoing similar justice concerns with the environmental movement and not just being ascribed as being a preoccupation of the rich west wanting simply to conserve, now that they had created great wealth at the expense of over-exploiting their environment and their colonial neighbours throughout the world.

The valorisation of food grown ethically and locally is also connected with Aldo Leopold's long-established notion of the 'land ethic', as expanded by Wendell Berry and other environmental thinkers. Consequently, the distinction can be drawn

between industrial modes of agriculture, which view the land as a commodity value that simply foregrounds production-related inputs, as against a local or sustainable food perspective that sees the farmer primarily as a land steward, who fosters a deep agrarian ethos, in which land is closely connected to biological diversity and holistic ecosystems. This philosophy helps to promote a place-based perspective, which is keenly echoed across all three examples, while remaining more questioning of the farmer's role as being firmly situated as a key environmental agency and constituency within the overall community. [3]

Echoing modern societies apparent desire not to 'waste time' within production/consumption, food sourcing for many and especially those who can least afford 'good food' has become an exercise in acquiring the cheapest cuts, for quick consumption. Furthermore, because of the dominant economic imperative, this reality automatically favours the fast food industry, as demonised in documentaries like *Food Inc.* and to a lesser extent across the other two case studies. Alternatively, the slow food movement and the organic food business generally remains restricted to more environmentally aware citizens, who can comfortably afford such luxuries. Class-poverty remains a key barometer and divide across the environmental ethical debate, with the ever-present communications danger of simply preaching at those who cannot afford the luxury of good food. [4] This danger is constantly foregrounded, especially within the left-leaning food documentary format and serves as a cautionary tale when educating and teaching around various aspects of food production and consumption.

## ***Farming Development: From Organic to High Tech Food Production***

The current global factory farming production and marketing system, according to some reports, is generating a glut of cheap processed meats that is fuelling climate change, while at the same time feeding a pandemic of diet-related ill-health that is costing between 600 and 900 billion dollars a year in healthcare and related costs. All of the documentaries discussed in this paper, especially *Food Inc.* and *Cowspiracy* draw attention to these worrying trajectories in a very direct and emotive manner.

For instance, if people in developed countries simply ate no more than the recommended levels of meat, more than five million premature deaths could be avoided by 2050, according to Oxford researchers and they further calculate that a worldwide switch to a vegetarian diet would potentially save more than seven million lives. Consequently, progressive environmental food documentaries like *Cowspiracy*, and others explored in this paper, seek to actively promote vegetarianism and related forms of sustainable organic food production across all levels of society.

At the same time, as recently as 2014, the influential British Chatham House Think Tank found low public awareness of the true cost of such dietary choices. But as expected, 'consumers with a higher level of awareness were more likely to indicate willingness to reduce their meat and dairy consumption for climate objectives'. Closing what such researchers call this 'awareness gap', is a vital first step towards instigating behavioural food change. Researchers also note the 'sticking paucity of efforts' to help reign in global food consumption and further suggest that governments and environmental groups have been 'reluctant to pursue policies or campaigns to shift consumer behaviour'. The reason seems to be fear of backlash, principally from powerful interest groups, as specifically dramatized in *Cowspiracy*. This worry is acutely evident in America and other Western countries, where food policy is shaped primarily by the agri-industrial lobby. [5]

But, on the other hand, can organic farming alongside sustainable fishing for that matter actually feed the world? This remains an overly crude hypothesis and simply presents a binary framing of apparently alternative global production possibilities. There was of course a time when all farming was organic, with fertilizer primarily made up of compost and organic material. Fields were periodically left fallow (unfarmed) to recover soil moisture and nutrients and crops were historically rotated to prevent nutrient exhaustion [6] and most notably pesticides were non-existent. Farmers however in this pre-chemical fertilizer period remained at the mercy of periodic droughts (despite irrigation) and insect infestations. As populations grew, so did the demand for more food, which in turn led to more large-scale farming methods being developed and normalised. More recently synthetic pesticides, beginning with DDT came into use during the 1940s and 50s and this in turn sparked off the contemporary environmental movement.

Somewhat counter-intuitively however, it is at times insinuated by food experts that organic does not automatically equal 'safe'. Africa's and India's crisis in food production for example, described as the global battle with hunger, is largely rooted in a 'soil-health crisis' with new technological methods constantly needed to feed growing populations. Meanwhile, proponents of organic farming of course argue that this strategy is exacerbating the crisis. Nonetheless, it must be recognised there are a myriad of variables affecting overall production levels as further suggested by the documentaries under discussion. [7]

Organically grown crops on average use 25% less energy than their chemical cousins. [8] By privileging more organic grasses and sustainable methods of production, the major danger of intense farming affecting climate change can be at least partially kept in check. This remains the underpinning philosophy of several of these alternative food documentaries. Most notably, greater efforts need to be expended in off-setting the fact that agriculture remains the most water intensive industry on the planet, consuming a staggering 72% of all global freshwater, at a

time when the UN says 80% of our water supplies are being over-exploited. The related pillars of food sustainability and environmental security, coupled with global behavioural change remains a major challenge for all human societies, educationalists and environmental literacy programs in speaking to mass audiences. Some of these complex debates will be analysed using these documentaries as case studies.

## ***The Power of Documentary Storytelling: [Food, Inc.](#)***

[Food, Inc.](#) effectively draws on the investigative scholarship of Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation* and Michael Pollan's books *An Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural history of Four Meals* (2007), as well as *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (2009). As David Denby noted in *The New Yorker*, [Food Inc.](#) is 'an angry blast of disgust aimed at the American food industry'. Yet at the same time it speaks to mainstream audiences across the world and the film successfully [9] 'steers clear of animal liberation arguments, while pushing for a return to grass-fed, hormone-free meat production'.

Interestingly, the powerful food industry's public high-profile campaign against [Food Inc.](#) remains just the sort of response Hollywood usually aims to avoid. Monsanto, one of the largest agri-food companies in the world still maintains a link in its corporate website to critiques of the film, displaying material designed to discredit arguments set up in [Food Inc.](#) The website reiterates Monsanto's position that criticism of the company's practices essentially constitutes criticism of America's hard-working farmers. It also emphasizes that biotechnology and high-input agriculture are the only real solutions to global demands for food. [10]

Such a globally influential documentary remains a thorny problem for the conventional food industry, because it efficiently articulates that consumer society's drive towards inexpensive food has 'a hidden price tag that takes an enormous toll on our environment, our health, and our society'. Rather than focus attention on the ease and pleasure of consumption, as evident in many fictional food films, the documentary alternatively examines food as 'a health issue, an environmental issue [and as] a human rights issue'. With the documentary's explicitly critical view of the industrial food system stretching from procurement to disposal, it dramatically shows that the rising cost of health care and disaster relief are related to 'the way Americans produce and consume food'. [11]

[Food Inc.](#) effectively promotes its critical environmental and educational agenda by also using archival audio-visual footage which provides a historical overview of farming and food purchasing changes from World War Two to the present. According to the narrator, a 'deliberate veil' has been constructed between food and its source. In reality, of course in spite of advertising a sanitised form of homogenous factory farming, food is seen as being produced within very large industrial units and is represented as coming from 'enormous assembly lines,

where both animals and workers are abused'. With the assistance of contrasting images and montages of these factory farms, interviews and voice-over narration, *Food Inc.* effectively demonstrates how big corporations control all aspects of food production, from seed to final distribution into the supermarket.

Nevertheless, some critics point out that the documentary's assertions are weakened, not only because of an over-reliance on the authority of a narrator, (unlike, at another extreme, *Our Daily Bread*, which is set up as a counterpoint aesthetic to such political documentaries that often suffer from a lack of balance), but also because the documentary argues its points from single examples, with no hint of contestation and that in turn remains unsubstantiated throughout the narrative.

Most certainly one could agree that *Food Inc.* 'is meant to be an opening salvo that gets people's attention, not the battle that wins the war'. [12] The high pitched (propagandistic) documentary format further includes individual examples of cattle production and corn production, before offering an alternative. The solution of course demands organically grown food that is presumably meant to also 'help viewers reminisce nostalgically about a pastoral past now out of our grasp'. [13]

The opening shot of the documentary for instance frames us as an audience flying above a 'bucolic cornfield bathed in soft, warm light. We see exaggerated bright green grass and glowing amber of corn and then cut to images of a friendly red tractor and the quintessential mythic cowboy on a horse, pictured in long shot behind his happily grazing cattle'. Some critics and environmental media scholars could argue that such aesthetics can in turn serve as a form of greenwashing, by the way it promotes a one-dimensional romantic image of early modes of farming and representations of the landscape. While on the voice-over, the narrator highlights that our food system has changed and is been transformed from such mythical pastoral scenes, which are in turn juxtaposed with images of conventional supermarket shelves and clinical factory methods of farming.

The voice-over adds that it will lift the 'curtain that's dropped between us and the food we eat, and how the industry doesn't want us to know the truth about where our food comes from, because if we did, we might not want to eat it'. Such direct and overtly constructed scare tactics are common place within such polemical documentaries.

Following numerous interviews, documentary footage and animated sequences, the film divides into chapters that focus on different but related and contentious problems: diabetes and obesity; food borne illness; factory farming; genetic engineering; farm worker protection; pesticides; cloning; environmental impact and the global food crisis etc. Probably too many areas to cover adequately, but nonetheless attests to its broad pedagogical approach that in turn feeds into a



constant first principle of environmental and educational literacy, namely that 'everything is connected'.

Overall the documentary attempts to engage audiences emotionally (albeit not as effectively as in *Cowspiracy*) by showing deeply personal stories, pointing out the vested interests of power brokers in maintaining the status quo, and unearthing ownership patterns and decisions that determine what eventually lands on our plates. We see food from both the broader perspective of institutions (the power that companies like Monsanto and others hold; recalling the implications of policy decisions) as well as foregrounding individual stories, such as highlighting the challenge of poor families struggling with diabetes – juxtaposed with important and pertinent facts – all of which ensures the narrative packs a powerful and emotional punch for mass audiences everywhere.

The finale presents a call to active environmental citizenship. While the soundtrack plays Bruce Springsteen's 'This land is your land'; statements flash up on the screen telling us how we can rise up and demand systemic change. Audiences are actively encouraged to buy organic, to know what is in our food and to choose seasonal produce that is more sustainable and thereby avoids waste. These are all considered useful pedagogical strategies to actively engage audiences in the message of the text. Audiences are continually reminded for instance that the average meal travels 1500 miles from the farm to the final supermarket and encourages consumers to be more selective in our eating and consumption habits.

However, uncovering how successful such powerful documentaries like *Food Inc.* are in promoting or achieving behavioural change, as well as facilitating active food citizenship, remains an ongoing scholarly challenge. Journalist reviews at least appear to be generally positive with regards to the intrinsic power of such provocative texts. For instance, John Anderson of *Variety* asserts that *Food Inc.* 'does for the supermarket what *Jaws* did for the beach – marches straight into the dark side of cut-throat agri-business, corporatized meat and the greedy manipulations of both genetics and the law'. Meanwhile, environmental film scholars are somewhat less optimistic or encouraging regarding the potential educational power and influence of such strident documentaries. [14]

More apparently progressive and immersive modes of documentary filmmaking, like that displayed in *Cowspiracy* represent a significant change and a growing tendency within public discourse towards the inclusion of local opinion, not only as a means to depict the realities of individual lives, but also to demonstrate the articulate the voice of the people involved in all aspects of the economy. Consequently, this strategy can appear more successful in promoting effective new forms of environmental literacy.

## *Cowspiracy: New Generational Rhetorical Strategies*

Produced by celebrity environmental actor [Leonardo DiCaprio](#), *Cowspiracy* also speaks directly to the food industry and effectively uses the conspiracy fictional format, which has a growing appeal especially for a new generation of audiences. [15] Most notably the documentary uncovers the ‘most destructive industry facing the planet today’ and ‘investigates why the world’s leading environmental organizations are too afraid to talk about it’. This shocking, yet often humorous documentary reveals the absolutely devastating environmental impact large-scale factory farming has on our planet and in sowing the seeds of a potentially dangerous environmental and ecological disaster. But it presents this shocking story, I would suggest in a more engaging manner at times than *Food Inc.*

As already mentioned animal agriculture is the leading cause of deforestation, water consumption and pollution, while being responsible for more greenhouse gasses than even the transport industry and this remains a primary driver of rampant destruction, species extinction, habitat loss, topsoil erosion, ocean ‘dead zones’ etc. Nevertheless, these global worries and environmental fears apparently remain entirely unchallenged across the public sphere and mass media in particular. Naturally therefore the documentary quickly gets audiences on its side.

*Cowspiracy* suggests animal agriculture is responsible for between 18 and 51% of greenhouse gas emissions and the author and narrator [Kip Andersen](#) is shown to have tears in his eyes watching animals being slaughtered. The film’s framing at the same time appears more positive than *Food Inc.*, creating an uplifting, action-oriented message, promoting self-efficacy in bringing about change, which left one reviewer feeling optimistic. ‘As well as supporting self-efficacy’, which is important for action, the film ‘affirmed rather than threatening my sense of self and basic worldview’. Such a strategy has been shown by psychological and behavioural studies to ‘create greater openness to risk information’. The documentary further employs a positive affective register, or what Leiserowitz calls an ‘affect heuristic – an orienting mechanism that allows people to navigate quickly and efficiently through a complex, uncertain and sometimes dangerous world, by drawing on positive and negative feelings associated with particular risks’.

The release of a solitary chicken from the slaughter house for example is framed as the pivotal moment in the documentary, where [Andersen's](#) personal journey as a consumer meets his investigative journey as a filmmaker. [16] ‘We hear [Andersen](#) say that if he cannot bear witness himself to the slaughter of animals for consumption, even in this presumably less environmentally damaged backyard farm [and] that he cannot contribute to any form of animal agricultural practices’ for instance. This pivotal moment, dramatically breaks up the divide between individual/environment, by collapsing the rationality/affect boundary – which is also arbitrarily defined as anthropogenic – as [Andersen](#) emphasizes the core message of the film’s exposure of violence against both the planet and animals.

'If you care about maintaining the planet's boundaries within safe limits, you must go vegan'.

Commenting on the dangers of speaking out, even one might argue preaching (like in *Food Inc.*), as expressed by some protagonists in the film; they go on to assert, 'you are putting your neck on the chopping block' talking about it. Consequently, such ongoing debates about food become so incendiary, they almost feel like recalling another toxic subject such as nuclear energy, or even at a stretch the global challenge of facing up to the illegal drug industry. But of course, food has always been a huge concern for stakeholders concerned with environmentalism and has most definitely become a touchstone for new generational activism. At the same time, it is difficult to build a responsible consensus involving a set of consistent core values which underpin an environmental educational agenda. Strategies involving simply scaring audiences with fears around big business dictating non-environmental policies remains rampant within several provocative food documentaries. Some critics even go so far as to acknowledge their fundamentalist environmental pedigree in adapting this polemical strategy. As also evident within the ubiquitous YouTube industry around the proliferation of food documentaries, such forms of address need to be examined in detail to tease out how educational and effective such online media spin-offs are, with a broad-ranging viewership. [17] Audience research scholarship is badly needed to evaluate how successful all forms of mainstream (conventional) mass media outlets are in foregrounding sustained pro-environmental attitudinal and even promoting behavior change, many of which feature a number of specialists and food celebrities (including Richard Oppenlander, Michael Pollan, Will Tuttle, Howard Lyman).

In any case within environmental textual studies, much work is still needed to tease out the relative importance of more established mainstream documentaries like *Food Inc.* or *Cowspiracy* and unpick their use of celebrities and professional experts in building new audiences, while at the same time ensuring environmental messages are effectively transmitted and received. [18] All of this media exposure appears to signal ongoing transformation and the setting up of possible tipping points for marketing the effectiveness of such audio-visual stimuli and recording their power to stimulate a range of environmental literacy protocols. This can hopefully help towards supporting transformational food consumption practices through radical behavioural change. At the same time, more cautious scholars believe this is expecting too much from mainstream documentaries and turn to artistic and less preachy food documentaries for such results. Unfortunately, there appears to be less innovative experimentation than might be expected, as we have to go back as far as 2005 and an Austrian film maker for textual evidence of more innovative aesthetic interventions, as suggested by a number of environmental communication scholars.

## ***Our Daily Bread: Innovative Aesthetics for the Future***

Reflecting on the ambiguity of contemporary responses to changing landscapes and food production, one of the first great documentary filmmaker to engage in this process is [Nikolaus Geyrhalter](#), who began his documentary career with *Pripyat* (1999) about the no-go-area around Chernobyl and followed this up with a wordless evocative study of industrial farming, titled *Our Daily Bread* from 2005. Most commentators complement the ways in which this documentary implicates the viewer into the worlds' represented, by allowing time to think about the images and by refraining from occupying the space for thought and feeling with unnecessary commentary, dialogue and music, unlike most mainstream documentaries which bombard viewers with rhetorical and polemical messages. His representation of farming and landscapes in particular, are profoundly changed by technology and the actions of human society and the contemplation of them suggests the need for material change.

The director can be compared with his contemporary Austrian filmmaker [Erwin Wagenhofer](#) and his film "*We Feed the World*" (2005), which is also reminiscent of *Food Inc.* For instance, it has a final section which includes an interview with the managing director of Nestle, who robustly defends intensive farming, pointing out the lack of evidence that genetically modified food is harmful to human health and furthermore insinuates that the idea of a public right to water remains an extreme view. Certainly, such right-wing views are very different to environmental activists' belief in the global commons and the need to maintain long term sustainable and balanced land husbandry.

These two very contrasting Austrian documentaries effectively bring this contemporary world and work of agriculture into the public sphere, as a normal and necessary part of the global economy. Showing how the realities of the mass production of food may have very different outcomes. Perhaps the images will be absorbed into the society of the spectacle and accepted as part of the cycle of production and consumption. As part of the pro-filmic production of documentary films, the images have already become commodities after all, but unlike the polemical address of *Food Inc.* or to a lesser extent *Cowspiracy*, reflexive contemplation across the varying environmental issues may hopefully encourage more active and critical engagement as part of an educational and literacy program.

*Our Daily Bread* focuses on the latest industrial forms of agriculture production, while contemplation of the landscape creates a sense of cognitive dissonance through the economic conflict set up between the benefits of modern factory farming, as against the clearly visible and detrimental effects on landscapes as well as on working practice. Such artistic documentaries raise awareness through spectacle rather than verbal rhetoric and hyperbole, which in turn serves to close down active engagement with the complexity of the debates presented. Instead

such narrative tropes help set up the pervasive demand to revise beliefs about the resilience of the natural world to withstand the impacts of human civilisation and its intensive agricultural methods.

Scholars appear to suggest that *Our Daily Bread* comes closest to capturing the three-dimensional 'truth' of food production and consumption, offering fragmented observations that closely replicate the segmented process of industrial food production, effectively revealing its consequences to human and non-human nature, because the intermediary veil of direct cinema has been lifted. 'It provides a nostalgic view of traditional farming methods as a contrast to industrial methods currently employed in Europe'; without background sounds and voices to support its visual rhetoric - the avant garde rhetorical documentary 'relies exclusively on visual rhetoric'.

The documentary nonetheless makes both the reality and the romantic myth of the pastoral transparent, without diluting the powerful visible rhetoric on display. Manohla Dargis further highlights this aspect in her *New York Times* review (24/11/2006) and demonstrates how the wordless documentary uses 'cool deliberation, showing rather than telling through the long tracking shots'. Meanwhile, Leslie Felperin of *Variety* (23/12/2005) foregrounds *Our Daily Bread's* visual rhetoric with its 'precisely composed lensing and painstaking sound [which] create moments of sublime beauty, even when showing the production-line slaughter of animals'. In this mechanised world, which *Food Inc.* also captures, but here not just the animals, the human workers are also portrayed as alienated, unable to escape the sounds of machinery that accompanies even their lunch breaks. [19] But of course as with all experimental and avant garde film making, one has to question if mainstream audiences are actually viewing such (difficult) semiosis, or is it only speaking to the converted and those who already have a high degree of environmental literacy.

The opening sequence reminds me of the highly stylised film drama *Hunger* (McQueen 2008) which depicted the political prisoner and martyred hunger striker Bobby Sands from the political conflicts of Northern Ireland. Both films spend significant screen time observing a worker cleaning the ground and sweeping impure liquids away – alternatively human and animal. But through the mise-en-scene in *Our Daily Bread*, audiences observe displays of rows upon rows of dead animal carcasses in a huge warehouse. This sense of routine time passing, while evoking large industrial spaces, echo across all forms of factory farming; from chickens and cattle to even hot-housed vegetable production. At one stage, audiences observe a solitary worker donning full body protection including breathing apparatus, as he proceeds to spray chemicals across large swaths of glass-housed plants. Environmental worries relayed in Rachel Carson's 1960s classic *Silent Spring* come to mind. A follow-on sequence counterpoints this scenario, with a shirtless man picking the fruits from the plants for human consumption.

The repetitive nature of such factory work and the isolation of workers is dramatized, as audiences constantly witness them consuming food on their own or smoking a cigarette during a solitary work-break. Otherwise, the workers seem to have nothing else to relieve their boredom. For the general viewer however, audiences instinctively expect background music and a controlling voice-over, or alternatively at least dramatic interviews to frame a consistent meaning and help bridge the interpretation process for the reader. While of course, film scholars seeking new generic aesthetics and developing a more nuanced form of media literacy and engagement, admire the openness of the narrative and the prosumer's capability to make up their own mind and interpretation, as the images spill into each other without any driving or coherent storyline. By all accounts the albeit opaque message incorporates a pervasive critique of the Fordist model of mass production, while foregrounding an overall lack of concern for any long-term resolution with regards to sustainable environmental issues. All that matters in this form of agribusiness is the bottom line of mass production and constantly enforcing reduced costs. Consequently, a more reflexive aesthetic model of film making is privileged, rather than the shrill montage exposition and preaching of *Food Inc.* or even recalling the more inclusive immersive storytelling model evident in *Cowspiracy*. Nonetheless, this paper argues that because of audience interests and varying levels of literacy, *both* polarising forms of documentary expression and more besides are necessary to help promote environmental food literacy and most importantly encourage behavioural change across a broad range of audiences, while tapping into inter-generational taste cultures.

## ***Concluding Remarks***

The toxic materiality of the eco-documentary, according to Helen Hughes in her provocative *Green Documentary* monograph, is a matter of a complex network of social and material effects, involving not only the immediate material of the DVD or film strip, but also the design and mass manufacture of technology, travel and transportation, land use and most importantly accessibility. As already insinuated, *we* need all types of food documentaries; from the shrill polemical varieties to the more immersive first-person narration, alongside the more nuanced avant garde and much else besides, to help in the struggle towards activating environmental engagement and helping to develop new forms of food literacy.

Environmental awareness, as defined by Kollmuss and Agyeman, includes simply 'knowing of the impact of human behaviour on the environment', and serves as the goal of many different kinds of activity concerned with education about human impact on the environment, including food consumption. [20] However, according to such research, one of the earliest findings of environmental behaviour research in the 1970s was that knowledge and awareness is not sufficient in itself to lead to radical changes in behaviour. Yet

most environmental non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) - and one could add food sustainability documentary approaches alluded to above - 'still base their communication campaigns and strategies on the simplistic assumption that more knowledge will lead to more enlightened behaviour'. Through ongoing psychological and behavioural studies in the media, this has been shown however not to be the case. There is no magic bullet towards communicating environmental literacy, while using one particular or privileged documentary aesthetic.

For instance, Greg Mitman talks of a contemporary 'green wave' of film and television, facilitated by a popular penchant for 'eco-chic' that is underpinned not only by commercial imperatives, but also by counter-balancing ethical and environmental concerns. Mitman notes that of the 631 million in gross revenues earned by 275 documentaries released between 2002 and 2006, 163 million came from eight wildlife and natural documentaries. In trying to speak to large uncommitted audiences, environmental food documentaries can learn a lot from the broad-ranging pleasures and aesthetic protocols set up within more mainstream nature documentaries, alongside other related fictionalised environmental narrative formats.

All the while threats to the food supply chain represent a cogent and visceral concern for us all - especially as food speaks so vividly to both short and long term human needs and related manifestations of global environmental transformation. The search for food amidst a world of scarcity remains a frequent motif for instance within numerous post-apocalyptic science fiction fantasies, alongside being directly foregrounded inside the documentaries discussed in this paper. [21]

By any measure, food remains one of the most important attributes, triggers and barometers of environmental ethics and literacy, as consumers are directly implicated in maintaining food prices as low as possible, to help maximize competitive productivity and even some argue to maintain long-term sustainability. While deep tensions between factory farming, as opposed to more organic forms of (slow) food production speak directly to a broad range of environmental and ethical tension and agendas, all of these have huge implications for day-to-day living for humans across the world. With expedient growing populations and increasing demands for corrective economical models for increased food production, there are grave dangers involved with un-regulated systems of food production, distribution and consumption.

Such developments for instance, do not take into account the long-term 'common good' of society in general, much less recognize further concerns around for example the Precautionary Principle. As evident since Rachel Carson's seminal and prototypical literary text *Silent Spring*, once a direct health concern is raised - making a clear connection between pesticide and the human food chain for instance - then such concerns have to be urgently addressed. More recently, worries over the safety of food has reached a tipping point and has spiralled into

ongoing risk-debates around GM-food and what is deemed as acceptable practice; much less taking into account what is natural or normative with regards to mass produced factory food production, security and consumption.

Appealing to public interests concerning the quality of food can serve as a useful bridge between cultures, including those that appear to place a more holistic value on good quality organic food and those like America that seems to privilege the economic bottom line. Related forms of environmental food literacy projected onto the inter-related spectre of climate change remains an ongoing big picture concern for all forms of media representations, as explored by environmental communicators. Certainly, the lack of environmental literacy and clear discursive practices of communication around food stands out as a pervasive danger and risk. Documentaries continue to have an important part to play in the targeted communications agenda around exposing environmental issues to mass audiences. However, in striving to find new ways to address audiences, documentary formats alongside fictional narratives, need to provoke more open engagement and adopt new aesthetic strategies that hopefully can succeed by cross-connecting with other forms of new media, while speaking to evolving food debates and related environmental concerns. The three documentaries explored in this paper have been shown to be exemplary in teaching environmental food literacy. However much more creative imaginaries are needed in the future to connect with new generational audiences.

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The original text was published in *French Journal for Media Research*, « Le web 2.0 : lieux de perception des transformation des sociétés », 10/2018

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## Notes

[1] *The Corporation* is one of the most economically successful documentaries to detail problems in the food industry, yet the film made only 3m at the box office. While *Flow* only raised 142,569 gross in US market, *King Korn* 105,422 dollars etc... [www.BoxOfficeMojo.com](http://www.BoxOfficeMojo.com). See also top 20 Documentaries and box office receipts up to 2012 which include: March of the Penguins (2005) at number 2 with 77m; Earth (2009) at number 5 with 32m and *An Inconvenient Truth* number 9 with 24m... down to number 17 with *Super-Size Me* (2004) at 12m. (Baron et al. 2014: 185).

[2] This concern about equity and essentially speaking to a class bias, led him and others to add 'Fair' to the slow food slogans of 'good' and 'clean', emphasising that the food should be grown sustainably.

[3] By all these measures, a Farmer's Market meet all the criteria – food grown locally; tastes good, fair food- purveyed in a consistent manner with the food justice framework, and clean food as it is grown sustainably.

[4] Nonetheless, food not 'only shapes our bodies, but it structures our lives, fashion daily rituals and helps to mark significant rites of passage. Food connects us to others – both directly, through shared meals, and culturally, through shared tastes' (See Retzinger et al 2008).

[5] For instance, high-tech alternatives to meat, such as the approach of 'Beyond Meat' by the US food company backed by Bill Gates is emerging as possible solutions to the problem. This is activated by using plant-based ingredients to closely mimic the taste, texture and smells that make meat so alluring, while apparently setting out to trim the health effects and global environmental havoc that our ancient carnal predilections are now wrecking.

[6] See for instance John Norman Foster's critique of post-colonial land abuse and the so-called 'metabolic rift'.

[7] Experts, like Ed Hammer and Mark Anslow remain more positive regarding the overall benefits of organic farming, while asserting in *The Ecologist* from January 3rd, 2008 that we all need to cut down on meat consumption in particular to help normalise the average consumption of one and a half pounds per person per week (43-6).

[8] And organic farming can even help salvage the poor cow, which has been deamonised as a major source of methane emissions.

[9] While for example *Supersize Me* (2004) took a massive box office revenue of 11.5m, *Food Inc.* by 2009 had taken over 4.5 million. Unfortunately, the other two documentaries explored in this paper did not reach the top 100 earners in the box office charts but are available on Netflix and online for new genre audiences to find. While in the iMDB best food documentaries *Our Daily Bread* is rated number 11, with *Cowspiracy* at 71. (June 2018)

[10] For an overview of Monsanto's latest position regarding the documentary see [its website](#) (accessed June 3rd 2018 where it justifies its patenting of GMO seeds etc for the betterment of farming in general).

[11] All of this comes out of the basic premise of the documentary, being bounded by that notion that consumers have 'the right to know what's in their food' (Amato and Hamid), contrary to the food and film industry's modus operandi.

[12] According to Andrew O'Hehir (2009) from the online magazine/website [Salon.com](#), 'the food-activism movement in 2009 is roughly where the environment movement was in 1970.'

[13] Nonetheless, *Food Inc.* adapts an anthropocentric perspective on food that relegates environmental issues into peripheral status, which of course is the norm in the USA and elsewhere. The film's style by all accounts remains highly effective due to its high production values and its narrative structure is engaging and entertaining.

[14] As already suggested, Murray and Heumann suggest that while *Food Inc.* provides a plethora of information about industrialised farming and argues from a clear position, its

message is weakened by 'both its nostalgic vision and by the rhetorical strategies the film-maker choose to employ' (2012: 49).

[15] See *The Sustainability Secret* produced by Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn : <[www.cowspiracy.com](http://www.cowspiracy.com)> - short promo to examine its potency.

[16] In *The Transmission of Affect*, Brennan (2003: 14) points out there is no secure distinction between the 'individual' and the 'environment' which many food documentaries find it difficult to tease out.

[17] This also includes for instance the use of food apps and even prototypical online games etc.

[18] Anecdotally, colleagues have talked how their children have been dramatically affected by such documentaries in recognizing the long-term environmental dangers of industrial food production and of them being willing to radically change their life styles and food consumption patterns as a result.

[19] Death is clean in the factory farm, the film shows us, and workers are cold and distant, consuming food they prepare and seemingly oblivious to the unnatural state of the food production process (Murray and Heumann, 2012: 56).

[20] A further goal of environmental education is the promotion of pro-environmental behaviour that as Kollmuss and Agyeman put it in their survey of approaches to the subject, means 'behaviour that consciously seeks to minimize the negative impact of one's actions on the natural and built world (e.g. minimize resource and energy consumption, use of non-toxic substances, reduce waste production)' (2002: 240).

[21] When hunger takes a literal rather than a metaphorical form, it propels actions that serve to define what it is to be human – or to be inhuman. Food and water scarcity leads both to brutality and kindness in science fiction films such as *The Omega Man* (1971), *Mad Max 2* (1982) etc.