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Food Inc. : A Rhetorical Analysis

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Mrs. Armstrong

AP Language

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Food Inc. : A Rhetorical Analysis

Food Inc., a documentary film produced by Robert Kenner and based on Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation*, is designed to inform the American people of the food industry's sinister side. The film paints the food industry in a more realistic light than the advertised and perceived image of an "Agrarian America." *Food Inc.* not only uses compelling images, such as hundreds of baby chickens being raised in spaces no larger than a desk drawer, but also includes the voices and stories of farmers, businessmen and women, government officials, and victims of the food industry. As the film is being played, the audience sees the horrors and immorality of the food industry, feels disgust towards the unethical greed for wealth over safety of customers, shares in the helplessness of oppressed farmers, workers, and animals, finally feeling a sense of hope at the end where the film tells the audience they can vote for safer, better foods with what they decide to buy. *Food Inc.* effectively intertwines visual elements along with commentary, forging an ominous and foreboding image of the food industry that is furthered by its audio track and expert testimonies, creating a potent warning to the American consumer of the darker side within the food industry.

In the opening moments of the film, images of corn and wheat fields spanning acres of land, along with a cattle rancher riding his horse among a magnificent grassy landscape surrounded by trees, are presented to the audience. Narrating over these

images, Eric Schlosser states that “the way we eat has changed more in the last 50 years, than in the previous 10,000, but the image that is used to sell the food is still the imagery of agrarian America.” It then transitions to a factory floor with thousands of headless, featherless, dead, chickens that are being placed on a conveyer belt by African American workers. Schlosser then states that the food industry has become more dangerous and both “animals and workers are [now] being abused.” The title of the film is then shown in front of a background of gloomy dark clouds being spewed out of a dismal factory, juxtaposed next to the capitol building. This ominous image is furthered by the statement, “This isn’t just about what we’re eating, this is about: what we’re allowed to say, what we’re allowed to know. It’s not just our health that’s at risk.” The shift between the perceived reality and current reality of the food industry shocks the audience into questioning the integrity of their food providers. The common icon of farmers and ranchers working the land they own to provide food at a local grocery store is shattered by the image of an industrialized meat packing plant where thousands of chickens are hung and transported on conveyor belts. Images, such as those previously stated, reinforce the reality of the way food is now cultivated, appealing to logos in the process by drawing connections between what used to be farming and what is now “farming”. Although the abuse of animals and workers is not shown, it is implied through the bleak environment they share in the factory. This appeals to pathos by eliciting feelings of bitterness and irritation at the inhumane treatment of people and animals. The final gloomy image of the capitol building placed next to infernal looking factories with phrases that hint at the infringement upon the audience’s right of free speech and knowledge, darkens the portrayal of the food industry and places it in a sinister light.

The juxtaposition of the capitol building next to the factories evokes feelings of fear and outrage as it implies the corruption of government by the food industry; thereby appealing to pathos. The visual elements laced with commentary allow *Food Inc.* to paint the corrupted side of the food industry with a finer brush. This better informs the American people of the hidden world that is behind the curtain of the food industry.

Another rhetorical strategy that *Food Inc.* uses is background music. Throughout the entirety of the film, music is used to set the mood. In the beginning, while the camera pans around a grocery store, mysterious and dissonant stringed instruments play in a minor key behind Schlosser's commentary. In another scene, music creates an uplifting mood as a guitar plays upbeat music in the background of positive change happening within the food industry (mainly about the company Stonyfield). Music is not only used to set the mood, but also foreshadows the purpose of the following scene by creating an appropriate upbeat or foreboding atmosphere. Before any commentary is made, the audience can already infer the tone of the following image through the music being played. Music therefore plays an important role in setting the ambiance of different scenes within *Food Inc.*, allowing the film to connect to the audience on an emotional level and better convey its point.

In addition to music and visual aids, testimonies of the people victimized by the food industry are used to establish ethos and appeal to pathos as they retell their stories. Carole Morison, who was a chicken farmer for Perdue, recounts her story of the oppression that was exercised upon her. As she tells of the unsanitary mass production used by all farmers working for a multi-national food corporation to raise chickens, the audience is shown images of a crowded poultry house filled with dust and barely any

sunlight. Carole then states that the companies keep farmers under their thumb by threatening a loss of contract if they don't do what they say. Therefore, farmers have to succumb to the corporation's demand of upgrading their farming equipment, putting the farmers further and further in debt. Another testimony by a woman who was never named, speaks of the story of her two year old son, Kevin, who died of hemorrhagic e-coli. To add insult to injury, it took her attorney two to three years to find out that her family matched a meat recall. To further shock the audience, the USDA had actually passed a law stating the companies needed to test for e-coli and salmonella. Repeated failures of passing the test would result in the plant being shut down. However, the law was overturned in court and basically stated that the USDA had no authority to shut the plant down. In direct response to this court case, a new law, which became known as Kevin's law, was introduced to give the USDA back its authority to shut down plants that continuously produced contaminated meat. No action has been taken to pass this law. These testimonies given by the victims of the food industry cause the audience to connect and empathize with the victims by thinking of the potential consequences that could happen to their own families. The testimonies also allow the message of *Food Inc.* to establish ethos by providing real examples and stories of those who have been affected by the careless and impersonal attitudes of the food industry. Furthermore, after each interview of an exploited farmer or a denunciation of a large company (such as Tyson or Perdue), words on the screen appear saying that the company mentioned has "declined to be interviewed for this film", reinforcing the victim's story by causing the audience to question why the company wouldn't want to defend their case. Testimonies

from people affected by the food industry helps *Food Inc.* create a more personal atmosphere, better relating to American food consumers.

The use of rhetorical strategies to convey the horrors of the food industry essentially leaves the audience in a feeling of powerlessness. The corruption and power the industry has achieved brings about a sense of gloom and hopelessness that is only comparable to defeat. However, the prospect of the people's influence is not lost. In fact, the film conveys a message of hope at the end through the power of purchasing. Each time a person buys an item from the grocery store, they are voting for the way that food was produced. If enough people use their power of purchasing to combat the evils of the industry, they can influence and even change the way food is produced. Ultimately, in the words of John F. Kennedy: "United, there is little we cannot do".