The Story of Food

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Teresa Bensel

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Senior Comprehensive Board Members:

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Professor Sue Buck

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Professor River Branch

Pledge

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Teresa Bensel

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ART 620

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Artist's Statement

The title *The Story of Food* is not attempting to conceal the subject matter my film explores— food (more specifically the ethics of eating) and the nature of storytelling. In fact, my hope going into the scriptwriting and shooting processes was to conceal as little as possible. With that in mind, I was inspired by contemporary filmmaking techniques, most notably self-reflexive methods, which place the act of storytelling at the forefront of viewer consciousness. As opposed to "getting lost" in my film, I encourage you to question the very threads that create my narrative. Instead of leaving with a clear take-home message, I hope you may leave thinking about the narratives (and calories), whether good or bad or undecided, that compose and nourish your own life. I do not believe the absence of a clear message should dispirit, but empower. Similar to the play of the cooking process, one always has the ability to doubt, believe, and create. Hopefully, you will be reassured that some "recipes" are worth discovering, or holding on to—and taste even better when shared with others.

Introduction

"Food is the one central thing about human experience that can open both our senses and our conscience to our place in the world." –Alice Walters (Lappé 37)

Before even writing a script, my proposal relayed two major themes I hoped to communicate, which are still apparent in my final product: food (the ethics of what we eat), and the nature of storytelling. While there were of course many changes and surprises in the development of my work throughout the semester, I believe I have stayed true to my initial desires. My reasoning for choosing the film medium, both this semester and as a general passion in life, is embodied in the concept of voice. As a filmmaker, I truly believe in the power of storytelling. In contemporary society, storytelling is inseparable from disparities, both tangible and abstract, between various populations. To elucidate: as some individuals, societies, species, and so forth have more power to create and tell stories, other stories fade—or are never born. In an unsurprising congruency: as some thrive, others die, as some grow rich, others grow poor (and not simply in terms of monetary wealth). Stories are not harmful in their own right, of course, and culture is beautiful. As one of the characters in my film, Tia, indignantly relays to the main character Lila, "you can't rebel against everything!" While one cannot find inner purpose and meaning without guiding narratives to actively apply oneself to, I believe there is a problem when one does not even have a conscious ability to choose and help shape those narratives.

I chose to develop this thread—voice (and with the inevitability of narratives, the difference between obedience and agency)—specifically within the parameters of food. This exploration was not separate from a sense of ethical responsibility. The food industry is an exceptional example of disparities in voice and power. As will be explored in further detail in chapter one, which explicates my motivations for exploring food, fewer and fewer individuals are controlling the food market, and fewer and fewer crops are being utilized to create our meals. A homogenizing food market means

the deterioration of rich agricultural and cooking traditions. Tightly linked to the concept of agency is this issue of diversity. Without diversity, there are no questions, and without questions, there is no ability to actively reflect, choose, and create.

The product of all of this thematic inspiration is my film, *The Story of Food*. As food provides such rich metaphor for every other aspect of life, I hoped to unleash power to the viewer by "unveiling" the narratives that shape their eating habits. In order to do this, I was inspired by contemporary filmmaking techniques that place the act of creation at the forefront of viewer consciousness. *The Story of Food* indeed unravels its own making. It presents the story of a high school student named Lila who, after given an assignment that will determine whether she graduates, explores food culture through the medium of comics. Not accidentally, her assignment shares the same name as my film, and so as one witnesses her physically creating the frames of her narrative, the act of storytelling is repeatedly placed upon the film as a whole. Chapter four is reserved to be a final reflection on the making and final product of *The Story of Food*—a process which challenged my own voice as much as I hope the result challenges (and empowers) viewers.

1. You Are What You Eat

> *"Diversity provides the ground for us to turn our food systems around—diversity of crops, diversity of foods, and diversity of cultures. Diversity provides both the resistance to monocultures and the creative alternative. Our strength is our uniqueness and variety, a strength that can be eroded only when we give up on it ourselves" –Vandava Shiva (Shiva Manifestos 3).*

There were a number of ethical concerns to sort through and discover while making *The Story Food,* specifically during its conception and the scriptwriting process. With such a large body of inspiration (negative *and* positive), I attempted to hint at quite an array of trends in both food production and consumption during the course of my film. Initially, as stated in my proposal, my advocacy centered upon a localized, plant-based diet. This focus arose as a response to discourse

surrounding animal and environmental ethics, as well as a personal conviction of the importance of supporting one's local economy and culture. This centralized focus was not as dominant as I initially intended, as the scriptwriting process of course surprised and shifted my direction.

There are, however, moments where these initial intentions do shine. In terms of meat consumption, the question of eating animals dominates Lila's initial exploration. In terms of localized food, the visual shift from packaged food (shown mostly in wide shots) to the close-ups of vegetables from the local market is not accidental (*fig. 1)*. However, overall, my film does not explicitly state: "eat more plants, and buy them locally!" Instead, I believe it generally advocates a personal, and perhaps critical, relationship to food. I say critical not in negative way, but instead to note that my film hopes to challenge viewers to *really love* their food. One cannot be mindful of food one does not even know—as thinking too hard about it may evoke the uncomfortable: "I *don't* want to know what's in this." In addition to a personal relationship with food, I believe my film advocates diversity in a way that trumps all specific messages. As stated, this returns back to my objectives as a filmmaker, as diversity is tightly related to issues of agency and voice. This is not hidden in Lila's voiceover—food, and its wide array of growing and cooking possibilities, is a way to keep questions alive.

It is here that I hope to expound upon the motivations and specific research (food-related) that materialized into the final product of my film. I hope to begin with the big one—the importance of diversity in the face of a homogenizing food world—in order to connect more specific research back to it. Diversity, and challenges toward conserving it, can be divided into a number of subcategories within the realm of food. To begin within the market, a smaller number of companies and individuals have control over how food is produced and distributed. For example, the top four meat buyers in the U.S. controlled over 80% of the market (Food, Inc.). And this is as of 2008, when *Food Inc.* first shocked viewers nationwide—the disparities between giant agribusinesses and







Fig. 1a, 1b, 1c – *The progression of food images within "The Story of Food." The camera moves closer and closer as Lila's investment increases.*

smaller farms have only enlarged. Congruently shifting with these systematic changes were societal values. The diversity of value systems also deteriorated as economic growth (whether unsustainable or not) was held as the highest priority. As Foer states, factory farming has a mind-set: "reduce production costs to the absolute minimum and systematically ignore or 'externalize' such costs as environmental degradation, human disease, and animal suffering" (Foer 35). Some of these "negative externalities"— harms to other aspects of environment and society for the sake of making food "cheaper"—will be expounded upon in further detail.

In terms of the actual food that this market is producing, the illusion of diversity in the supermarket actually has a backstory that will most likely lead one back to 3 main crops: rice, wheat, and corn. These 3 crops make up *two thirds* of humanity's primary productivity (the bottom grounding of the food chain) (Manning 38). These crops are not only fed to meat but processed into all kinds of surprising products, corn being an ingredient in everything from batteries to potato chips. These high yielding varieties (HYV) are grown in mass monocultures—plants and animals being grown and raised in isolation as opposed to with one another—beginning in a period inappropriately deemed "The Green Revolution" (Shiva *Monocultures* 39).

This centralization of plant crops does not use the wisdom of diversity provided by functioning ecological systems in nature. Vandava Shiva has written an essay, both beautiful and informative, entitled "Monocultures of the Mind." She writes of the outcomes of the Green Revolution, stating that "the diverse knowledge systems which have evolved with the diverse uses of the forest for food and agriculture were eclipsed" (Shiva *Monocultures* 17). She uses the forest as an example, expounding on the fact that trees are currently gazed upon through an economic lens that diminishes their value from an ecological standpoint. While seen as money for loggers, they are seen as inhibitors for agribusinesses—as monocultures are grown on large expanses of cleared land. Aldo Leopold is perhaps the most famous author to explicate how this viewpoint is flawed—as crops

indeed thrive when grown *alongside* each other and are allowed to serve one another (waste in one species is nutrients for another, trees help prevent soil erosion) (Leopold 249). Therefore, not only does this dwindling down of food options harm the possibility of diversity, it actually impairs its own productivity. As Shiva summarizes: "[Moncultures] are neither tolerant of other systems, nor are they able to reproduce themselves sustainably" (Shiva *Monocultures* 50).

This is where dialogue surrounding environmental ethics comes in, as in order to yield such great quantities of food with these four crops (unsustainably), a great deal of energy and chemicals are needed. I could probably go on for a long time about the environmental concerns linked to industrial agriculture and factory farming. For the purpose of extending the focus of this paper beyond the gloom and doom of my project's motivation, I hope to only begin to hint at them. First of all, because monocultures do not follow ecological wisdom, humans apply fertilizers and pesticides that "solve" problems only to create others. One example is eutrophication—when nitrogen rich fertilizers run into streams (as no other plant mass prevents water run-off) and causes mass upset and extinction of freshwater and species (Sawyer 738). Additionally, it may come as a surprise that "Americans choose to eat less than .25% of the known edible food on the planet," as boxes of colorful personalities fill grocery store aisles (Foer 1). This is because we are no longer eating food—as Manning bluntly states in the title of his essay, American society is essentially "eating oil." These three crops have to go through a great deal of processing before becoming Fruit Loops, to borrow a specific example from my film. In culminating effect, "if all the world ate the way the United States eats, humanity would exhaust all known global fossil-fuel reserves in just over seven years" (Manning 42). These fossil fuels are not only non-renewable, but the burning of them contributes to harms such as global warming—animal agriculture alone being the number one cause of climate change (Foer 43).

To hint at the harsh realities of our current food industry through an animal ethics lens, one can look at the issue of diversity in two lights. First of all is the loss of biodiversity that results from irresponsible practices. For example, "the average shrimp-trawling operation throws 80 to 90 percent of the sea animals it captures overboard, dead or dying, as bycatch"—resulting in 145 different marine species (which humans do not even consume) that are regularly killed (Foer 49). And this is only one of the most obvious examples of how irresponsible practice results in species extinction. Many other connections between cause and effect are not as clear. As elucidated earlier, while ecologies do adapt to changes over time, violent changes such as sudden and massive chemically-laden-soil erosion lead to violent and often surprising ecosystem disruptions—
and subsequent violent extinction (Leopold 254).

Additionally, one can regard an issue that sparked Lila's own journey--speciesm. This second challenge to diversity within an animal ethics lens presents itself most tangibly in the meat industry—where the harshness of the word "cruelty" may not even begin to do justice to the torture experienced by animals as (or more) intellectually and emotionally developed as the dogs and cats of American homes. It is important to note that while diversity is extremely valuable, many conceptual differences between animals are constructed to give power to some while oppressing others. I do not separate humans from animals in this statement. In fact, constructions of difference between race and gender, a large thematic connection in my film, give rich insight into why we are so compliant to "animal" cruelty. As stated by Salisbary, "by the late Middle Ages women were considered closer to animals...marginalized groups seemed to slip below the human boundary" (Salisbary 15). While I did not differentiate humans from animals in my statement, it is clear that a definition of humanity as separate from animals was and is prevalent in society. This definition of humanity, was (and is) selective of only a constructed elite of the human species. I do not even have to explain the similarities between speceism, racism, sexism, and the challenges they pose to the value of diversity.

If a certain amount of power is applied to these concepts, a harsh an often violent reality ensues. As Professor Bill Bywater, who I interviewed for my film, stated—racist science determining who can feel pain was applied to justify cruelty imposed on African Americans similar to the way in which it is currently applied to justify practices found on factory farms.

Finally, I want to return to the human sphere—social justice one of the primary concerns of food scholars across the globe. As Food Inc. states, 1 in 3 Americans have early onset diabetes, and among minorities it is 1 in 2. As I have already talked a little about constructions of difference, it makes sad sense that those in poverty are at a greater risk for obesity, and that those in poverty are usually minorities (Pollan 8). While food insecurity is indeed an issue among low-income families, diets consisting of high-processed food present another problem. This is because unhealthy, processed foods that are transported over great distances are actually "cheaper" (in terms of the money that is paid over the final register—not in terms of the negative externalities discussed) than fresh, locally grown foods. And this is due to legislation that heavily subsidizes crops grown by giant agribusinesses that churn out surpluses of cheap meat, dairy, and processed foods (Imhoff 7). This legislation is also leading to a fast-food culture that supports non-social eating habits—i.e. eating in the car and eating in front of the television (Pollan 7).

With all of this in mind, to put a short but positive spin on things, there are many individuals and larger movements that are working to fight for food—and this is what my film aims to support. Perhaps Thomas Lyson best describes a summary of newfound individual and community agency in his concept of civic agriculture: "an organizational production strategy tightly linked to a community's social and economic development," that, in essence is, "smaller-scale, locally-oriented, and flexibly organized." (Wright 5, Lyson 61). Bound to this concept is my film's concern with creativity, which will be expounded upon shortly. A community is sustainable if it can support and continually re-create itself instead of depending on an unsustainable global market. An individual

can thrive if he or she can be informed and make conscientious choices—whether in the grocery market or elsewhere.

2. Postmodernism and Self-Referential Film: Conscious Storytelling as Cinematic Technique with a side of Social Action

> *"Like the proverbial fish that cannot see the water they swim in, we do not notice the medium we dwell within. Unaware that our stories are stories, we experience them as the world…But we can change the water. When our accounts of the world become different, the world becomes different." –David Loy (Loy 8)*

With this sense of responsibility embodied in my relationship with food, it was extremely crucial to develop an understanding of the history and opportunities presented by the medium of film. There were of course, endless methods in which to approach this desire to communicate my concerns (regarding the food industry). Furthermore, I did not only hope to create an objective criticism of current external food systems, but also the complications that materialize in the elaborate struggle to create a *personal* system of values. This is where the second focus of my film made its appearance: storytelling. Bodies of ethics and more general modes of being are in fact contingent upon stories, as well as who has the power to tell them.

As another statement by David Loy, a renowned Buddhist scholar, elucidates: "Without stories there is no way to engage in the world because there is no world, and no one to engage with it because there is no self" (as can be observed with Lila's statement "we all need something to guide us", as well as the whiteness of the empty comic frame) (Loy 3) (*fig. 2)*. As witnessed not only in the food industry, but much of contemporary society, consumer capitalism has contributed to increasing disparities in monetary wealth, and perhaps more importantly, voice. People are engaging with the world through stories they often have no power over creating. This is why I chose to use techniques that are rapidly arising in recent cinematic history. Through using postmodern methods, I wanted to



Fig. 2 – *As the story is crumpled, Lila is about to disappear into the whiteness of the empty comic frame.*

place storytelling in the forefront of the film's dialogue. More specifically, through self-referential techniques, I hoped to not only feed my viewers with a story, but give them the power to understand what they are eating.

The postmodern techniques that influenced my film, which will be further expounded upon, are: pastiche and cinematic fragmentation, characters that exemplify psychic fragmentation, breaks in linear continuity, and, as stated as my largest influence, self-reflexivity. All of these methods overlap in terms of thematic goals—through undermining the illusion of objective reality often brought forth by Classical Hollywood methods (viewers experiencing what is referred to as "suspended disbelief"), contemporary cinema tends toward radical relativism (Rountree 12, Booker xvi). In other words, analogous to postmodern thought, contemporary films relay that "no point of view can be maintained as absolutely superior to another," this philosophy engendering a number of aesthetic consequences (Booker xvi). These films exemplify the existentialist philosophy that existence precedes essence, that, as opposed to inherent values or moral doctrines that should be preached, life is what one creates of it.

Among these thematic concerns and aesthetic consequences is the dwindling distinction between art and reality. For example, a *pastiche,* a film that embodies a collection of genres and often even recreates past film moments, literally brings forth a reality contingent upon former artistic developments. *Pulp Fiction* (*fig. 3*) is an emblematic example of a pastiche, as it continually references pop-culture and as characters literally enact scenes that have taken place in cinematic history. This method, therefore, tends to demonstrate a sense of historical discontinuity by portraying present reality as a hodge-podge of irrelevant moments from the past, with no inherent newness or value (Booker xix). While I did not directly incorporate this method in *The Story of Food,* I hoped to bring a similar effect through the choice of comic book frames. While Lila's two best friends, Tia and Aileen, are constantly grounded in history, Lila's primary hobby is to escape



Fig. 3 - *The conversations between Vince Vega (left) and Jules Winnfield (right) are famous for being laden with pop culture references.*

Directed by Quentin Tarantino
Pulp Fiction
Released in 1994
Film – Screenshot
Source: *Pulp Fiction*

history by creating utopian universes for her comic self to wander through. Comic Lila, then, simply lives according to the worlds and dialogue given to her (similar to the way in which characters in *Pulp Fiction* and other contemporary films live according to other artworks). As Lila begins to parallel her own life to a less perfect version of this comic format (art and reality becoming hard to separate), she concludes that she, too, is simply living out stories. Though former films may not explicitly be found in *The Story of Food*, the consequences of pastiche are articulated as Lila's apathy is voiced: "everything is *old stuff* day ok? ...the world is made of old stuff. Old ideas, old stories, it's just a matter of which one you choose to follow. There's no escaping it, ok?"

As is distinctive from the method of *pastiche,* another meta-cinematic technique, self-reflexivity, is not as concerned with recreating the past. A definition of self-referential cinema is offered by Vincent LoBrutto in his book *Becoming Film Literate*: it is "a cinematic work that refers to itself....a self-referential film is not about the making of another film—it is concerned with the one that is currently being watched by the viewer" (LoBrutto 190). I used a number of methods to allude to *The Story of Food's* own creation. While the film was not strictly about its own making, it is important to note that the film shares the same title as Lila's assignment. And while I am not Lila, I certainly went through similar processes and struggles in the development of artistic, thematic, and ethical voice.

To begin a list of more specific examples of self-reflexivity in my film, the inter-titles (i.e. "Ten Minutes Later"), inspired by Almodovar's *Talk to Her* and Berman's *American Spledor (fig. 4),* show my hand in creating the film—the comic text disrupting the hidden flow of the work and directly connecting the film to Lila's own comic creations. The freeze frames that initiate these comic frames and disrupt standard perception of time are inspired by a number of art films, specifically from director Truffaut (*fig. 5)*. Additionally, the tape recorder is evocative of my own microphone, making the viewer aware of the author's control over the record and stop button (



Fig. 4a – *One of the opening shots of "American Splendor" begins with a comic intertitle.*

Directed by Shari S. Berman and Robert Pulcini
American Splendor
Released in 2003
Film – Screenshot
Source: *American Splendor*

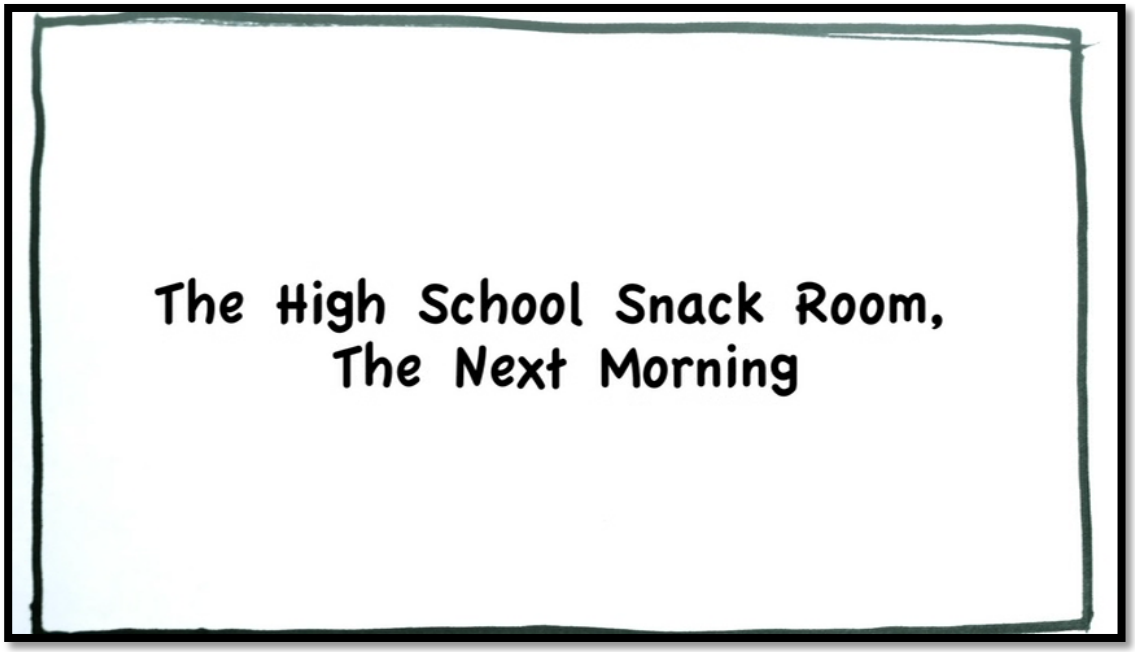


Fig. 4b – *An Intertitle in "The Story of Food."*



Fig. 5a - *This scene progresses with Catherine (middle) pretending to have a series of pictures taken of her. The film camera actually seems to do so as her candid poses are captured in freeze frame.*

Directed by François Truffaut
Jules et Jim
Released in 1962
Film - Screenshot
Source: *Jules et Jim*



Fig. 5b - *Freeze frames throughout "The Story of Food" shock the viewer out of a comfortable progression of time.*

well as cuts in post-production). This sense of authorial control is enhanced by the fact that linear continuity is broken. Similar to the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind (fig. 6),* a scene from later in the film is shown at the beginning, making apparent the act of editing. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, are the frames of the comics themselves, alluding to the thousands of frames that make of the film--which again, quell the illusion of objective reality and place authorial manipulation in the forefront of viewer consciousness.

Regarding the development of these techniques of influence, the self-referential approach is both expected in the evolution of an art-form as well as brought upon by specific historical influence. As stated by Rountree, "with the development of generic conventions, narrative forms quickly become self-conscious because writers working within a particular form must be aware of the genre's constitutive elements" (Rountree 11). This explanation of the evolutionary fate of art-forms can be supported by similar trends found in both written art (i.e. play-within-a-play in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound*) and other visual art-forms (i.e. Rene Magritte's *The Use of Language*) *(fig. 7, fig. 8*). (Rountree 11). Contemporary films, however, cannot simply be reduced to being "modernist for the sake of being modernist" (Nichols 18). Instead, these techniques are again correlated to thematic concerns deeply felt in contemporary society. The deteriorating distinction between art and reality correlates directly to the deterioration of trust in regards to a number of modes of orientation—religion, gender roles, the traditional family, and so forth. As these former reality-grounders collapse, the act of creation surpasses the act of obedience. Meaning is now highly regarded as coming from within, as opposed to from an external source. Thus, the focus on creation itself is a logical trend in contemporary art.

There are obvious hardships that result from these approaches, considering the fact that I wanted to conserve an active tone. As ideas of truth collapse and aesthetic techniques consequently focus on the act of creation, a film may actually deprive "individual subjects of the kind of totalizing



Fig. 6a - *Joel is seen hopping aboard the train to Montauk twice throughout the course of the film, this repetition making clear the act of editing.*

Directed by Michael Gondry
Written by Charlie Kaufman
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind
Released in 2004
Film - Screenshot
Source: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*



Fig. 6b - *Comic Lila disappears into whiteness two times in the film. It is only the second time that the viewer understands the reasoning.*



Fig. 7 - *Notice the two characters watching the performance in the background.*

Written by Tom Stoppard
A production of *The Real Inspector Hound*
Performance – Photograph
Source**:** http://at-scene-of-crime.blogspot.com/2011/09/i-am-inspector-tiger.html



Fig. 8 – *Magritte's "The Use of Language" has text that references itself.*

René Magritte
The Use of Language
1928-29
Painting, Oil on canvas
Canvas: 23 3/4 x 31 15/16 x 1 in
Collection: The Treachery of Images
Source: *Schneede*

vision that is required in order to oppose capitalism in a genuinely effective way" (Booker 4). Indeed, while modern films are filled with critiques of capitalism, their own inability to take themselves seriously leads to a lack of alternative solutions (Booker 45). There was therefore a delicate balance between deconstructing reality and ethical responsibility that I had to maintain.

However, my philosophy was that through focusing on the act of storytelling, I would not necessarily undermine my own seriousness, but instead strengthen the seriousness of viewer participation. This seriousness extends past the confines of the thirty minute film. Instead of getting lost in my piece, I hope viewers carry with them a sense of newfound agency—an ability to witness hidden stories, examine them, and make more educated choices. As Sartre believes, the freedom to create is what gives humanity dignity (Ganssle 228). Rountree, while recognizing the detrimental effects postmodern techniques have on moral unity, acknowledges this sentiment: "Metanarrative films," by drawing attention to their creation, "[force] the viewer to acknowledge that the film is nothing but a series of images accompanied by sound," therefore, "the audience must consider not only the technical aspects of filmmaking but also the *motivations* that lead to the production of a film" (Rountree 18). Whether viewers even agree with any conclusions reached by my film, this focus on motivations, and not doctrines, bequeaths viewers with the ability to choose and act independently from the film's discourse—to understand the hidden motivations of their own eating habits and everyday routines.

3. Grocery List: Specific Artists and Films of Influence

> *"And they say there is no fate, but there is: it's what you create."*
> *–Synecdoche, New York*

Now that I have given an overview of the general postmodern methods that inspired *The Story of Food,* as well as some historical context, I want to give specific privilege to two artists that

directly affected my approach, particularly in regards to theme: Charlie Kaufman and Woody Allen. Additionally, I hope to give the film *American Splendor* particular acknowledgement, as it shaped both thematic and aesthetic developments in my film.

Charlie Kaufman was perhaps the most dominant influence in the creation of *The Story of Food.* I began freewriting my initial script without any distinct boundaries or filters. I hoped to allow my script to evolve from this method as opposed to forcing itself onto the page. As this method became more chaotic, one of my central focuses came back into view – storytelling. While thinking about this thread I could not stop remembering *Adaptation*, a film that portrays the creative writer's block I was experiencing—and then ensues to make storytelling a theme through focusing on that struggle (*fig. 9).* Ironically, by allowing the discourse of *Adaptation* to inspire my writing, I overcame my own writer's block. Distinct images began to surface, the first being a character eating food when suddenly a crumpled piece of paper falls into view, causing his (I was initially writing a main male character) world to somehow unravel. It was from this starting point that a series of ideas began to rush into more prominent focus.

To clarify, Charlie Kaufman is the screenwriter (not the director) of *Adaptation,* as well as a host of other films that explore human nature through their interaction with unlikely environments and circumstances (LaRocca 6). For example, in *Being John Malkovich,* the fantastical portal and whimsical puppetry allow for very serious commentary about human identity and the quest for transcendence. These and other fantastical apparatuses therefore open up a series of metaphysical questions that can be applied to more realistic human experiences. It is important to note that while some critics believe Kaufman's meditation on these questions (accompanied with his disregard for an established order, a "right one" or a final rendering of justice) is apathetic and self-indulgent, other critics have a more generous point of view (LaRocca 15). It is instead thought by these critics that Kaufman's questions are motivated by ethical concerns "about how we should, or can, live in



Fig. 9 - *Charlie Kaufman, as played by Nicolas Cage, is having a case of writer's block.*

Directed by Spike Jonze
Written by Charlie Kaufman
Adaptation
Released in 2002
Film - Screenshot
Source: *Adaptation*

the world as moral beings" (LaRocca 15). I tend to uphold the latter point of view, and believe Kaufman gives credit to the possibility of morality in a number of ways.

One way Kaufman does so is by bequeathing viewers with more agency through focusing on the act of creation (as I have already expounded upon in my discussion of self-reflexivity). *Adaptation* begins with an establishing shot of darkness, as Evans explains, "the world *before* the world established by the space of agency...without form and void" (Evans 27). Similar to the white void of Lila's empty comic frames, this spaces comments that "nothing exists or happens before the story" (Evans 27) (*see fig. 2*). And so while *Adaptation* begins with darkness before the story unfolds, *The Story of Food* takes away tangible reality and moves into whiteness as Lila's story is crumpled. Additionally, both films mark an uncomfortable and difficult distinction between author and character. A fictionalized Charlie Kaufman is the main character of *Adaptation,* similar to the way in which a fictionalized Lila gives tribute to my authorship (*fig. 10*). This uncomfortable distinction allows viewers to transcend making clear judgments about the characters (and the film as whole), as instead they focus on the (un)reality of the characters themselves (is she real or made up?). (Evans 37). These examples show that throughout both *Adaptation* and *The Story of Food,* the viewer may then witness the unfolding narrative as contingent upon the act of creation. And so while this may unhinge any clear morality (as the discussion of self-reflexivity made clear), it gives the viewer the power to witness construction, the morality of which will be further elucidated.

In order to make clear the distinction between the morality of films that preach standards and the morality that I hoped to infuse into *The Story of Food,* I want to bring another prominent influence into the picture—Woody Allen. Both Woody Allen and Charlie Kaufman are indeed focused on the difficulties embodied in creativity. More specifically, both artists, through their films, juxtapose their own creative efforts against a dominant Hollywood culture (*fig. 11)*. By doing so, there is an imminent conflict between history and myth, reality and fiction, detachment and

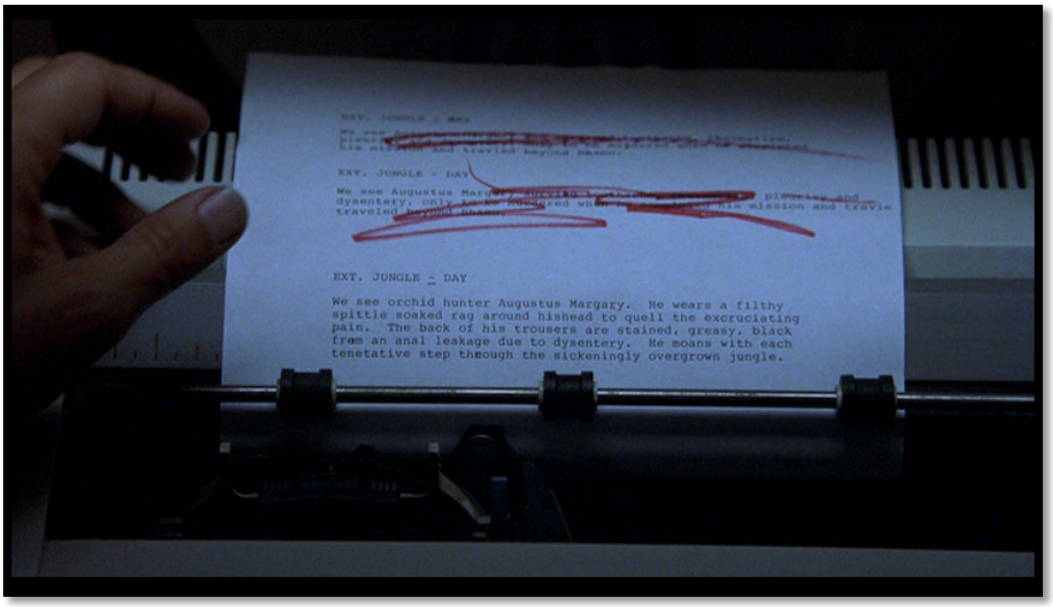


Fig. 10a – *Charlie Kaufman's marks on the script within "Adaptation" mirror the real Charlie Kaufman's scriptwriting process.*

Directed by Spike Jonze
Written by Charlie Kaufman
Adaptation
Released in 2002
Film - Screenshot
Source: *Adaptation*



Fig. 10b – *Lila's marks on the comic book frame immediately follow the scene in which this image was shown. This ties the author (both Lila and I) to what is seen unfolding on screen.*



Fig. 11a – *The fans of Sandy mock his most recent work, portraying Allen's creative anxieties.*

Directed by Woody Allen
Written by Woody Allen
Stardust Memories
Released in 1980
Film - Screenshot
Source: *Stardust Memories*

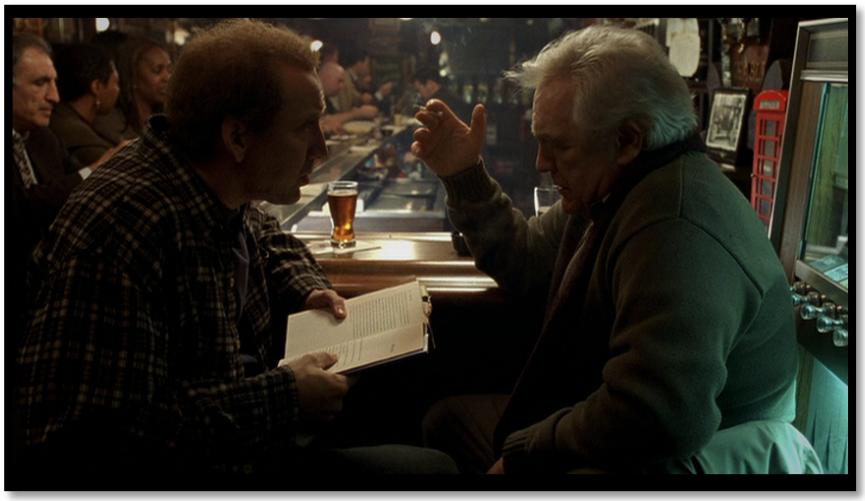


Fig. 11b – *Charlie Kaufman talks to a lead screenplay teacher about how to write a story. He hears everything about the Hollywood format that he does not believe in.*

Directed by Spike Jonze
Written by Charlie Kaufman
Adaptation
Released in 2002
Film - Screenshot
Source: *Adaptation*

engagement (D'Aquino 557). D'Aquino, who writes about the struggle of art against dominant culture as portrayed in recent films (actually using both Kaufman and Allen as examples) speaks of culture as "a need to come up with a story, a mythos to explain the origin of man, his place in the universe" (D'Aquino 558). And while giving credit to culture, she also states that it may establish order by imposing questionable values such as gender dominance and race subordination (D'Aquino 570). As both of these artists fight against Hollywood culture, therefore, they *strengthen* the ethical content of the film by *questioning* the moral threads of Hollywood and American culture as a whole.

Woody Allen constantly upholds good art as something that "comes to terms with painful realities," as opposed to supporting denial and escapism the way Hollywood does (D'Aquino 557). In culminating effect, both Allen and Kaufman's works, "which made abundant use of the techniques of estrangement and defamilarization...[enable] the viewer to gain an insight...and confront the ideas that make up ethical systems--both religious and non-religious--of one's own culture" (D'Aquino 575). Therefore, by realizing the power that stories have on shaping lives, these artists embody a sense of ethical responsibility—they put painful realities on screen, and through their self-reflexive methods, highlight one's ability to reshape them. This is a crucial concern of my film—which through interweaving documentary elements shows hidden stories that are often hidden by dominant culture. My film then importantly follows this unveiling with the notion that one has the ability and responsibility to take more control over these narratives.

If Charlie Kaufman and Woody Allen were my main thematic motivators, the film *American Splendor* was the bedrock beneath the technical and aesthetic elements of *The Story of Food. American Splendor* was so rich with imagery that I was already imagining that I have almost forgotten which came first—the inspiration or the ideas. For example, I know I had already written the visual of the tape recorder spinning into my script, which was uncannily mirrored in the film reels spinning in *American Splendor (fig*. 12). The comic intertitles are another example of



Fig. 12a – *As the real Harvey Pekar is interviewed, the viewer witnesses many self-reflexive symbols at work – including the reel that records his voice.*

Directed by Shari S. Berman and Robert Pulcini
American Splendor
Released in 2003
Film – Screenshot
Source: *American Splendor*



Fig. 12b – *My camera indiscreetly shows the act of recording as Lila conducts her interviews.*

something that the two films share, already written in my script before my initial viewing. While they were already written in my script, both of these elements took on a more prevalent role after that initial viewing, as I had more confidence they would work.

It is perhaps the way in which the comic world was infused into *American Splendor* that I took most "fresh" inspiration from. The black and white freeze frames, which I wanted to incorporate in my film but didn't know how, helped to guide my own sense of flow (I initially did not even think about incorporating freeze frames within "the real world"). I believe flow is the precise word to explain how *American Splendor* guided the trajectory of my film. Reflecting on my own history, I tend to privilege ideas themselves over actually and technically making them *work* (obviously a severe flaw). While my mind was able to instigate a number of thematic focuses and visual apparatuses, it was through studying a series of narratives, like *American Splendor,* that I believe I actually made *The Story of Food* a cohesive piece. As will be elucidated in the next chapter, I trust this is my most successful effort to date.

4. Mixing the Pot and Putting it All Together: Making *The Story of Food*

> *"This is our responsibility: to study, challenge, and invent new ways of eating, ways of living—to keep creating stories." -The Story of Food*

Throughout this paper, I have interwoven methods and specific moments from my film. It is with this final chapter, however, that I want to focus exclusively on the development of the piece, and reflect on its outcome. To go over the practical aspects of my film's creation, I shot on a Canon T3i DSLR camera and edited on Final Cut Pro. All props, sets, and costumes were previously owned, bought or borrowed. The comic sequences were filmed by using a green screen and keying out color. Finally, the drawings found within these scenes were also illustrated by me. As an Art and Technology major, I believe I have successfully woven elements and previous lessons from the

disciplines of video production and studio art. To move into content—as my film is about creation, I hope to elucidate *The Story of Food* by focusing on the *development* of three threads throughout the course of the piece: character, comics and food.

Before going into these specific evolutions, however, I want to note some of the aesthetic choices and changes that developed throughout the process. As I was just talking about *American Splendor,* I will start with color. As the main character of *American Splendor* lived quite an apathetic and detached life (similar to Lila's own), the color scheme of the film was an additional inspiration. The drab lighting and rainy days are not as apparent in *The Story of Food,* but I instead added blue tint through color correction to the majority of my film. It is only when we move into the grandmother's eulogy—the turning point of the film—that a warm tint is introduced, and Lila's apathy transforms into empathy and a sense of responsibility (*fig 13)*. On a side note, I was inspired by the color scheme of *Sin City* in order to make a distinction between comic and real worlds. As Lila draws in red and black ink, the red-black-and-white colors (and heavy contrast) of Sin City made perfect sense to use as guidance *(fig. 14)*.

Similar to the changes in color is the transformation of camera angles. The first part of the movie is predominantly composed using 180 degree angles, which neither empower nor disempower Lila. One exception to this rule is when someone is actually talking down to Lila (such as when Tia arrives in the lunch room). The other exception actually does disempower Lila—as the teacher's authority forces Lila to begin the assignment and provides proper motivation. More severe than these examples is the high angle shot found later in the film after the last comic sequences. Because many shots within the comic world are filmed in high angle to show "real" Lila's authorial power, this shot in the real world highlights that Lila is also bound in a world of stories (*fig. 15)*. It is when Lila finally makes the choice to take authority over her food that she is shown for the first time with a low angle shot, helping to empower her.



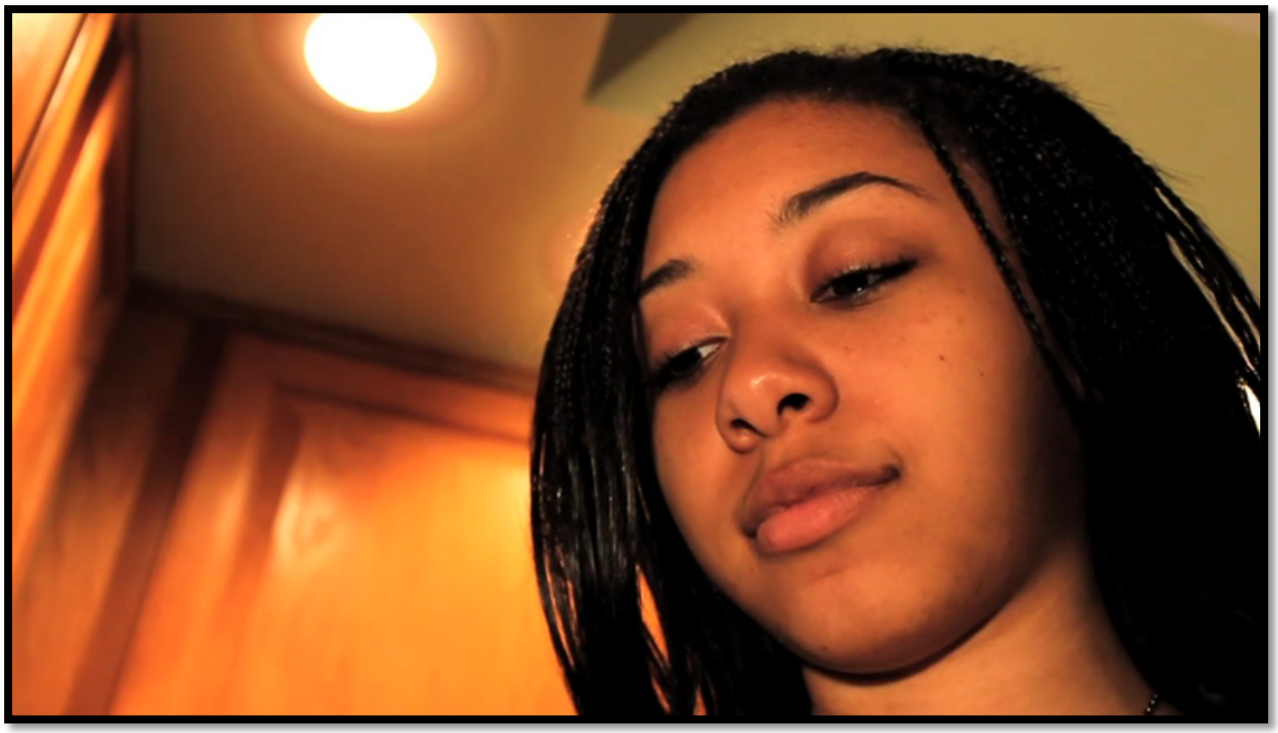


Fig. 13a, 13b – *The colors and angles dramatically shift within the trajectory of "The Story of Food."*



Fig. 14 – *The opening shot of Sin City shows the color scheme that will continue throughout the movie.*

Directed by Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez
Sin City
Released in 2005
Film – Screenshot
Source: *Sin City*





Fig. 15a, 15b – *Lila is shown in the real world with an extreme high angle shot almost directly following the high angle shot of the previous comic scene.*

As these aesthetic shifts take place, Lila's own character dramatically shifts from cold and apathetic to a hopeful and active. This transformation is shown in a number of ways, the most obvious being her dialogue. Lila rarely speaks during the beginning of the film, and when she does it is usually to shut people off ("I'm perfectly happy right here," "It's stupid, never mind"). She reserves her more active personality for a comic world she can escape into as easily as she can flip a remote control. As she begins to be more invested in the stories of food, and history that has developed in her actual environment, she *shares* her concerns. This is most notable in the second creek scene during her dialogue with Tia. Other cues also develop her transformation, such as her positioning with her back to the TV screen toward the end of the film (*fig. 16)* Altogether, Lila takes more responsibility for the formation of her identity, and its relation to the external world. She does not want to become "Toucan Sam," as the child in the initial advertisement did when looking into the mirror (*fig. 17)*. And this discomfort ignites her imminent action by the end of the piece.

The purpose of her comic illustrations also shifted congruously to the trajectory of the rest of the film. At first, Lila comics in order to "escape into a world better" than reality. While her best friends Tia and Aileen are grounded in history, Lila rejects the world in favor of frames she has direct control over. After being forced to write *The Story of Food,* Lila uses comics to aid her curiosity. Comic-ing becomes a mode of exploration as she becomes more invested in the world. In the final scene, following the visual and emotional shift of her grandmother's eulogy, she finds renewed hope in the mere ability to participate in these narratives. Unable to fill in the last comic frame throughout the piece, always unaware of "the perfect ending," she finally submits to the unknown nature of human purpose but finds power in her creativity—filling in the frame with "to be continued." This statement does not only show that Lila will continue to create stories, but invites the viewers into the communal process of storytelling (*fig. 18)*



Fig. 16a, 16b – *Notice the change in Lila's positioning (with her back now to the TV), the shift from cool to warm colors, Lila's facial expressions, and the filling of empty chairs.*



Fig. 17a, 17b – *Lila's inability to accept being "framed" shows in her sadness. Note her white costume and the empty clothes hangers that portray her apathy in relation to identity formation. This resistance will show itself in a more optimistic way by the end of the film.*

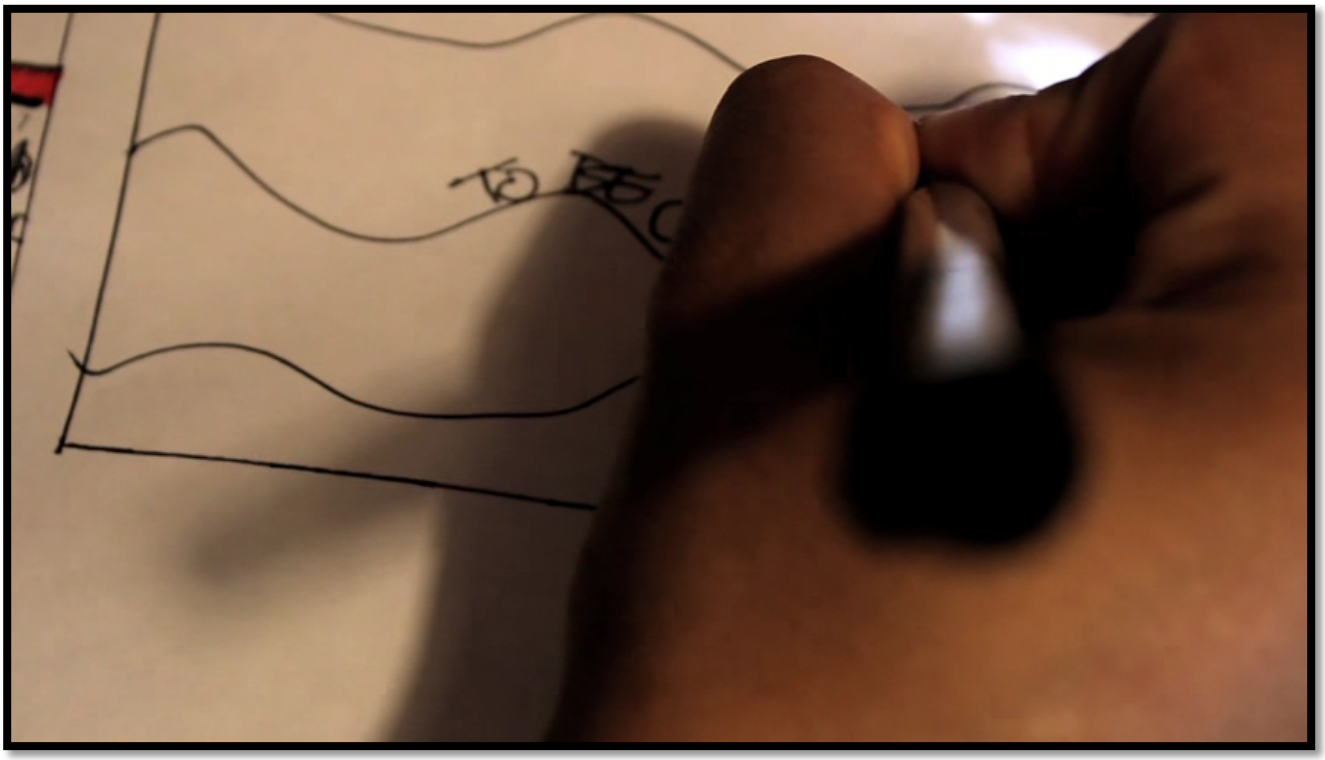


Fig. 18 – *Lila finally fills in the last comic frame with the invitation – "To Be Continued."*

This “to be continued” is followed by a cooking montage that shows rich colors and textures of food, this imagery lacking in the beginning of the narrative. Food, the focus of my own film, has served as a vehicle for a number of various films to forward themes and ideas. As James E. Keller states, “in most cases the filmmaker simultaneously links visual and sensual responses to ideas peripheral to food and its consumption. The culinary is highly suggestive of abstract cultural processes...” (Keller 1). This is why, as my own film moves from the violent sounds and distant imagery of processed food to the colorful close-up shots of homemade food, a number of metaphors are made concerning the whole of human experience. In fact, this shift in food imagery emphasizes the effects of my self-reflexive methods, as “one of the recurring motifs in food film narrative is meta-cinematic in that the preparation and consumption of elaborate meals and dishes signifies the material process of producing a film.” (Keller 6) Therefore, as Lila takes great responsibility over her own act of creation, moral sentiments are placed on the film as a whole: The idea that care and empathy should be embodied in the act of creation lays at the heart of my film.

Overall, I am extremely pleased with the outcome of *The Story of Food.* While I spoke a lot about thematic/aesthetic inspiration and realization within this paper, I believe my last statement is something I am truly going to hold onto in the future. Actually following through with creating this story took *a lot* of care that was sometimes put into question. As I initially went into the piece, I was expecting to make a 15-20 minute film. I had no idea the script I wrote would actually materialize into a 30 minute film. I also had no intention of taking away a large chunk of my initial conceptual grounding, so I just kept editing. From the responsibilities of set design, lighting, and prop and costume scavenging, to the filming and editing processes—apathy could not last long if this piece were to actually get done in time, and successfully. I hope viewers are inspired by this care put into the work, reflect on their own dynamic and creative potential, and go home and cook a meal with their friends and family.

Appendix



Finishing up set design for Lila's room



Willow "helping" me write up my research – note the "Eating Animals" book in the background



The veggie burger samples all eaten up at the gallery opening!

Sample Shot List:

Scene 10
(The Green Screen)
Costumes/Props
Frame One, Indigenous Hunter Gatherers: Ripped up shorts, ripped up shirt, a spear or bow and arrow, costume jewelry, face paint, fake tree/plants?, rocks
Frame Two, Judaism: Jewish apron, blue floral dress, hair ties (for pigtails) menorah, yamacah, candles, pork, dinner table and chair, plates, silverware, and napkins
Frame Three, Plato's Republic: Floral Purple shirt over a dress or skirt, headband of leaves, bread, cheese, vegetables, olives, figs, tablecloth, older looking tableware
Frame Four, Meat as Status: Drabby clothes, a smaller table, a hamburger and other dinnerware
Frame Five (Hindus worship cows, Muslims don't eat pigs, Mongols are disgusted by fowl and Europeans don't eat cats or dogs.): Colorful scarf and clothes, completely black clothes, black piece of fabric, another less colorful scarf that she can wrap around her head, and back to her normal self.
Shot List:
Frame 1
1) WS: Lila enters the frame with her regular clothes on, looks to her left as jungle begins to appear before her
2) MS: Lila begins to yawn, stretches her arms out
3) CU: her arm stretching up and morphing into costume bracelet, with spear.
4) WS: Lila with spear outstretched, she looks up at it and brings it down, audio begins, Lila begins to crouch down with spear in killing position, walking.
5) CU: Lila crouching down and walking, suddenly she turns left as if hearing a sound, begins to outstretch her arm (but oh no! elaborate codes – cannot kill young or female).

(See food brochure pdf)

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