Movies to Eat Carrots By

Written and directed by Morgan Spurlock
Produced by The Con
Running time 100 minutes. Rated PG-13.
dvd and vhs by Hart Sharp Video
dvd $26.99; vhs $50.99

Muffin Man (2003)
Written and directed by Jessica Eisner
Produced by Pickle Tub Productions, Inc.
Running time 93 minutes. Not rated.
dvd $14.95

In Liz McQuiston’s Graphic Agitation 2: Social and Political Graphics in the Digital Age, a work of art by a Japanese artist takes aim at the perilous consequences of eating fast food. This image, a critique of America’s dominant cuisine and culinary export, depicts a handgun made entirely of french fries. Japanese script sits at the bottom of the page, but there is no need to translate. The picture is worth a thousand, er, calories.

The simplicity of this work, in form and content, belies Americans’ overall inability to embrace its true meaning. The shape of our national body is a corpulent one, the fattest in the world, in fact, and this despite the wealth of information circulating daily regarding the direct relationship between the nutritional quality of the food we eat and our physical and mental well-being. Holding the french fry gun in our hands, will anything prevent us from pulling the trigger?

Super Size Me and Muffin Man are two films that propose salvation by way of popular cinema. Mixing weighty information with offbeat comedy, both directors employ a documentary aesthetic, presumably to emphasize the seriousness of their subject matter. Ultimately, however, the two filmmakers take widely divergent approaches to their pedagogy, and to wildly different effects.

The premise of Super Size Me is now legendary: Writer and director Morgan Spurlock, after following a court case in which two girls sued McDonald’s for their obesity, decides to challenge the chain’s assertion that their food is, in fact, nutritious and, by implication, not harmful to one’s health. He eats three meals a day there for thirty days, ordering everything on the menu at least once and with no special-preparation requests. When he travels (he lives in New York City), he stays on the Mickey D’s diet, which isn’t difficult, given the restaurant’s omnipresence; it also affords him new selections, as menus vary regionally. If a server offers to “supersize” anything he orders, he must comply. This last rule, while rarely exercised (he only supersizes nine items in approximately ninety meals), opens the film to a wider discourse, expanding it from the physiological to the psychological. Throughout the film the director asks, What role have marketing strategies played in luring billions of consumers to the Golden Arches?

So, after consulting with three doctors and a nutritionist (who each determine him to be in excellent health), we witness Spurlock order meal after meal while limiting his exercise to that of the average American (two miles walking per day, with no additional gym time). Along the way he gets regular check-ups with the medical experts and shares how he’s feeling—the good, the bad, and the ugly. (“I made it past the three-day hump!” he proclaims early on, likening his new diet to the rigors of quitting smoking.) Despite many bouts of discomfort, we only once see him throw up his food (early in the diet, when he’s obviously unaccustomed to the large portions), and we watch his girlfriend, a professional vegan chef, roll her eyes, issue a few statements of concern, and design a detox diet for the day after he eats his last Big Mac. Midway through the film she also candidly expresses changes to their sex life, confessing, “He gets tired faster.” (“It’s still good,” she smiles. “But it’s different. I can tell.”)

Spurlock, too, offers plenty of humor and levity, most often by laughing at himself and at the odd nature of his endeavor. Ultimately, this self-deprecation plays a large role in our ability to digest the film’s gravity: as Spurlock binges on burgers, he also loads us up with startling information and statistics about our nation’s health crisis, the unappetizing ingredients and manufacturing process of McDonald’s foods,
and, most compellingly, the dearth of nutritional education. Some of the most powerful moments in the film are when he visits high schools around the country, where poor diets and easy access to fried, processed, and sugary foods are the norm. A typical student’s self-made lunch consists of just french fries and a Coke.

*Super Size Me* is no groundbreaker in its revelation that McDonald’s foods aren’t the healthiest on the planet. In court papers discussed in the film, even McDonald’s representatives argued that most people “know” the chain’s food should not be eaten to the exclusion of other (presumably fresh) foods. The surprise, however, is how quickly Spurlock suffers its deleterious effects. After only one month of Mcmeals, his body and overall health change dramatically, including a weight gain of nearly thirty pounds and toxicity levels so high that one doctor says his liver has become “pâté.”

It’s a devastating sight and, one would assume, irrefutable evidence against the grand poo-bah of fast-food purveyors. And yet, while the film garnered much critical praise and popular success internationally, refuting is indeed what many American objectors did, accusing Spurlock of disingenuously forcing himself to eat more than was comfortable or reasonable in order to prove his thesis. Spurlock, however, anticipated this argument, and he clearly states in the film that while taking three squares there per day may sound preposterous, there is good reason to believe that many customers do in fact eat at the restaurants, or some combination of fast-food joints, that often. (He interviews several regular customers who cop to the simple appeals of taste, convenience, and price.) Moreover, when negative effects can occur so quickly, only one additional meal per week could be all that it takes to start tipping the scales. Spurlock did consume more calories than his body required, but here, too, he was not just pulling a stunt: he was eating the actual amount served. Moreover, foods high in calories do not necessarily deliver satisfaction or a lasting feeling of fullness, especially when they are high in sugar and fat and low in fiber and nutrients. No wonder, then, that Spurlock develops what another doctor calls “an addiction” to the food, as he’s often hungry soon after eating, and the food temporarily boosts his mood (although it has, arguably, also caused an onset of lethargy and depression).

Nevertheless, the attacks reflected a curious and devout protectiveiveness of the chain. In the DVD version of the film, Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, speaks of the warm fuzzy McDonald’s-is-home feelings that the company has consistently evoked in its advertising campaigns. These seductive spots have also helped elevate the chain to iconic status and what some might characterize as loyalty beyond reason. In the summer of 2004, Soso Whaley, an educator and filmmaker from Washington, D.C., was so incensed by what she viewed as Spurlock’s unwarranted attack against the chain that she began making her own documentary. Espousing personal responsibility and making “prudent menu choices,” she, too, ate three McDonald’s meals per day but watched her calorie count in order to lose weight on the chain’s food. Also under a doctor’s care and guidance, Whaley ate a 1200-calorie-a-day diet, mostly composed of fruit parfaits and salads. She lost over ten pounds. A punch in the gut to Spurlock? Not quite.

As it turned out, McDonald’s didn’t need Whaley’s help to upgrade their image as a restaurant with healthy menu choices. Indeed, the company’s own agents were already at work, adding new lower-calorie and less-processed items to the menu.
and touting the resulting spurt in sales and stock prices. Soon after Spurlock’s film was released, the chain also ended their supersize option, claiming the timing was purely coincidental. But as Spurlock makes a point of stating, supersizing isn’t the only portion-related problem: typical sizes, after all, are such that a “large” beverage is akin to a small lake.

McDonald’s changed its menu because it recognized that consumers’ increased education regarding food and health could yield new profits. But when it comes to teaching the public nutrition and self-care, Muffin Man takes another approach. Unfortunately, where Super Size Me is both serious and goofy, this film is bizarre and preachy. Spurlock understands the initial absurdity of his effort, but as his findings surprise even him, he becomes a serious and sympathetic “lead.” Jessica Eisner’s film, however, is a self-righteous prediction of the extinction of the human race due to its tendency toward ignorance and hedonism. In the human race’s final incarnation, Homo Twinkus, or “Muffin Man,” is completely unconscious of obesity and its health implications, and completely depraved.

The plot is centered on Jack Sprat, who does little but sit on his couch, eat, and watch TV, falling in love with Hope, a young woman who seeks refuge in his home to escape her abusive ex-boyfriend. While her affections simultaneously grow for him, so does her waist size, and whatever “hope” she might provide to prevent death by cheese doodles quickly disappears. We only hear but never see Jack’s father, Pie, as he is so large that he is confined to the bedroom. His mother, meanwhile, is an angry, gun-wielding man in drag—a completely confounding characterization—as is Hope’s ex-boyfriend, T-Bone, in an uncomfortable stereotype of a young, hyper-fit, virile black man.

Muffin Man is part faux narrated science film, part “mockumentary,” but it fails miserably in its attempts to be funny or even, for that matter, instructive. Sex scenes, which fetishize thick folds of flesh and engorged breasts, are not only devoid of comedy, they are too outrageous to convey any cautionary message. There is also an “instructional” interruption showing foods that resemble genitalia, one slowly penetrating the other (with juice drippings), to imply what two characters are up to at that moment. Despite its modest potential, the effect is crude and immature. Moreover, whereas Spurlock charms us and humanizes his subjects, writer and director Eisner’s approach is to scold and scare us with her nightmarish prophecy. There are no sympathetic characters in Muffin Man, and the dialogue is excruciatingly dopey. In Super Size Me, intelligent restraint balances outrageousness; in Muffin Man, there is only ugly excess.

In addition to being a filmmaker, Eisner is a physician, so it is most interesting that after all of her warnings (all of her characters die or end up miserable), her film fails to give any prescription or motivation for change outside of a command to not eat so much junk. Spurlock at least tries to make a case for more produce and fewer meats and fats by showing a school in Wisconsin where healthful lunches have kept its students focused, productive, and calm. We also know from his “before” condition that Spurlock’s previous habits of regular exercise and a combination of vegan, home-cooked, and fast-food meals actually did his body good. Schlosser himself advises boycotting fast-food chains in favor of locally produced, minimally processed, and, if possible, organic comestibles.

In the end the final call for all of the filmmakers—Spurlock, Eisner, and Whaley—is for each of us to take charge of our own health. Whaley’s approach, like many on commercial diet programs, is to keep options to a minimum and let someone else prepare the food. (Jared, the famous spokesman for the Subway chain, similarly lost weight by restricting himself to one and one-half sandwiches at the restaurant per day.) But when temptation exists at every corner, and high stress levels often lead to cravings for something warm, fast, and familiar, can we ever expect to get comfort from a piece of fruit, or, in fact, from something non-edible? And how do we strengthen ourselves against the massive assault of junk-food advertising that hits us each day? Fortunately, it has become increasingly popular to ask food corporations to help us out: In addition to McDonald’s new menu items, General Mills, the second-largest cereal manufacturer behind Kellog’s, has decided to start substituting whole grains for refined in 40 percent of its packaged cereals. While the cost of this effort is not yet clear, the decision was based on the premise that people do indeed want to buy healthful products. Exactly how healthful and helpful these cereals will be, and whether this move signifies a trend among food manufacturers, remains to be seen.

United we have stood, overfed and undernourished. And yet, as critics of Super Size Me showed, biases against health food “fanatics” (or the “Body Nazis,” as they are referred to in Muffin Man) still exist, and attachments to familiar foods and flavors don’t die quietly. For McDonald’s and General Mills to support the increasing health-mindedness of the country is, without question, an investment in the companies’ longevity as well as our own. And one less bullet in the French fry gun.

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