

The Politics of Food

By Genevieve Akal

THIS YEAR'S FILM FESTIVAL sees an entirely new genre – 'food' – and follows the new wave of 'anti-capitalist' documentaries that have swept through the film industry since the release of Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*. *Super Size Me*, directed by Morgan Spurlock, and *Deconstructing Supper*, directed by Marianne Kaplan, both offer radical insights into the global food industry. They are showing on Monday 21 June and I would recommend seeing both of them in order to gain a more holistic understanding of today's 'food industry epidemic'.

Deconstructing Supper follows the journey of John Bishop – chef, restaurateur, and owner of 'Bishops', one of Vancouver's top restaurants. Bishop has achieved numerous restaurant awards, and has published two recipe books, which feature the use of seasonal ingredients.

Despite being so accustomed to the preparation of food, Bishop, like most of the world's population, knew very little about the monopoly of agricultural monopolies or the technologies of genetic modification. His thought-provoking journey to find out about these subjects, which takes him half way around the world and back, is documented in *Deconstructing Supper*.



Genetically modified

Bishop's journey begins in the vast fields of industrialised agriculture in the central valley of California where 60 percent of North America's fruit and vegetables are grown. The major difference between organic and genetically modified foods occurs in the breeding process. Where traditional breeding moves genes between the same or closely related species, genetic engineering moves genes between completely different species; like animals, insects, fish, bacteria and viruses.

GM food producer Monsanto claims that the activist 'uproar' stems from a lack of knowledge about the topic. They claim that their technology can eradicate extreme hunger in Third World countries. The documentary shows an array of perspectives and Monsanto's view is countered numerous times. One of the film's most startling images is of a farm worker

wearing a gas mask on a farm containing genetically modified harvest and seed.

The sins of the food industry are brought sharply into focus in Morgan Spurlock's controversial *Super Size Me*, which grossed (no pun intended) the highest opening weekend takings for a documentary in Australian history. It is a hard-hitting documentary that explores the biggest monopoly of the fast food industry, McDonald's, and the extreme effects its products can have on its consumers.

Close on 40 percent of American children and adolescents are carrying too much fat and two out of every three adults are overweight or obese. Is it the consumers' fault for lack of self-control, or is the fast food industry to blame? Spurlock hit on the concept for the film on Thanksgiving in 2002 whilst watching TV, stuffed with turkey. "I was so full and was watching the news when a story about the two girls suing McDonald's came on the TV," he explains.

Spurlock's first feature film turns into a rather risky experiment with himself as the guinea pig. His interviews with experts in 20 US cities, including Houston, America's "Fattest City", are sobering. But most harrowing of all is his decision to put his own body on the line by eating nothing but McDonald's for one month, governed only by three basic rules: eat what is available over the counter; no 'supersizing' unless offered; and eat every item on the menu at least once.

Spurlock's degradation is painfully visible as he gains a bulky 25 pounds (± 12 kilograms), compromises his liver and heart, and hurtles between lethargy, depression, and manic overdrive. McDonald's' response to this highly acclaimed documentary was a multi-million dollar advertising campaign. The chief executive of McDonald's Australia, Guy Russo, disputes the film's claims and says, "We believe, and have always believed, that McDonald's can be eaten as part of a well-balanced diet". Whether this is true or not, the film results in an obese food bill, nerve racking visits to the doctor, and gripping viewing for anyone who's ever thought, "Hey, I wonder if it's possible to live on fast food alone?"

Nollywood sets the pace

Nollywood is the low-budget, VCR-based, fast-paced Nigerian version of Bollywood. Over 800 of these films are produced every year, so there is obviously a strong demand for them. CHRIS MASON spoke to Tito Taiwo, a prominent figure in the Nigerian film industry, here as a guest of DIFF 2004.

WITH MOST PRODUCED on budgets tighter than Morgan Spurlock's pants, and with the quality of dusty home videos, it is quite surprising to discover that Nigeria's Nollywood films churn out an estimated \$45 million a year. According to Tito Taiwo, there is a simple reason for this success: people just want to be entertained. Nigeria is not in an economic position to support celluloid productions, so films are made for and sometimes on video, sacrificing quality for quantity, and creating jobs for an abundance of actors.

At DIFF this year there are six Nigerian films to choose from, three of which – *Saving Alero*, *Raging Storm* and *Dangerous Twins* – are directed by Tade Ogidan, one of Nigeria's foremost directors. Ogidan and several other Nigerian filmmakers are in Durban to promote Nigerian film and share their knowledge with local enthusiasts.

The explosion of the video film industry is a recent occurrence in Nigeria, with most of the growth happening after 1998. Nigerian movies are now being exported all over Africa, with the average movie selling about 50 000 copies, while a blockbuster will sell four times that. Nigeria's video movies serve one very important function – entertainment for the masses at a very accessible cost. Sold for about R12 each, they are shown in restaurants, video centres



and even private homes that have been converted into movie houses. The whole phenomenon is testimony to the entrepreneurial spirit of a country with a struggling economy. It is an industry that is growing from the inside out, and the hundreds of movies it generates provides work for a lot of actors, with top actors now commanding up to \$4 000 a film. Those still aspiring to greatness hang out in the Surulere district in Lagos, fast becoming West Africa's movie-making capital, in the hope of their big break.

Money and drugs are themes that seem to dominate Nollywood productions. Ritual killings and witchcraft are also popular subjects, and *Saving Alero* speaks out against ritual violence against women. When watching a Nigerian film, leave your everyday expectations at the cinema door. Don't expect clear celluloid quality, breath-taking stunts or special effects, or to see any faces that you recognise. In fact, at first it might be hard to even hear any words that you recognise. But there will be lots of drama, one or two murders and even a few moments of suspense.

DIFF is about expanding your movie-watching horizons, so go and check one or two of these films. Who knows, it might inspire you to whip out your video camera, and film your friends in your own epic Nollywood style movie.

FESTIVAL FOCUS

PICTURES BY
MONICA RORVIK AND
MPHO MOLOKO

MAJOR FUN @ DFO'S YOUTH IN FILM CONCERT, JUNE 16



A huge crowd packed Gugu Dlamini Park, next to the Workshop.

The "Youth in Film Concert" sponsored by the Durban Film Office, was held at the Gugu Dlamini Park opposite the Workshop on Youth Day, June 16. CHRIS MASON reports.

FEATURED ARTISTS included KB, Skwatta Camp, Cashless Society, Illuminating Shadows and many more. Cashless Society also took time out from their hectic schedule to play a gig with local hip hop talents Illuminating Shadows and the Nomads at Burn the previous evening.

The concert started at 10h00, with a large stage and screen showing local and international artists and a powerful sound system thumping to the bass line of some funky house, setting the scene for an enjoyable day of music. With an audience of about a thousand strong assembled on the grass, and more milling in from Durban's CBD, Cashless Society hit the stage at about 12:30, and proved so popular that the only thing to be heard over the roar of the crowd was one of the Cashless MC's shouting "pipe down, OK now pipe down!".



Serious attitude: Tyrone & Gemini of Cashless Society (left) and KB and her troupe (right).



Peter Rorvik with the Durban Film Office's director, Mandle Nollmande.



Joe Carrol interviewing the Illuminating Shadows.

SCENES AT THE LAUNCH OF THE WOODEN CAMERA, JUNE 16



International Jury Members Simon Field and Dorothy Wenner with Nashen Moodley and Margaret McKenzie.



Big mates: Teboho Mahlatsi with Trancing in Dreamtime director Junaid Ahmed.

CREDITS

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