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Resistance Narratives in Documentaries:

A Narrative Rhetorical Analysis on *GMO OMG*

Organizational Communications Capstone Project

University of Portland

Fall 2014

Supervised by Alexa Dare, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

This paper explores the elements of narrative within the documentary *GMO OMG* that contribute to the persuasion and motivation of audiences in food activist films. A narrative rhetorical analysis was used to identify the artifact, its objective and them main elements that contributed to the narrative. The analysis found that narrator perspective, thematic message, and audience were powerful in creating a resistance narrative within the documentary. Additionally the film used an anthropocentric perspective to engage and motivate audience members. This perspective emphasized that the use of GMO based seeds threatens the “American Dream,” leading into the final call to consumer-based action. The film is a key example of the power of combining the communicative tactics of documentaries and social movements.

*Keywords: narrative rhetorical analysis, resistance narrative, food politics, anthropocentric perspective, GMO OMG*

### **Introduction**

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have been in the American food supply for the last 20 years (Food and Drug Administration). However, only recently have American citizens become aware of the potential issues of these bioengineered products. Within the last few years, ballot measures across 29 separate states have been introduced in the hope of labeling GMOs in food products under the argument that people have a right to know what is in their food. The most notable cases began in California in 2012 and Washington in 2013, where measures failed by narrow margins. In 2014, Vermont became the first state to successfully pass the GMO initiative without neighboring clauses that Maine and Connecticut required. Most recently however is the fight for Measure 92 in Oregon that spent millions of dollars fighting on each side and failed by a margin of 809 votes (Ballotpedia). The narrowness of this margin allowed the supporting side to demand a recount that will be completed on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014. In light of the most recent attempts to label GMOs, the pervasiveness of food politics is evident in American society. Food politics take the form of a social movement and thus fit into the rhetoric of both political activism and social persuasion.

The nature of food politics involves an integrated network of social mediums combined in an effort to engage citizens in the cause. Key to this movement is the simple concept of consumer rights to knowledge about their food (Lindenfeld, 2010). In order to achieve action, the political food movement utilizes listservs websites, social media, and documentary film. Within the last decade, an explosion of food-based documentaries has integrated into the mainstream media with the main goal of disrupting the fetishization, or romantic mystique, of food (Lindenfeld, 2010). While popular narratives of food, such as

those found on *The Food Network*, operate as romantic images of consumption, food documentaries aim to reveal the underside of the food industry. Most recently, GMOs have entered the food documentary circuit, highlighting the potential danger of technologically engineered food on our health.

The latest activist movement works towards the labeling of GMOs within food products and in a larger way disrupting the power of GMO based powerhouses such as Monsanto. The current project aims to analyze one such documentary, *GMO OMG*, for narrative themes that arise in food activist films. Narrative is a vital part of activist movements, as human reasoning does not rely solely on logical lines of argument, but rather on symbolic, or narrative, action. Narratives give meaning to human experience through metaphor and allow the audience to engage in the history, culture, and character of their society. Narratives also have the power to either reinforce or challenge societal norms (Clair et al., 2014), giving activist movements the key to persuading an audience towards political action. The narrative constructed in *GMO OMG* is essential to understanding the foundation of food based political action.

*GMO OMG* is the main artifact of the study. This is a good artifact to analyze because of its clear narrative line through the lens of a concerned father, focus on the GMO sector of food politics, and its current production date of 2013. The goal for this research is to identify the common narrative tools used by food documentaries to engage the viewer and incite them to action. This research also contributes to a larger body of work on the politics of food, by looking at the rhetoric of a social movement in combination with the persuasive power of a documentary.

### **Literature Review**

To gain an understanding of the form of narrative used in *GMO OMG* and put the structure of the film into perspective within the food activist movement, the following literature looks into the dynamics of resistance narratives and the techniques of food documentaries.

#### **Narrative Form**

Wood (2005) states that the basis of human belief and action is a compelling story. Narratives are the constructions of stories that aim to communicate messages to the consumer who receive them. Thus, Wood (2005) describes three main assumptions that accompany a narrative approach to communication:

[...] human beings make decisions and form beliefs on the basis of good reasons  
[...] human beings use a narrative form of rationality to judge the stories [...]  
[and] life is a set of stories and in choosing to accept some stories and to reject others, we continuously re-create our lives and ourselves. (pp. 107-108)

Clair et al. (2014) describes this as the narrative paradigm, or the way in which humans understand experience through the narrative context of history, culture, biography, and character. These assumptions come together to illustrate the primary function of narrative communication as a “form of human understanding that directs perception, judgment and knowledge”(Wood, 2005, p. 108). Understanding that human judgment is formed on narrative rather than logical argument (Clair et al., 2014), activist movements utilize stories in order to persuade audiences to their cause.

**Resistance Narratives.** Atkinson’s (2003) study of resistance narratives identifies creation of desired reality, culture jamming, and establishing “us against them”

dichotomies as key elements in persuasion. Narratives are “designed to impose [a] desired order”(Atkinson, 2003, p. 171) and thus incite the audience to accept the reality proposed rather than the reality that exists. If the audience accepts the proposed reality, they will more likely act in favor of the collective goals that the rhetor proposes in his narrative. In resistance narratives, different techniques are used to enact the desired change. Often social movements will attempt “culture jamming,” which aims at questioning the current corporate and capitalist ideologies and promotes consumer-based change (Atkinson, 2003). An example of culture jamming includes creating an image of the American flag with the stars replaced by corporate logos, indicating the shift in American values to support capitalism more than its people. Another example is covering police cars with flowers with the goal of implicating the need for change in police brutality (Atkinson, 2003). These examples show how a movement might shift the perception of an issue by critiquing the current corporate ideals and suggesting a change.

Another strong proponent of the resistance narrative form is the creation of an “us against them” dichotomy. In this dichotomy, “The storyteller wants to illustrate the cultural values held by the supporters of the status quo are reprehensible and harmful”(Atkinson, 2003, p. 172). Establishing the dichotomy and targeting the values of the opposite side is accomplished by strongly identifying the cultural values of each side (Atkinson, 2003). One example of a resistance narrative is the “Creative Resistance” campaign founded by *Adbusters* magazine. The movement began with “spoof ads” which mocked the style of popular corporate ads to shift the perception of the viewer. The movement continued with these ads and moved onward to vandalizing billboards to create different messages and question the system(Atkinson, 2003). Through these

actions, the campaign sought to create a different perception of reality, while questioning corporate based ideologies, and promoting consumer change. These three elements form the basis of resistance movements, all of which seek to change the status quo through manipulation of narrative.

**Framing.** Magnan (2007) would describe the resistance narrative as a frame by which social movements produce and mobilize meanings. Magnan (2007) highlights that framing accomplishes three central tasks: “diagnosing the problem to be confronted and attributing blame for the situation; proposing remedial action; and motivating action” (p. 292). By emphasizing the opposing sides of the resistance narrative as vastly different in values, the blame is attributed and a clear path is given to the audience and thus plays on the assumption of narratives that humans will form beliefs given good reasons and accept the story. The resistance narrative, then, is a prime example of narratives that work to shape perception, judgment, and knowledge of the audience.

**Narrative in Documentaries.** Narratives are the key element to persuasion in documentaries because they rely on personal emotion and intimacy. By proposing a singular, subjective perception on reality through a series of statements connected by narrative, documentaries engage in their goal of educating the public on social issues. Statements are considered assertions of facts or opinion, which may be conveyed through either direct expressions or indirect nonverbal means. These statements are connected in the form of a narrative, with the originator operating in a manner that the two combined will function as truth (Smith & Rock, 2014). Narrative is key to the acceptance of truth in documentaries within US culture as personal emotion and intimacy is highly valued as a standard of reality (Bergman, 2004). Specifically, “if a documentary in the US represents



a personal affective event with a resolution from a particular historical time and place that is accessible to a contemporary audience, then that representation is construed as historically accurate”(Bergman, 2004, p. 23). Personal based narratives are vital to obtaining belief in documentaries because they connect statements of fact together. The narrative establishes a cohesive line of thought through the intimacy of a narrator’s life and builds the documentary into a story rather than a logical argument, unaccepted by the audience.

Documentaries gain persuasive power through personal and emotionally packed narratives, while social movements use the rhetoric of resistance to shift perceptions of society and motivate action. Arguably these two forms of narrative can combine to both question the current reality and persuade the audience to support the collective goals through personal connection. A resistance narrative within a documentary would have significant emotional power to persuade the audience into the beliefs of the social movement, which focus on the disruption of current societal practices, and motivate them to political activism.

### **Food Documentaries**

The main goal of any given documentary specific to food production and processes is to engage and motivate the audience towards changing the system of food. These documentaries utilize narratives interspersed with institutional fact in order to education while capturing the attention of the audience. These sequences seek to paint non-organic food and distributors negatively while building up the organic farmer to finalize in a call to action. These documentaries aim to create a counter narrative to the

romanticized Hollywood understanding of food in order to disturb the viewer and form new knowledge.

A typical structure for food documentaries involves dividing the film into chapters that focus on the problem areas of the agricultural system (Lindenfeld, 2010). The larger overall narrative is thus split into smaller narratives, some of which may feature ordinary people becoming more knowledgeable about food and rising to activism (Flowers & Swan, 2011). Lindenfeld (2010) emphasizes that:

Moving back and forth between personal stories and institutional practices ensures that the film can deliver important facts while creating a compelling narrative that emotionally engages its spectators. Its strategy is highly effective in providing information to viewers who know little about the food system. (p. 382)

The audience is able to follow this path of information through the use of direct messages and systematic critique. Lindenfeld (2010) highlights that from the beginning audience members quickly learn they will be unearthing the mystery of food. Using chapters creates a system for the audience to follow and highlights the key points for the audience to build knowledge from and reference later. The creation of structure is key to keeping the audience in line with the path of discovery through the shifting of personal and institutional knowledge.

In the construction of knowledge during these narratives, scientific knowledge in service of corporations (i.e. GMO production) is presented as “Frankenstein foods,” removing industrial food from nature (Flowers & Swan, 2011). The opposite narrative displays farmers within nature-based settings rather than laboratories, establishing them as a true, better, form of food production (Flowers & Swan, 2011). In order to understand

these perceptions, Flowers & Swan (2011) established a template that allowed them to organize documentaries into three key sections of representational techniques, orientation, and organization. Representational techniques focus on the verbal, musical and visual dimensions that produce the film's purpose. Orientation consists of camera angles, close ups, and distances that establish how the viewer relates to the objects on film. Organization focuses on the form of the film which produced an argument structure that in turn persuades the audiences through narratives, time or scene length. This template allowed Flowers & Swan (2011) to break down meaning and examine how nature/science and experts/lay people were represented, which in turn build the foundation of food knowledge in documentaries. The creation of food knowledge paves the way for to the final product of food documentaries, motivating action. In the finale, food documentaries focus on a call to action, often with inspirational music and statements. These statements demand change and illustrate a strategy for the consumer to participate in, often engaging the viewer in cultural, political, and economic methods (Lindenfeld, 2010). Thus, as Lindenfeld (2011) highlights, food documentaries differ from mainstream representations of food, such as *The Food Network* or other Hollywood films, by examining the production and distribution of food, not just the consumption.

In their study on consumer perceptions of food, Holt & Cartmell (2013) note that a growing distance between the consumer and the producers of food has led to increased reliance on media as the main site for information on food safety. In order to determine this, the researchers hosted a free viewing of *Food Inc.* at a university and surveyed the participants pre- and post-viewing regarding their perceptions of the agricultural industry. The affect of the film showed significant differences in opinion regarding the safety of

food and animal treatment. Results showed that those who have no knowledge or experience with the agricultural sector, may in fact rely solely on the media to form their perceptions (Holt & Cartmell, 2013). Consequently, narratives within food documentaries have a strong power to influence the opinions of their audiences and as a result, their buying behaviors.

Key to all food social movements is the consumers' right to know about their food. With growing distance between the farm and the dinner table, the politics of knowing who produces what and who is "in the know" about production has become a critical point in food politics. Taking from this, the majority of food documentaries utilize knowledge as a method of exposing the truth and lifting the "veil of secrecy" on food production in an effort to shift consumers from ignorance to informed activists (Flowers & Swan, 2011). In order to understand the impact of documentary food films, Lindenfeld (2011) assessed them by looking at how they communicate a message, engage the audience, and produce and circulate the film. Specifically within her analysis on the filmic text and the methods of communication, Lindenfeld (2011) found disparities in the production of messages. While some used narrative and interviews, others showed raw footage allowing the audience to form opinions of their own. However, as Bergman (2004) notes, "The audience experiences a vicarious pleasure in viewing another's representation with none of the risk of interaction as well as none of the apparent work in the production of knowledge"(p.25). Thus, the form, style and content of the film's narrative are key to the success of motivating action (Lindenfeld, 2011).

Frequently documentary films use an anthropocentric perspective, focusing on the effects to humans' health and stability, rather than the effect to animals or the

environment. Framing environmental issues within the veil of human concern is often the most effective way of bridging less significant issues into their daily lives (Lindenfeld, 2010). Connelly argues, in this way “the view that our duty to [the nonhuman world] is derived *indirectly* via a recognition of what we owe to human beings”(as cited in Lindenfeld, 2010, p. 383). From this perspective narrators can focus on human concerns, which is more likely to encourage behavioral change (Lindenfeld, 2010). It is important to note, that while food narratives use knowledge as a rhetorical device to expose truths, they still function as representational mediums, which characteristically reveal incomplete pictures in order to bias the viewer toward the desired understanding (Richardson-Ngwenya & Richardson, 2013). Most common to these films, however, is the “concerted effort to engage people as active citizens and political agents of change. Many of the films' Web sites have calls for action and enable people to sign up for listservs that keep them apprised of (and hopefully involved in) food-related issues”(Lindenfeld, 2011, p. 156). Documentaries then serve as jumping points to engaging as political, economic and cultural citizens (Lindenfeld, 2010).

### **Research Questions**

Based on an analysis of the literature, the current study asks the following research questions:

RQ1: How does GMO OMG function as a resistance narrative?

RQ2: How do the narrative elements used motivate the audience to action?

RQ3: How does GMO OMG contribute to the larger body of work in food politics?

### **Methods for Narrative Analysis**

To determine the narrative elements that contribute to audience motivation and resistance dimensions I conducted a narrative criticism of the film *GMO OMG*. I chose to use narrative criticism because it highlights the connection between the storytellers and the audience. In particular, a narrative criticism engages in the particular methods by which a storyteller involves and persuades the audience into his or her beliefs. This method will reveal how food documentaries utilize narratives to promote and motivate audience members to becoming food activists.

In order to narratively analyze *GMO OMG* I used Foss' (2009) procedures for narrative criticism. These procedures are to identify the artifact, identify the objective and identify the features of the narrative that achieve the objective. As stated in my introduction, I chose *GMO OMG* particularly for its narrative structure. As discussed before, documentaries rely heavily on the narrative to put statements of fact together (Smith & Rock, 2014). For this reason, a narrative perspective is effective in determining how the audience is persuaded into belief. A narrative must meet four requirements: it must contain two events, it must be temporally ordered, the latter events must be dependent on the early events, and it must be a unified subject. In *GMO OMG* three primary events determine the narrative. The narrator, Jeremy Seifert has children, which leads him to discovering the many chemicals that may harm them, including GMOs. Upon this discovery, Seifert desires to know more about GMOs and sets off on a road trip to discover more information. These events are temporally ordered and are reliant on the previous events to occur. Additionally, these events are unified in the setting of Seifert's

family and his quest to protect them from potential damaging effects of GMOs. The objective of the film is to educate and motivate the audience to activism against GMOs.

The narrative achieves this objective through three main elements: theme, narrator, and audience. Theme is defined by Foss (2009) as a general idea illustrated by the narrative. This is understood as what the “narrative means or is about and points to the significance and meaning of the action” (Foss, 2009, p. 314). The narrator is can be presented directly or in a mediated format. A direct presentation of the narrator has a hidden persona, which speaks over events while the audience witness action. A mediated narration hosts an actual person who informs the audience of events and characters while present. Within a narration, the point of view that the narrator takes is the perceptual and psychological view in the presentation. An audience is the people to whom the narration is addressed. The audience can be used as a rhetorical device through their active participation in the narrative, assumptions made about them, or how they are addressed (Foss, 2009).

A number of films exist regarding the nature of food and GMOs specifically. *Food Inc*, *Forks over Knives*, *Genetic Chile*, *GMO OMG*, and *The Seed of Death* were viewed to gain an understanding of the structure of food documentaries. *GMO OMG* was selected for its narrative style, the focus on GMOs, and relevance to current political topics. The film was watched five times and stopped periodically to transcribe quotes. The first viewing focused solely on gaining an understanding of the movie and its structure, no notes were taken. After reviewing Foss’ (2009) narrative elements, theme, audience, narrator, and temporal relations were selected as elements to take note of in the next viewing for their relevance to the topic and observed presence in the film. The

second viewing consisted of taking notes by hand on these elements, and later reviewing which of the elements was most present. Temporal relations was eliminated for its lack of evidence. The third and following viewings consisted on taking more extensive notes on each area of focus and transcribing quotes by hand in a notebook. These notes were then compiled for analysis.

### **Analysis**

The narrative of GMO OMG takes the form of a father, Jeremy Seifert, seeking answers regarding the food he feeds his family. The main kernels, which lead to this journey of discovery, are the birth of Seifert's children that lead him to recognizing the dangers within the food system, his initial research on GMOs and finally the burning of Monsanto seeds in Haiti following the earthquake. These events spark Seifert's project of uncovering truths about GMOs and establish him as an ordinary family man trying to take care of his innocent children. The ultimate objective of Seifert's narrative is to educate the audience, at the same time as he educates himself, and entice them to action against the use of GMOs. This objective is accomplished through the major theme of the narrative, narrative point of view, and targeted audience.

### **Theme**

Throughout the various personal interviews and idyllic family sequences, Seifert establishes a general idea that the system of GMOs threatens the continuity of families and life. This theme is important to the narrative because it connects to any given audience member who is part of a family and establishes GMOs as a threat to the health and regeneration of said families. Theme as stated by Foss (2009) is the general idea illustrated by the narrative. More specifically, it is what the "narrative means or is about



and points to the significance and meaning of the action” (Foss, 2009,p. 314). The theme was identified through repeated sequences in which Seifert questioned the safety and continuity of his family in relation to GMOs and heralded alternative methods as righteous efforts. Seifert establishes the threat, emphasizes the loss it creates, and provides a solution. The creation of fear acts as a motivator for the audience to build awareness and take action against the companies or systems that contribute to the threat against their homes.

**Establishing a Threat.** The opening sequence of the film acts as foreshadowing of the threat GMOs will represent. A reading of Wendell Berry’s poem “The Peace of Wild Things” is laid over images of nature, children, and the cosmos. The key phrase pulled from the poem, “and I wake in the night at the least sound/ in fear of what my life and children’s lives may be,” establishes the tone of fear within the narrative for future generations. However, this fear is countered with the continued message of the poem, “When despair for the world grows in me[...]I go and lie down where the wood drake[...]I come into the peace of wild things.” This peace wrought from the pure experience of the environment builds the solution to such fear as the common inheritance of the land. The expression of fear and solution through the land provides the backbone to the narrative theme. The threat of GMOs against the family establishes fear and must be countered with the purest forms of life, unaltered seeds.

Seifert builds the threat of GMOs through a case study of Haiti following the earthquake. Despite their desperation, as displayed through numerous shots of broken buildings and tent cities, the people were protesting seeds provided by Monsanto, the GMO giant from America. Key language, such as “the seeds of death,” “poison,” and

“loss of food sovereignty” cast doubt upon GMO seeds and emphasizes unaltered seeds as “seeds of life.” Seifert narrates, “They believe that the seeds of life are the common inheritance of all humanity, as numerous and diverse as the stars above, owned by none and shared by all,” as shots of farmland transitioning into the cosmos flash across the screen. Glorifying the unaltered seed as “shared” and “diverse as the stars above” emphasizes in contrast how the GMO seed is not. The people have no right to the GMO as it is patented, the GMO is not diverse as the unaltered seed is, and the GMO benefits only one rather than all. The GMO is rooted within a system that does not seek to aid the family or the sustainability of life, and thus loses the support of the audience. By discrediting GMOs and the companies who promote them through specific language surrounding the opposing sides, the audience can be moved toward awareness and action.

**Promotion of Loss.** Seifert moves on to emphasize the loss of tradition through personal testimonies and research that displays the inability of current and future generations to function the same as their ancestors. In an interview with Michael Adam, a hybrid seed dealer, he describes a time when his great-grandfather would pick the best ears of corn to save as seeds for the next year’s crop. It is evident by this testimony and the nature of Adam’s work that this is no longer possible, that he has no right to save the seeds, which he himself sells. The clear loss of familial tradition is pushed even further by the fact that Adam’s lives in the same house as his great-grandfather. Adam’s view that “the family farm is going by the wayside in a hurry,” solidifies the disappearance of family continuity. Further, it plays on the idyllic American dream, where owning land and passing on the family business is something that will be continued for years to come.

The loss of tradition is clear in Adam's testimony and plays on the audience's relation to their own family traditions, which have continued through generations.

Seifert highlights the loss of genetic diversity through his son's love for saving seeds. Seifert takes his family to Seed Savers, a farm that hosts a variety of non-GMO seed strains. While shots of his children playing in the gardens and running around in barns show on the screen, Seifert narrates:

We learn that in the last ten years in the US, up to 93% of our crop varieties have vanished. They are gone for good because we have replaced diversity, seed saving and sharing, and the farmers themselves with the corporate run industrial monoculture. The sheer immensity of what we have lost is a tragedy on its own, but its more that losing the beauty and flavor of those varieties [...] Loss of diversity threatens our very survival on this planet.

Seifert's language is heavy with accusation and paints GMOs as an evil that will lead to the demise of the earth. While potentially excessive in his implications, the images of innocence in his sons playing in a barn crossed with the threat of GMOs to the very existence of life demonstrates to the audience how their own children will not be able to live in the same way as them. Following this, Seifert is shown driving through farmland and reaching out to it while wishing to "take back the land for my children." This imagery solidifies the inability of the American family to provide to their children the same life that they lead due to corporate tactics they had no choice in. The loss of freedom evident in this narrative contradicts the very essence of America, and pushes the viewer to change the system that took away their rights.

**Providing Solution.** Musical and visual aids emphasize non-GMO crop diversity as the solution to the threat of GMOs. The reverence for crop diversity is found in Seifert's trip to a seed bank in Norway. Seifert narrates the description of the seed bank as if a fairy tale to his sons as Executive Director, Cary Fowler, walks through the underground tunnel. Choral music begins softly and increases slowly as Fowler goes through multiple sparkling iced doors. As Fowler finally reaches the last door, the choral music reaches its peak and the scene shifts to an image of the stars at the opening of the door. The seed bank is portrayed as a godlike savior to the world's decreasing seed diversity. This is accentuated by the purpose of the seed bank being described as a "common heritage," "insurance policy," and "responsibility to each other." Portraying the bank as such ensures that the audience puts trust in the idea of seed diversity. The audience is by default against the systems of GMOs that work towards uniformity and thus the loss of life.

The use of powerful language through cases and personal testimonies establishes the systemic use of GMOs as a threat against the American family and the continuity of its traditions and values. By establishing fear for future generations, the audience is motivated to work against the use of GMOs. The solution of this issue is presented as a connection with pure, unaltered, and diverse forms of seeds. Systems associated with such diversity are presented as idyllic or godlike operations, which will save the "common heritage" of the earth. The use of threatened continuity of family as a theme supports the objective of motivating the audience to activism by associating their own lifestyle as one that is under attack and emphasizing the systems by which their lifestyle

will be saved. The theme is accomplished largely through the personal perspective of a father, Seifert, who narrate the quest of discovering the hidden threat of GMOs.

### **Narration**

Seifert functions as a mediated narrator, which is defined as informing the audience of events, knowledge, and other characters while being present within the narrative himself (Foss, 2009). Adopting the point of view of a concerned father, rather than a researcher or general screenwriter, Seifert relates to the audience in a more personal way and gains their trust. Using a questioning tone throughout much of his narrative, Seifert casts doubt upon the GMO system and emphasizes the consumer's right to know what they are feeding their families. In doing so, Seifert provides the audience a familiar perspective and gives them a path to gain more knowledge.

Seifert employs his son, Finn's love of seeds as a building block for his quest for knowledge. Seifert opens with a sequence illustrating his family, the interests of his children, and his efforts to protect them from harmful substances. By listing items such as BPA in baby bottles and lead in children's toys, Seifert connects with audience members who have gone through similar struggles. Additionally, Finn's excitement for seeds and giving lessons to his father draws on the audience's experience with children's innocent fascinations. Through his concern for his family's health, Seifert discovers a lack of community knowledge on GMOs despite their presence in food. Seifert emphasizes the troubling nature of this by questioning, "How is it possible we are all so clueless about one of the most essential things in our lives?" He further describes his attitude as "uneasy" and desire to understand something so "basic" seems reasonable. Seifert's connection with the audience over fatherhood gives him credibility and allows his

questions to be taken as reliable. His emphasis on the basic quality of his question further pushes the audience to feel they cannot sit back and refuse to educate themselves. If he as a father is going to protect his children, then another other parent will and must do the same.

After establishing the audience's inability to sit back and do nothing, Seifert begins to cast doubt and establish fear around the GMO system. While eating food with his children, Seifert questions the reliability of Monsanto's three-month studies due to their refusal to release raw data, "Were they hiding something? Were we all part of some gigantic experiment?" The threat of being a part of non-consensual research is powerful in creating fear and outrage, particularly within a democratic society of freedom and choice. Seifert moves on to cast doubt on typical food sources by creating "GMO goggles" for his kids and having them look at food stores. While clearly a game for his children, the song "Highly Suspicious" plays as his sons stand in front of Wal-Mart, Subway, or Jack in the Box with a "GMOs" sign. He repeats this image later during a family road trip, having his sons stand in front of Monsanto corn fields with the goggles and sign while info graphics on the presence of GMOs in food substances flash across the screen. Seifert uses the innocent game for his children to be involved in his work, but in the process casts a darker shadow on the food industry as a whole. The inability of his sons to see the GMOs with goggles illustrates the lack of knowledge for consumers and hidden substances within their diets.

Seifert's displays of regular family activities distorted by GMOs functions as an emotional tactic to both disturb and pull sympathy from the audience. The most notable example is taking his sons to play in fields of corn. As picturesque as the image sounds,

Seifert fears for his sons' health due to the pesticides within the corn and bundles them in hazmat suits and masks. Rather than children laughing and playing in fields of plenty, the children are stumbling and struggling to breathe, strongly reminiscent of soldiers of chemical warfare in their masks. The innocence of play is taken away and instead play serves as a distortion of desired reality. Seifert moves to a tone of exhaustion with his quest. The constant threat of GMOs against his family is straining and his solution becomes a camping trip where the threat is all but diminished. However, this is disproven when his son catches a fish and it is discovered that the fish are GMO fed. Seifert despairs, "Is there anything sacred left?" His question evokes fear and hopelessness as a result of institutions that support the destruction of nature. The audience feels pain with Seifert as the next scene displays his family in conflict and stress over the constant interruption of GMOs on daily life. An ice cream truck enters the neighborhood, but Seifert does not allow his sons to join. Seifert equally feels his children's frustration stating, "who doesn't want to buy their children ice cream on a hot summer day?" Seifert struggles with maintaining his family's safety while also maintaining American culture. The audience can relate to these hard choices over what is right or healthy against the mainstream practices. Seifert ultimately draws sympathy from the audience by emphasizing how reducing GMOs mean opting out of culture and traditions, something that is precious to the family and childhood.

The emphasis on a parental point of view draws the audience in through similarity of experience or sympathy. Seifert's goal of protecting his family is noble particularly in the case of his innocent children. By questioning the ethics of GMO institutions, Seifert casts doubt and establishes his inquires as so basic and essential to family rights, that the

audience has no choice but to agree with his attitude. This point of view is vital to gaining the trust of the audience and enticing them to action.

### **Audience**

The audience is assumed to be consumers, most of whom are passive and uninformed about their products. The use of street interviews emphasizes the issue of education for consumers through their lack of knowledge about what GMOs are and what foods they are based in. This perspective is initially echoed in Seifert's narration and his path to knowledge seeks to resemble the same processes that a basic consumer could do or use to gain knowledge. However, through personal interviews with experts, the narrative targets the audience directly and seeks action.

The first direct address of the audience comes in the Haitian case study. Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, the leader of the Peasant Movement of Papaye, discusses the role of the consumer stating, "There is a choice and I think consumers have an important role to play in pushing their countries, industrialized countries, to change their mode of agriculture." Jean-Baptiste thus highlights the importance of the consumer in a capitalist society through the power of demand for products. Statements relating to the consumer directly attract the audience as everyone falls within that role. The stress on choice demonstrates the audience's assumed lack of knowledge about their role. An assumed lack of knowledge is also seen in Ken Roseboro's testimony on consumer education, "I think the biotech industry would like to keep it that way, that people remain unaware of this issue because, [...] the more people know, the more they are shocked and surprised [...] about this whole issue and the potential negative impacts on human health and the environment." Roseboro states that consumer education is key, encouraging the audience



to gain knowledge about their products in order to make informed decisions. In combination with Jean-Baptiste's message, the consumer is directed to be an informed consumer whose choices are capable of change within the food industry.

The most notable address to the audience is the closing credits where the audience is encouraged to first consume wisely and second be an activist. The credits emphasize that while consumer choice is valuable, governmental action is vital to true change. This point in the film no longer considers the consumer uneducated, but rather informed and able to make the "right" decisions. By addressing the audience directly as consumers the objective to educate and persuade the viewers to action is approached clearly.

### **Conclusion**

*GMO OMG* utilizes the culture jamming and "us against them" dichotomies established in resistance narratives. These techniques succeed in framing the issue of GMOs as a choice between the family and genetically modified foods. By doing so, Seifert succeeds in positioning the audience in favor of social and political action.

Resistance movements rely heavily on the assumption that narratives are key to human perception, judgment and knowledge (Wood, 2005). Through narrative, social movements are able to question the current reality by proposing another in which values of each side are pitted against each other in favor of the resistance (Alexander, 2003). In *GMO OMG*, the use of a family based narrative highlights the morally questionable aspects of the opposing supporters of GMOs. The narrative perspective of a father pushes the audience to understand the story from the standpoint of family, typically a deeply emotional bond. Seifert gains the support of the audience through his protective nature over his sons as he attempts to find the true threat of a GMO to his family. The

impossible nature of this quest casts doubt upon GMO manufacturers, thus establishing a fear of the unknown. Here the audience has a choice to side with the family or the hidden nature of the GMO. The dichotomy of family against corporation is the first step of resistance narrative techniques.

With dichotomy established, Seifert moves further by establishing a reoccurring thematic message. This message communicates that GMOs are a threat to the American family culture. At every turn, families, Seifert's in particular, are being severed from their traditions and from leading the same lives as the generations before them. What drives the point home however is that the inability to lead the same lives as their fathers is not a display of upward mobility, but rather a decline in overall well-being. The narrative targets capitalist, corporate based institutions as the root cause of these troubles as they have elected themselves as owners of the new form of life, GMOs. The negative depiction of corporations is particularly clear through animated sequences within the film. One in particular illustrates how GMO seeds are a cash crop through the images of money symbols being dropped from planes like seeds, growing from the ground, and being picked and put into our food. The sequence indicates that we are using and protecting GMO seeds while risking our health for capitalist benefit. This acts as a culture jamming method, leading the audience to question their current societal system. The narrative concludes with the final portion of culture jamming, the promotion of consumer-based change. The audience is directly targeted by messages from active revolutionaries in Haiti, from testimonials on the suppression of consumer education, and direct instructions for change. These messages are enveloped in a sense of hope, through

music, human expression, and positive belief from experts on the ability to change. Seifert thus succeeds in framing his issue to result in the desired objective.

Framing is stated by Magnan (2007) as a diagnosis of the problem and attribution of blame, proposal for remedial action, and motivation to action. Seifert diagnoses the problem through his initial search for answers resulting in a tangled web of misinformation and unreliable scope. GMOs are an unknown threat to our health and are put into our food without our knowledge. Seifert attributes the blame of this issue on biotech powerhouses, such as Monsanto, and their legal policies that force farmers to utilize them. Seifert proposes initial remedial action as consumer education, which he demonstrates on his search for knowledge. Finally, motivating action culminates in the final sequence that addresses the audience as informed consumers who have a right to know what is in their food, the ability to choose what products they support, and to ultimately dedicate themselves to political activism to change policy.

*GMO OMG* ultimately engages the audience through an anthropocentric perspective. The film fits within the anthropocentric perspective that is prevalent in food based documentaries, by focusing purely on the effect to a human family rather than animals or the environment. Both animals and the environment are referenced as side evidence against the growth of GMO seeds. The concern for cows eating GMO based seed is only a concern because the potential hazard of GMOs is then within the beef that humans eat. Similarly, the only time the environmental effects of using GMO based seeds is brought up during a segment on organic farming, emphasizing how using pure seeds and no pesticides is better for the ground in which crops grow. However, the positive effects to the environment are only good because they support the growth of more food

on that land. The emphasis on human health, in particular the family, is more motivating as the effects are directly to the audience's own homes. While the audience never sees the cattle farms or the decaying environment, they can see sickness in their families.

Focusing purely on how human health will suffer is more impactful than trying to convince the audience to care about a cow. Using an anthropocentric perspective is a strong element of engaging consumers in the topic and motivating them to change their system.

These devices are key to establishing a convincing narrative that provides the audience with the information that they need to move to action. Specifically, consumers who know nothing of the food industry and thus rely on the media for their information (Holt & Cartmell, 2013) believe that they have experienced the same path to knowledge as Seifert and his actions pave the direction for their own response. *GMO OMG* provides insight to the elements of influence on the politics of food. Most prevalent of these elements is the emphasis on GMO interaction with the American family through perspective and theme. Using the family boosts into the larger aspect of the American dream, which relies heavily on the foundation of a family and its continuing generations. Reverting to the pure, unaltered farm not only saving the American family from the threat of GMOs, but it brings back the honest hard working farmer who built this country for his children and their children to come. Protecting this dream is present in every political arena and takes from a larger network of social movements.

Social movements focus heavily on the creation of resistance narratives, which breaks the traditional perspective of society and allows consumers to question government and corporate action. Within food politics, documentaries have begun to take

a new form in the creation of these narratives. *GMO OMG* is one such example of how one can use the persuasive power of a personal narrative and connect it into the larger resistance narrative of a social movement. Seifert is persuasive through his connection to families and dynamic as a simple guy just like the audience. The audience learns with him as he educates himself on GMOs. However, Seifert moves further than a persuasive narrative by using the forms of a resistance narrative to question the system and motivate change. The combination of the communicative tactics of documentaries and social movement has powerful possibilities, particularly within the food political movement where media has a strong influence on opinion.

*GMO OMG* provides a basis for further research into the dynamics of human motivation, specifically in regards to health and food politics. A narrative analysis of *GMO OMG* provides a solid foundation for understanding how the political food movement motivates their audiences to action. Narrative is a key element to connecting a story of facts into a stronger more relatable format that the audience can make sense of and believe in. Specifically within food politics, the emphasis on concerns for human health and a threat to the “American Dream” are key elements of persuasion that drive their messages across. These elements are ultimately communicated through the format of a resistance narrative, which discredits the current system and proposes a newer and better reality.

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