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The Market

by

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Abstract

The Market is a short science fiction essay film that explores ideas and values attached to the “local food” movement, and how they manifest themselves in the act of consumption. The film unfolds as a science fiction allegory, and traces the relationships between customers and farmers and their produce at a farmers’ market in a gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. The market is a place where food not only nourishes the customers’ bodies—it also represents progressive values about sustainability and individual responsibility, and is a place where customers connect the aesthetics and qualities of the produce to nostalgic ideas about the pre-industrial past. By focusing on local food, and following the consumption, exchange, and production of apples and heirloom tomatoes, *The Market* interrogates the assumptions underlying benevolent consumption, and questions the viability of small-scale production.

Project Description

The Market focuses on the people and products that meet at one of the fifty “greenmarkets” in New York City. This market is located in Fort Greene, a wealthy, hip, and gentrified neighborhood in Brooklyn. These characteristics make it in a sense unique, but they also make it a useful case study for looking at the food movement in the city and at the more general dynamics of food, class, and consumption.¹ The farmers’ market, and the ideas behind local food more generally, are part of a larger attempt to generate alternatives to the dominant economic

¹ Greenmarkets are run by the non-profit GrowNYC. The project started in 1970’s as part of the Council on the Environment of New York City (CENYC) with the purpose of improving quality of life through environmental programs in the city. Since then, the greenmarket initiative has expanded and implements programs in many neighborhoods with the goal of promoting regional agriculture and access to fresh food (GrowNYC 2018). Although markets are a product of city policy, they are also shaped by the demographics of the neighborhoods in which they are set.

system.² These alternatives seek to promote social change through small-scale agriculture and individual choices, and are based on ideas of benevolent consumption, the natural purity of certain products, and nostalgia for a pre-industrial past (Pollan 2008). As a case study, the farmers' market exemplifies how consumer politics can bring certain issues related to the environment, the treatment of animals, and the importance local small businesses to the forefront, while masking others related to access, class and labor.

In the film, the act of selling and buying food is but one plane of a densely multilayered social experience. To visit the market is not only to buy an apple, local eggs or berries; it implies a social encounter of the senses. Customers touch the products and feel their textures and shapes; they can smell the freshness of food and in some cases they can taste it, all the while satisfying their curiosity by asking questions about the way food is grown or the best way to cook it. Behind this sensory experience of the food itself is a panoramic display of the neighborhood coming together around a shared group of values, expressing their desires to engage in a certain level of exchange and relate personally to the producers of their food. This relationship between the producer, the commodity and the consumer presents an opportunity to analyze the farmers' market as a particular type of social and commercial experience in one of the most diverse and progressive cities in the world. Paradoxically, the farmer's market could be seen as reenacting old times where the interaction with the producer was essential; it erases the impersonal features of the long distance capitalist market, it shuns middlemen as the producers of waste, and it offers a reconnection with the commodity and the land and labor that produced it.

I became interested in the market while I was working at one of its stands several years ago. I observed that in many cases, the interactions that took place generated meanings far

² Other alternatives like "green commodities" and "fair trade" are similarly based on benevolent consumption, and often celebrate personal stories, "ancient" knowledge and closeness to nature.

beyond the products themselves. Many of discussions that took place seemed to be related to larger social and political decisions about the environment and consumption. I noticed that GrowNYC's own media, as well as the media and discourse around the city's restaurant scene and food shops, tends to reinforce this representation. This local media is part of a much larger industry that includes food documentaries and journalism that both documents and reinforces the consumption patterns of a trendy, health-focused middleclass lifestyle.

The "extra value" attached to certain products was particularly true for the most expensive luxury or niche items like heirloom tomatoes and honey crisp apples, which can cost more than twice as much as regular varieties. On one hand, heirloom tomatoes are known for the purity of their seeds, which results in a wide variety of shapes, colors and flavors. These tomatoes are difficult to grow and are more sensitive to transport to and from the market due to the thinness of their skin and high water content, which make them fragile and can generate lots of waste. Honey crisp apples, on the other hand, are a popular variety designed to contain the most appealing characteristics for customers. The apples tend to be very large, and are also much sweeter, more colorful, and crisper than more common varieties.³ At the Fort Greene market, the high demand for these products directly influences their price, and as a result, some farmers prefer to focus on these products instead of bringing a wider range of less expensive varieties of tomatoes and apples, or less profitable goods like peppers, eggplants, and other vegetables.

³ In order to enhance the apple industry, which is very important in New York, researchers' experiments with different breeds have resulted in a wide range of tastes, shapes and textures. In 1991 the release of the honey crisp made apple history. This "humble Minnesota apple," first developed in the early 1980's, became a national and international sensation when it was finally released. It turned into one of the "twenty-five innovations that changed the world, along with Google and the V-chip." The singularity of the honey crisp apple (it is very crunchy and extremely sweet) is the result of its particular molecular construction, as its cells are much larger than the cells of other apples. As in other cases of apple varieties that have been developed in recent decades, the appearance of honey crisp has been central; as an important apple researcher commented in the article, "customers buy with their eyes" (Seabrook 2011: 56/60).

I became more interested in the topic when I found out the markets were part of a government program based on the dual principle of providing a better quality of food to New Yorkers and promoting small, local farmers. Like many of the customers of the farmers' market, I am attracted to local, organic, fair-trade, rustic and handcrafted goods, as well as other ecofriendly and socially responsible ways to spend money. But at the same time, I see the politicization of these labels as problematic. Since "benevolent" and "environmentally friendly" consumption can make the consumer feel good while also simplifying other social and political issues, it is important to critically analyze these values.

In *The Market*, I approach these issues by combining tools and techniques from ethnography, as well as narrative and nonfiction film. I conducted research on academic literature and media to gather information and analyze the markets' principles and popularity. I collected data through participant observation and structured interviews with people who participate in the farmers' market as workers, customers, and farmers; some of the interviews were recorded in audio or video. I documented activities at the market and the farm by shooting observational footage through different seasons. The material I gathered informed my search for archival footage that dealt with food and consumption, and it also helped me write scripted scenes and the voice over that drives the film's narrative.

The result is a science fiction essay film based in the distant future. During the first scene, we learn that a catastrophe has destroyed agriculture and poisoned the land, and a large corporation run by scientists produces food in laboratories that has nutrients but lacks flavor. The corporation has also discovered a way to open what they call "The Archive," something of a door to the past, which allows their "agents" to navigate through images and sounds from time periods before the catastrophe. The story of the film follows the journey of one agent who is sent

into The Archive on a reconnaissance mission to find something called “flavor.” Most of the film takes place inside The Archive, which is primarily made up of shots and scenes from the contemporary farmers’ market and the farm that produces the stands’ goods. We follow the agent as she navigates The Archive’s “chapters,” attempting to discover the meaning of flavor for the corporation, and we trace her path as she collects information for the development of a prototype that will allow people in the future to purchase trips in the archive that will bring them closer to experiencing flavor.

The Market is an allegory that traces the relationships between customers, commodities and farmers. It explores how global forces relate to local stories, government policies and cultural expression. I choose to explore these ideas through film because I believe the media has a unique ability to promote critical thinking, and can enable analysis and facilitate discussions of specialized issues beyond academic fields. In my personal experience, the films that have encouraged critical thinking the most have used elements from narrative and non-fiction film in order to question the objectivity of images and the deliberate construction of visual narratives and observational footage. These films also tend to acknowledge the nuances of the frame, the filmmakers’ power and responsibility in creating meaning, and the active role of the viewer in this process.

The Market incorporates elements from different film genres, especially essay film and science fiction. Both approaches allow me to deal with familiar issues while maintaining a level of distance, to explore the market and the patterns of consumption in a critical way, and to problematize the traditional approach to food within documentary film. Within this structure, I use the voice over as a device to create tension and provide a counterpoint to the visual narrative.

The written and visual texts play off of each other and let the viewer engage with the story and work to create their own meaning.

The Market is structured around the agent's reports, which divide the film into chapters that follow the local food supply chain backwards from the market. In the film *The Archive* deals with a collection of footage from the past, and treats the contemporary observational footage from the market and the farm as archival records themselves. On the one hand, this allows me to play with the idea of nostalgia that is at the center of much of the discourse around small, family farms and local produce. On the other hand, it is a commentary on the constant production of media that help build our collective memory, and on how archives open the possibility of analyzing records and re-appropriating materials to give them another temporality.

Research Analysis

In *The Market*, I explored the borders between art and ethnography, and tried to bring out the advantages that each approach has for research and storytelling. My background in cultural anthropology influenced the way I approached the project. I was interested in understanding how relationships of power play out in society, the connections they have to history and culture, and the way they are documented and represented in media. The study of food, particularly the case study of the farmers' market, lets me combine my previous interests with new research and first hand experiences.

In popular media, food is commonly discussed in terms of its calories, nutritional value, and taste, but tracing its production and consumption can show the connections between societies, the environment, trade, economic systems, and history. For centuries, humans have gathered around food to socialize as family and community. Ingredients, dishes and cuisines

became markers of identity, culture and class. What, how, and where we eat makes up an important component of what we call “culture,” and as historical anthropologist Sidney Mintz argues, food has also long been a symbol of national identity (Mintz 1986; Pollan 2008:8). People’s “tastes” have also changed throughout history, and this process can be connected to various sociological factors related to trends and fashions that work to construct new eating habits in different societies (Mennell 2005).

My theoretical framework for exploring local food comes from my interest in history and political economy, and I attempted to place the representation of the farmers’ market within the popular historical framework put forth by the local food movement, particularly writers like Michael Pollan. Pollan and others emphasize that the local food movement is a reaction against large scale, corporate agriculture and mass produced food that reshaped American diets after World War II. By the middle of the 20th century, these authors write, industrial agriculture was promoting monocultures and the use of pesticides in order to produce large amounts of food, while improvements in the processing and an enlarged capacity to make food more “durable and portable” overlapped with corporatization and the rise of a consolidated food market. The innovative manufacture and transformation of food was accompanied by, and in many ways helped shape, the standardization of American taste (Mintz 1986; Pollan 2008: 97-133).

While the industrialization of food was breaking the “rules of nature,” it also represented an opportunity to confront population growth and the contingencies of World War II. After the war, however, “real food was rapidly disappearing,” and the effects of monocultures and industrialization were having a clear impact on the environment and public health (Pollan 2008:13). Although the American diet was starting to become more cosmopolitan as a result of soldiers who were introduced to foreign cuisines, and the opening up of trade in a greater number

of international products, the food industry in the United States was already firmly entrenched in the refining of whole foods and massive exploitation of the land, and both matters became part of political debates and social movements by the 1960's (Mintz 1986; Pollan 2008: 97).

Around this time, less nutritious, mass produced food led to the emergence of the organic agriculture movement, which opened the ongoing discussion about the relationship between the environment, humans, and what we eat. On the one hand, nutritionism and dieting became more popular as a result of the convergence of governmental, corporate, and scientific interests that were defining the eating habits of the majority of Americans. But in his influential book *In Defense of Food*, Pollan discusses how nutritionism has built up an ideology that disconnects food from its natural context and reduces it into fragments or components that people cannot see or even understand (Pollan 2008: 15/26-53). Pollan argues that the codification of scientific dietarian language in daily life “creat(ed) anxiety, confusion and diminish(ed) (our) ability to enjoy food by itself.”

There have been several responses to this development (most notably the so-called “slow food” movement), but Pollan sees the recent proliferation of farmers’ markets as the most promising and potentially liberating.⁴ According to Pollan, by 2008 “the number of farmers’ markets (had) more than doubled to more than four thousand, making it one of the fastest-growing segments of the food marketplace.”⁵ They represent an opportunity to access better

⁴ Mass produced and “fast food” had dramatically affected eating habits, reducing the time and money invested in the preparation and consumption of food. In the 1980's, the Slow Food movement emerged in Italy, proposing a new relationship between producers and consumers that “the industrialization of our food has destroyed.” This movement promotes the revaluation of quality over the quantity of food that people consume in contemporary societies: “to eat slowly, then, also means to eat deliberately, in the original sense of the word, ‘from freedom’ instead of compulsion,” and has since spread to many other industrialized countries (Pollan 2008: 53-54/194-196).

⁵ GrowNYC has developed food alternatives for communities who want to improve their quality of life through projects such as community gardens, recycling initiatives, educational programs and the greenmarket project. Greenmarket was created in 1976 with two missions: “to promote regional agriculture by providing small family

quality food and to have an impact on the food industry by reducing industrial consumption and providing benefits to local farms. This movement also allows consumers to explore new varieties of products, and to eat them during their season, resulting in more nutrients in our bodies and health improvements. The farmers' market, furthermore, is an option for the consumers to be conscious about the "story and identity" of the food while allowing the farmers to develop a sense of who is actually consuming their products (Pollan 2008:158-159). Pollan continues:

*"[In the industrial food chain] a wall of ignorance intervenes between consumers and producers, and that wall fosters a certain carelessness on both sides. Farmers can lose sight of the fact that they're growing food for actual eaters rather than for middlemen, and consumers can easily forget that growing good food takes care and hard work. In a long food chain, the story and identity of the food (Who grew it? Where and how was it grown?) disappear into the undifferentiated stream of commodities, so that the only information communicated between consumers and producers is price. In a short food chain, eaters can make their needs and desires known to the farmer, and farmers can impress on eaters the distinctions between what ordinary food is worth what it costs. Food reclaims story, and some of its nobility, when the person who grew it hands it to you. So here's a subclause to the get-out-of-the supermarket rule: *Shake the hand that feeds you*" (Pollan 2008:160-161).*

But of course this is not just a matter of choice. First, Pollan's ideal consumer is simply not concerned with the amount of money they have to spend to feed themselves and their family. Farmers' markets tend to be much more expensive than grocery stores, to say nothing of fast food restaurants. A single honey crisp apple or heirloom tomato, for example, can cost more than an entire meal from a fast food chain. Second, the information about the quality of food, and the refined taste that this information constructs, has specific social and economic origins. This is not merely a matter of "education," as Pollan strongly implies. The values that people hold, which are related to such things as health, the environment, and the "food industrial complex," exist within a hierarchy of needs. As Christine Barbour, professor of political science, said in a radio

farms the opportunity to sell their locally grown products directly to consumers", and "to ensure that all New Yorkers have access to the freshest, most nutritious locally grown food the region has to offer" (GrownNYC).

interview: “The luxury of worrying about the quality and sustainability of your food is the kind of thing you do when your major economic anxieties are soothed” (“Earth Eats,” NPR, October 18, 2012).

Issues of access, class, and the broader question of just how successfully the model of small-scale production under the farmers’ market model can be applied to modern society and large populations led me to be suspicious of Pollan’s positive interpretation. My experience as a worker in the market pointed me towards ethnographic work on similar topics. I found William Roseberry’s arguments particularly useful, especially his study on the segmentation of coffee consumption in United States during the early 1990’s, and I used his analysis of consumption patterns to organize my research on the culture of the farmers’ market. In his influential article, “The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States,” Roseberry discusses the relationship of the food industry (production and distribution) and advertising as a way to understand the consolidation of food markets in contemporary capitalism. Through the history of the expansion of specialty coffees in New York City, he explores the innovation of markets and the resulting reimagination and reorganization of the experience of consumption. He examines how the social and cultural “value” of these new coffees relates to the way customers reimagine the past, and how this perception is enhanced through “connections” with a more authentic precedent to the concentration and massification of trade. In his description, for example, the use of barrels or burlap bags in coffee stores represents the ambience of old style while appealing to consumers who prefer “natural,” “whole” and “fresh” food (Roseberry 1996).

Roseberry also touches upon the connection between producer and consumer in his discussion of “fair-trade” in the coffee market, and of the proliferation of new varieties of coffee from around the world. Since the early 2000s, the incorporation of “knowledge” about food and

beverages (their history, stories, and details of their production) has increased. In the example of coffee, the country, region, town, village and even the farm or family who produces or roasts the beans is presented as relevant to the consumer. The stories and visual representations of workers picking beans and of the rural landscape where they work produce an emotional effect on the consumer, particularly in urban contexts most removed from such scenes (1996). Roseberry's focus on these elements brought my attention to how similar marketing tactics and emotional connections between consumers and goods make up the experience of the farmers' market.

The farmers' market and Roseberry's discussion of coffee converge in the "mythification of the rural" and the incorporation of an extra "value" that knowledge adds to the products. However, there is a distinction. In the market, the farmers have to be present and represent their stand, and they interact with customers as part of the rules of the program. According to my conversations with the farmers, they are well aware of their role. They know the expectations of how they are supposed to act change with each market. In Fort Greene, for example, people are looking for a connection, a face who represents the roots of the food they are putting in their bodies. And the farmers do their job. Beyond just an apple or a peach, the unique quality and flavor of which is not questioned here at all, customers also pay for an experience that is full of symbols and meanings. And in a city where food culture is surging forward, and where the option of satisfying even the most extravagant eating habits seem to be increasing without end, the spread of farmers' markets are a welcome development.

My analysis of the farmers' market experience is attuned to the benefits that high quality, fresh food can bring to our lives, and to the fact that it does greatly benefit local farms.⁶ But I am more concerned with exploring the construction of sensibilities and taste through the lens of class

⁶ The farm that runs the stand that is very much the central character of the film was nearly bankrupt prior to the start of the farmers' market, and now it is thriving.

and consumption. For some people, shopping at the farmers' market it is a kind of enlightened consumer resistance to corporatization. I would like to suggest, however, that we problematize our practices of consumption through an awareness of class privilege and an understanding of how certain values become constructed and politically relevant. I see criticism, especially self-criticism, as a confrontational act that allows us to open discussions that can promote better conditions of life. The efforts and success of the farmers' market should be acknowledged, but I think that there is still a lot of work to do in order to provide access to good food for everybody (Gray 2013).

Several films and artists have shaped my artistic approach to this project, most notably Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread* (1933), Trinh T Minh-ha's *Reassamblage* (1982), Jorge Furtado's *Island of Flowers* (1989), and several works by Chris Marker, including *La Jetée* (1962) and *Sans Soleil* (1983). Among other things, these works taught me that there are many ways to structure and tell a story, and that there is great potential in borrowing elements from different genres. Most of these films have strong political content presented in non-conventional forms. In addition, they all point to the importance of postproduction, including the use of montage, juxtapositions, and the manipulation of images and sound.

Each of these works can be considered essay films. Most make extensive use of voice over and, with the exception of *La Jetée*, each combines observational footage with non-linear narrative elements.⁷ Taken together, they raise questions about the act of observing, the complexity of subjects (of observation or study), and the potential contradictions that often accompany their depictions in film and ethnography. This is particularly true in *Land Without Bread* and *Reassamblage*, both of which use a structure and voice over that simulate

⁷ *La Jetée* is mostly composed of staged still images.

ethnographic case studies, with exhaustive description and subjective analysis of people's behavior. While mirroring the ethnographic perspective, these films also provide a critique of the discipline of anthropology. As the films show, the role of the ethnographer is very similar to that of the documentary filmmaker. They share methods and techniques in their approach to their subjects, and occupy central positions in a process of observation that is often relational, multi-dimensional, and fundamentally subjective and rooted in power.

The filmmaker's alteration of "reality," the assumed subject of documentary, starts the moment they begin to capture images, and is extended and magnified during editing. The filmmaker's intentions determine the content and context of the frames; they are the one who is in control of creating meaning. Marker makes this clear through the dislocation of time and space he produces in *Sans Soleil* and *La Jetée*, which create an experience of disorientation as he dives into a discussion of memory and history. In many ways, the editing room is analogous to The Zone from Marker's *Sans Soleil*. As Rosenstone says, Marker's world is a place "where every image, every meaning can become something else" (1995:164).

Furtado combines many of these components in *Island of Flowers*, and in the end produces something that is altogether different from the films discussed above. Although he shoots many of his own images, Furtado also blends shots from Brazilian media and popular culture to create a kind of a narrative-as-collage. He presents his story not as an ethnography (like Buñuel and Minh-ha) or as a personal reflection on time and memory (like Marker), but in the form of a didactic monologue that traced the path of a single commodity, a tomato, from the farm that produced it to a garbage dump. After passing through a lengthy supply chain, Furtado's tomato is rejected by a customer and is finally picked over by animals and slum residents. His voice over takes on a distant, educational tone, as if it were a "letter to a Martian who knows

nothing of the earth and its social systems.”⁸ This level of removal allows the viewer to see the “normal” circulation of commodities as absurd, to see the familiar in a new unfamiliar way.

Thesis Production Process

My main intention for this project was to turn an ethnographic exploration into a visual narrative that stimulates critical thinking about consumption of local food and the culture around the farmers’ market. After several tests of structures and creative approaches, I was able to construct a framing device that let me explore my points of interests by borrowing elements from different genres. *The Market* became a science fiction essay film that blends observational and archival footage with scripted sequences and a voice over from the perspective of the main character. Looking back at my original thesis proposal, I was pleased to see my interests and artistic themes were in fact incorporated into the final film.

The main obstacle in this project was finding a device that could drive the analysis without being condescending to, or compromising, the subjects of the film. In my attempt to find the story, I shot several hours of observational footage of the market and the farm, community meetings, and demonstrations for workers’ rights. I filmed many stylized shots of food from the market. I conducted several interviews with workers from the farm and the market, and with customers, and I recorded sound from different locations. I researched archival material about media and local food.

In doing all this production work without a clear concept and form for the film, I ended up with a lot of material to integrate during postproduction. Logging and transcribing my content was time consuming, but these tasks expanded my knowledge of the larger subject and helped me to get to know my material well. Although my production skills improved considerably, it

⁸ This is how Furtado himself describes the film. <http://www.icoessentials.org.uk/film/ilha-das-flores>

was not until I stepped back from my timeline and started to write regularly that I discovered the potential of a fictional, scripted approach. The science fiction premise, and the voice over itself, let me craft my own narrative constructed with materials from different sources, and gave me the freedom to experiment with different visual and audio devices. Through the project, I learned the importance of writing in constructing the architecture of the film, and that is a skill I want to develop in my projects going forwards.

Audience and Exhibition

The Market seeks to promote conversations around middle class consumption, and I think documentary film festivals can be good venues for engaging in this discussion, especially since the audiences tend to come from the liberal middle class. I would also like to circulate the film in academic circles as a contribution to the field of ethnographic filmmaking or “visual anthropology.” And finally, I would like to organize test community screenings with small groups of people who are interested in issues related to the subject matter, in order to create space for conversation. In producing the film, I used archival footage that I collected online from the National Archives, Prelinger Collection, the New York Public Library, Archive.org, and other online sources. Most of the archival footage is in the public domain, but I recognize I will likely have to clear rights to all the images, video, and sound before organizing a public screening of the film. I will consult with an entertainment lawyer to determine whether any of the uses could be considered Fair Use.

After my experience in the program and making this film, I understand the production of cinema as a complex process with many layers. I learned about the importance of documenting moments through images and sound, of questioning the validity of these documents, and the

filmmaker's role in constructing a narrative. I think it is possible to learn and discuss history, memory, and politics through non-fiction film, and that the form presents media makers and audiences with the opportunity to grapple with the subjective nature of human activity in a unique way.

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