

McDeath: Suicide and Mourning in *Fast Food Nation*, *David's Redhaired Death* and *Super Size Me*

One of the unlikely threads tying together these three seemingly-disparate texts—a journalistic exposé of the fast food industry, a play about the built-in comfort of a meal that can be duplicated anywhere in the world, and a documentary about the deleterious effects of a 30-day fast food diet—is the need to create a narrative within which suicide can be understood and then mourned. The willfulness of the act of suicide is such that it inevitably involves its own narrative—be it through a note left behind explaining the motives, or by the manner in which each person chooses to die—the sudden, and often violent, cessation of life involved in suicide demands at least a legal reckoning. Autopsies must be performed, death certificates must be filed, the relatives of the deceased must be located and notified. These formal reports of the circumstances surrounding the death of a suicide do not provide an answer as to why the suicide itself took place. Those people the suicide leaves behind when ending his/her life have to find a way to incorporate the fact of this death into the ongoing and constantly unfolding narratives of their own lives. McDonald's fast food plays a sinister, indirect role in the death narratives contained within both *Fast Food Nation* and *Super Size Me*: first, because director Morgan Spurlock does not actually die while on his self-imposed high-fat McDonald's diet, and second, because "Hank," the eco-friendly cattle rancher Eric Schlosser befriends while researching his book, has no direct business ties to the McDonald's corporation per se when he kills himself. Sherry Kramer's play, by contrast, portrays a meal from McDonald's as a palliative that restores her protagonist's sense of well being and keeps the memory of her brother's suicide at bay. *David's Redhaired Death*, *Fast Food Nation* and *Super Size Me* depict the anger, grief and

anxiety experienced by the (would be) suicide's friends and family as well as the efforts of these figures to authorize a private counter-narrative to help them cope with their beloved's reckless/selfish final act.

Both *Fast Food Nation* and *David's Redhaired Death* begin their discussion of death narratives from the premise that the living live through an ever increasing number of the deaths of other people; in other words, that one's life is indelibly marked by the deaths of others. In the eulogy he wrote for Roland Barthes, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes," Jacques Derrida also talks about death as something the living experience—it is the living, after all, who mourn the passing of the dead, and who must bear up under the weight of all those deaths. In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida defines "The deaths of Roland Barthes" as "those of his relatives, those deaths that must have inhabited him . . . His deaths, those he lived in the plural" before finally asking, "But how did he 'live' them?" (*Work of Mourning* 52). In memorializing the death of his friend and colleague, Derrida acknowledges that his own act of mourning is but one more in a series of instances of mourning that Barthes himself experienced. Thus, Derrida looks to Barthes' writings of and about mourning to guide him as he seeks to live the death he cannot himself undergo—that of his friend Roland Barthes—who, in turn, cannot write about his own death after the fact.

Whereas Derrida's eulogy affirms the finality of Roland Barthes' own life as well as that of the deaths he experienced while living, *David's Redhaired Death* portrays death and life as endlessly repeating patterns that affect and interlink both the private and public worlds. The play opens with Jean, the 30 year old protagonist whose brother has committed suicide by jumping off a hotel room window, remarking upon the emotional weight that the deaths of others have upon the living. In a direct address to the audience, she says:

When my brother David died he had—oh, at least a couple thousand deaths. And he's still having them, in all the people that loved him, and that he loved. A remembered joke he told—a pair of shoulders shaped like his, seen for an instant in a crowd—the most ordinary detail of the most ordinary day—reminds us of him . . . And David dies again. In those he loved. (*DRD* 1)

While Derrida sees the accumulation of the deaths of others on one person (Barthes) to have an effect that can only be guessed at by outsiders, Kramer's Jean sees the cumulative experience of the deaths of others to be a communal experience. All of those that loved her brother David, as well as those people David himself loved, continue experiencing his death as long as they remember his life. Memory and mourning are forever intertwined in this formulation, as is a vast network of people who may or may not realize that their lives are thus interlinked. Most importantly, through this repeating pattern of recognition and death, of the memory of David as both once living and now dead, belongs to David as well, to the continuum of his life experience. In this one passage, Jean sums up the totality of her brother David's existence by adding up the deaths he had in life and those he continues to undergo from beyond the grave. David's suicide does not end his life so much as it perpetuates his death in others who must, in turn, mourn him again through narrative, by telling the story of his death and their own survival.

David's Redhaired Death depicts the circularity of this particular view of mourning by constantly re-enacting the moment when Jean learns of David's death but with an ever-increasing number of interruptions. In *Difference & Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze links the death drive to the eternal return as part of the cycle of repression and transference that interferes with how we perceive the passage of time. Deleuze argues that:

The eternal return is a force of affirmation, but it affirms everything of the multiple, everything of the different, everything of chance except what subordinates them to the One, to the Same, to necessity, everything *except* the One, the Same and the Necessary. . . . If there is an essential relation between eternal return and death, it is because it promises and implies ‘once and for all’ the death of that which is one. (*D&R* 115).

Throughout the play, David’s suicide is the repressed that keeps staging its “eternal return” for Jean, therefore requiring her to mourn through narration. Instead of repeating the story of his suicide, or of her learning about it, Jean tries to turn back time by conflating two different narrative times: a flashback to her thirteen-year-old self, and a more recent flashback to the night Jean and her would-be lover Marilyn, the Redhead, had agreed to finally consummate their relationship.

According to Deleuze’s theory of the relationship between repetition and death, the living use repetition as a means of coping with the burden of recognizing in the death of another a foreshadowing of their own eventual death. He contends that death should not be regarded as the merely the opposite or absence of life: “Death cannot be reduced to negation” (*DR* 112).

Rather, Deleuze regards death as a sort of transcendental state of the human experience recognizable in its eventual inevitability as well as its unpredictable uniqueness:

Death does not appear in the objective model of an indifferent inanimate matter to which the living would ‘return’; it is present in the living in the form of a subjective and differentiated experience endowed with its prototype. It is not a material state; on the contrary, having renounced all matter, it corresponds to a pure form—the empty form of time. (As a means of filling time, it makes no

difference whether repetition is subordinated to the extrinsic identity of a dead matter or to the intrinsic identity of an immortal soul.) (*DR* 112)

None of the three narratives I examine in this article incorporate any discussion of or concern about the fate of the immortal soul of the suicide. *David's Redhaired Death*, *Fast Food Nation*, and *Super Size Me* focus on the problem of “filling” the “empty form of time” occasioned by the (would be) suicide of the beloved through a narration that encompasses the transition from the suicide’s life to his death and the living’s “subjective and differentiated experience” of that death. Kramer’s play is unique among the three in its insistence on portraying the repetition compulsion that forces her protagonist, Jean, constantly to relive the very moment she would rather forget—the moment when she first learns of her brother’s tragic death, and the beginning of the end of her relationship with Marilyn.

McDonald’s comes into this cyclical play of recall and repression in *David's Redhaired Death* by providing an alternative way of perceiving time as both unchanging and also endlessly reproducible: repeatable. As she tells the audience, Jean’s goal in life since age thirteen has been to experience the same exact McDonald’s meal in a great multitude of different settings, thus incorporating change into a larger system of semiotic stability:

I wanted to order the exact same thing—a Quarter Pounder with cheese, a large Coke, a large fry—in Louisiana, in Mississippi, in Hawaii. In every state, in the map’s every Golden Arched-marked town. I wanted to say the same eleven words, pay with a five-dollar bill, receive the exact same change. Eat identical food, identically, ritualistically—two French fries, one bite of burger, one sip of Coke. (*DRD* 11)

Through this ritual, and the remembrance of its importance as a life goal, Jean keeps the terror of her brother's death at bay as long as she holds on to her idea of herself that has not changed since age thirteen. Back then, she had a plan but, most importantly, her brother David was alive. Jean goes to McDonald's to feel at home in different places, to seek out the thrill of adventure within a parameter of safety, and she uses the tale of her obsession with McDonald's as a circuitous way of postponing the narration of two deaths within the play: that of her brother, and that of her nascent relationship with Marilyn, The Redhead.

The very mundane nature of Jean's life ambition charms her listener—the Redhead, and the play's audience—precisely because it calls attention to its own lack of uniqueness. Eating at McDonald's has become such a familiar part of popular culture that the meal Jean fetishizes—“Quarter Pounder with Cheese, large Coke, large fry”—warrants no explanation. Eric Schlosser points to the central place fast food occupies within the American diet at the end of the twentieth century in *Fast Food Nation*: “The whole experience of buying fast food has become so routine, so thoroughly unexceptional and mundane, that it is now taken for granted, like brushing your teeth or stopping for a red light. It has become a social custom as American as a small, rectangular, hand-held, frozen, and reheated apple pie” (*FFN* 3). By claiming the very reproducible nature of this commonly shared phenomenon of eating fast food as her own, Jean draws attention to the possibility of choice within a proscribed system, as well as to the power of narrative to lend personal specificity and value to an otherwise anonymous event.

In *David's Redhaired Death*, Jean eventually undergoes the same narrative process to reckon with the personal toll her brother's suicide takes upon her life: the destruction of her and Marilyn's romance. Once again, McDonald's plays a defining role; Jean ritualistically leaves a trail of French fries leading from Marilyn's door to the foot of her bed where, on that ill-fated

night, the women try to overcome their mutual shyness and make love to one another. While the fries themselves are remarkable in their recognizable anonymity—they are from McDonald's, but indistinguishable one from the other—the lesbian lovemaking Jean and Marilyn are so hesitant to embark upon would mark a radical departure for each of them, highlighting the uniqueness of their common experience. Although each claims to have slept with a woman once before, both Marilyn and Jean regard themselves not only as heterosexual women but, more importantly, as particularly effective seductresses of men precisely because of their red hair. Faced with the other's auburn locks, Jean's and Marilyn's powers become neutralized. Their individual differences give way to the overwhelming sense of the Sameness experienced by the two women as the phone rings with the news of David's death. As foils, Jean and Marilyn experience David's death doubly—both together and in radically different ways—as either a concerned stranger or a distraught sister. The play itself, then, progresses as a series of aborted attempts to tell the story of David's "redhaired" death in the context of Jean's relationship with the Redhead, but also as an image of David's body spiraling helplessly downwards while his hair burned with the flames that had engulfed his room. Jean begins the tale and retreats into her memories of McDonald's, which act as a safe haven, while Marilyn urges her to tell the story straight through from beginning to end.

Schlosser faces such contradictory narrative pressures himself in the chapter of *Fast Food Nation* entitled, "On the Range." He gives in to the chronological imperative by telling the story of his meeting with "Hank," his pseudonym for a Colorado cattle rancher whose eco-friendly ranching techniques Schlosser clearly admires, from the beginning of their acquaintance to the shocking effect the news of Hank's suicide has on the reporter. As was the case in *David's Redhaired Death*, the suicide chronicled in this chapter of the book affects more than just the life

of the person narrating the events leading up to said death. While the future David's suicide cancels out in the case of Jean and Marilyn is the sexual manifestation of the women's desire for one another, Hank's suicide in *Fast Food Nation* creates horror because of the apparent selfishness of its timing. A father of two little girls, Hank nonetheless "took his own life the week before Christmas" (*FFN* 146). This particular comment about the timing of Hank's suicide conveys Schlosser's own tacit disapproval of his friend's actions. Schlosser does not reveal Hank's fate in the book until the last two pages of the chapter, after he has praised Hank's eco-friendly cattle management techniques and innovative ideas in the face of the mounting competition from the cattle trust lobby composed of shady meat packing conglomerates and greedy ranchers. Where Jean sought in her repeated and repetitive memories of McDonald's a retreat from the pain of the specificity of her brother's suicide and the end of her relationship with Marilyn, Schlosser explicitly sees McDonald's, the "nation's largest purchaser of beef" (*FFN* 136), as the primary reason behind Hank's suicide. He all but absolves his friend of personal responsibility for his action, though Schlosser's emphasis on the timing of Hank's death suggests that Schlosser cannot forgive his friend for branding all of his daughters' future Christmas celebration with the memory of his death.

Schlosser's use of chronological time to narrate the course of his acquaintance with Hank undoes the depressing proximity of Hank's death to his children's observance of Christmas by providing an alternative, and more positive, way through which to enumerate his considerable achievements. Although Schlosser uses the past tense when referring to Hank throughout the chapter, he does not reveal his fate until after he has contrasted his ecological "range management" (*FFN* 134) techniques to the assembly line approach to beef production and meatpacking favored by ConAgra, IBP, Excel, and National Beef and other large corporate

ranches. The end result of this narrative style is that the reader's first impression of Hank is untainted by the foreknowledge of his suicide, a situation that maintains a distance between his commendable business practices and the personal flaws of the man himself. However much Schlosser seeks to distance the emotional toll of the suicide from his portrayal of Hank as a representative of a sustainable cattle management policy, the writer's awareness of the secret he is withholding from his readers periodically breaks through the objective veil of his narrative. One example of this instance of the return of the repressed occurs when Schlosser describes his own reaction to the enthusiasm of Hank's words:

While Hank stood on the crumbling bank, giving an impassioned speech about the watershed protection group that he'd helped to organize, telling me about holding ponds, landscaped greenways, and the virtues of permeable parking lots covered in gravel, I lost track of his words. And I thought: 'This guy's going to be governor of Colorado someday.' (*FFN* 135)

In confessing to both his inattention to Hank's words and his admiration for the man while he was alive, Schlosser explicitly outlines the process of selective memory through which he has chosen to remember Hank personally and memorialize him publicly in this book. The very publicity of Schlosser's book and the prominence he gives to Hank's life and ideals give his wife, Susan, and their two daughters, Allie and Kris (*FFN* 135), a legacy to be proud of all the while relegating Hank's suicide to the status of a sad footnote to an otherwise heroic life.

In a book filled with death narratives and tales of disfiguring injury, Schlosser's account of Hank's suicide stands out as the most personal, the one death Schlosser experiences directly. Although he accepts the unalterable fact of his friend's demise, Schlosser postpones the use of the word "suicide" to describe the rancher's death until he talks about the plural deaths of

ranchers as a category. Schlosser only reports that “Hank died in 1998” and that “He took his own life” (*FFN* 146), thereby removing the stigma associated with suicide as a taboo or sign of weakness. As he finally reveals Hank’s fate to his readers in the chapter’s concluding section, “A Broken Link,” Schlosser progressively moves through the five stages of grief as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her landmark book, *On Death and Dying*. Schlosser exhibits denial when he says, “When I heard the news, it made no sense to me, none at all” (*FFN* 146). He goes through anger when he asserts that “The way he died seemed to contradict everything else about his life” (*FFN* 146). Bargaining is the most difficult stage to prove within this page and a half narrative; the closest Schlosser comes to it is when he says: “The man that I knew was full of fire and ready to go, the kind of person who seemed always to be throwing himself into the middle of things” (*FFN* 146). Schlosser’s depression manifests itself as he ponders upon the irony of Hank’s earlier appearance as a character in a non-fiction book which “combined text with photographs and told the story of a boy’s first roundup” (*FFN* 147), when the story had a happy ending. Signaling his acceptance of the inevitable, Schlosser reports that the real-life ending to Hank’s story was more tragic: “He was buried at his ranch, in a simple wooden coffin made by friends” (*FFN* 147). Schlosser carries out the work of mourning for Hank through repetition; not only does he celebrate the rancher’s achievements and innovative ideas again and again, but Schlosser’s use of suspense and revelation through his use of the past tense and chronological narration of the progress of his friendship demand a second reading of the chapter once he reveals the fact of Hank’s death.

The second way through which Schlosser displaces the event of Hank’s suicide from his personal knowledge of the man is by providing a broader context in which to understand this action as representative of a larger phenomenon: the increasing suicide rates of cattle ranchers.

Whereas Jean sought to personalize a common and banal every day experience—eating fast food—as her life goal and aspiration in *David's Redhaired Death*, Schlosser depersonalizes the pain he feels upon learning the news of Hank's death in *Fast Food Nation* by projecting it forward into the larger canvas of the problematic that concerns his book as signaled in the subtitle: "The Dark Side of the All-American Meal." Between reporting his friend's death and mourning his loss, Schlosser pauses to explain how the fast food industry is partly to blame for this tragedy. As mentioned earlier, he reads Hank's case as symptomatic of a more widespread problem faced by a whole subculture of people: "ranchers and farmers in the United States" (*FFN* 146). In the moral calculus, the fast food companies, of which McDonald's is not only the flagship enterprise but also the biggest consumer of beef, chicken and produce, are complicit in the rising suicide rate of ranchers and farmers which, at the time the book came out was, "three times higher than the national average" (*FFN* 146). The deaths of these faceless and nameless workers are Schlosser's to mourn and live, in Derrida's terms; they do not belong to Hank, despite his own suicide. To find a way to "fill the time" as Deleuze said, to carry the emotional weight of these cumulative deaths, Schlosser does his own moral reckoning:

It would be wrong to say that Hank's death was caused by the consolidating and homogenizing influence of the fast food chains, by monopoly power in the meatpacking industry, by depressed prices in the cattle market, by the economic forces bankrupting independent ranchers, by the tax laws that favor wealthy ranchers, by the unrelenting push of Colorado's real estate developers. But it would not be entirely wrong. (*FFN* 146)

As surely as Jean finds comfort in the repetitive consumption of the uniform product of fast food companies—McDonald's meals, to be exact—in *David's Redhaired Death*, Schlosser delights in

detailing the many different ways through which these businesses scheme and conspire against the success of the independent rancher and, even, against the individual consumer in *Fast Food Nation*. In portraying this suicide as a “prototype” in Deleuze’s words, this death narrative goes beyond providing an alternate reality of what *could have been* had Hank not killed himself, and instead depicts the future that may still befall other ranchers and farmers. By assigning part of the blame for both a particular death and also for the repetitive deaths of others to the fast food companies, Schlosser portrays them as faceless entities involved in an adversarial relationship with their customers, death mongers interested in profiting at any cost. The fast food industry may not kill people outright, but they provide both the means and the encouragement for would-be suicides to succeed in their self-appointed task.

While Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* balances the objective duties of investigative reporting about the fast food industry’s business practices compared to alternative modes of operation with a subjective experience of death and mourning, Morgan Spurlock’s documentary about the harmful side-effects of a fast food diet, *Super Size Me*, is a predominantly subjective first-hand experiment in both self-indulgence and isolation. Spurlock has less trouble keeping down a Super Size Double Quarter Pounder with Cheese Meal than he does in gaining access on camera to either representatives of the McDonald’s corporation or to Eric Schlosser himself.¹

The headline-making lawsuits brought by the guardians of two teenage girls against the fast food industry for making them fat (Pelman vs. McDonald’s Corp.) motivate Spurlock to document his own Mcquest: he embarks upon a self-imposed 30-day McDonald’s food eating regimen to document how such a high calorie, high fat diet affects an otherwise healthy adult male.² This experiment is overdetermined to the extent that Spurlock expects the outcome to be negative; he alters his entire lifestyle so as to conform to the fictional daily routine of a

composite “average American” whose constituent parts (amount of daily exercise, type of work activity, etc) he does not document very carefully. In radically changing his personal routine, giving up things he previously enjoyed, like exercise, and indulging in self-destructive behavior (eating fast food three meals a day), Spurlock demonstrates a kind of depressive behavior that might lead to suicide. His experiment is little more than a simulacrum of a non-existent original: few, if any, human beings consistently eat three meals a day at any one fast food establishment. In fact, the closest parallel to the quixotic quest Spurlock undertakes is the movie *Leaving Las Vegas*, an explicit suicide narrative where Nicolas Cage’s character goes on a drinking binge with the sole purpose of ending his life. Dr. Daryl Isaacs, one of the three doctors under whose supervision Spurlock undertakes his “Mcdiet,” repeatedly draws the comparison between the deleterious effect of alcohol on Cage’s character’s body in that movie and the growing impairment he documents in Spurlock’s liver function.

Whereas *Fast Food Nation* and *David’s Redhaired Death* focused primarily on the emotional after-effects of a suicide upon the living, and tried to devise narrative strategies to effectively turn back time, *Super Size Me* chronicles a suicide-in-progress, complete with dire warnings and predictions from physicians and nutritionists, and impassioned pleas from concerned friends and family. Repetition plays a more active role in this documentary film than it did in the play and exposé because the actions that constitute the would-be suicide (eating three meals a day) are inherently cyclical in nature as are the various steps Spurlock takes to track the progress of his experiment: doctor visits, consultations with the nutritionist, weekly weigh-ins, regular blood work screenings. Even Spurlock’s attempts to get in touch with the McDonald’s corporation, the erstwhile subject of his documentary, are repetitive in nature and endlessly futile.

Like Jean wants to in *David's Redhaired Death*, Morgan Spurlock travels around the country and orders fairly similar meals at different McDonald's restaurants throughout *Supersize Me*. He notices both the thrill of recognition of the familiar, but also observes some regional variations in the menu. Key among his self-imposed rules is that he will Super Size a meal whenever asked to do so by the cashier; this happens a total of nine times during the month the experiment lasts. The first time he Super Sizes the documentary delves into the subject by intercutting graphics that announce the passage of time from beginning to end of the meal—"ten minutes later," "fifteen minutes later,"—as well as close-up shots of Morgan Spurlock perspiring and laboring to swallow yet another mouthful of Double Quarter-Pounder With Cheese or French fries. The suspense culminates when Spurlock, finally overcome with nausea, leans out his car window to vomit the meal he just barely finished eating. A long shot of the vomit on the pavement of the parking lot ends this particular scene, entitled "McStomach Ache" in the DVD chapter menu. Although it is early in the documentary (it takes place on day two of the regimen), the vomit scene in *Super Size Me* corresponds to the paragraph describing the rising suicide rates among ranchers in *Fast Food Nation*, and the interrupted lovemaking in *David's Redhaired Death* as secondary death narratives within larger works because all three depict potential benefit gone wasted. Jean and Marilyn viewed their new relationship as a positive step after a series of disastrous love affairs with men; the dead ranchers could have somehow impeded, or at least, slowed the progress of the cattle conglomerates; the McDonald's meal could have provided nourishment, or at the very least, energy and calories, to Morgan Spurlock. Each in their own ways suffered a death themselves—the meal by being voided, the slowed process of the corporate take over of the cattle industry by meeting fewer obstacles, and the relationship by being forever associated with the grief of a loved one's death. In this way, each of these three

mini-death narratives incorporates death as both a prototype of future endings and as instances of change within repetition. They all provide an occasion for mourning.

After the abject drama of day two, Spurlock's diet and personal health do not face a major setback until days seven and eight, when he first reports experiencing "Chest Pressure," as the title to Chapter 15 of the DVD version of the documentary conveys. This is the first sign that the diet is having a negative effect on Spurlock's health. He reports the pain to his audiences, both personal and public, but does not give it further much thought beyond that; we can perhaps read this as stage one of Kübler-Ross's five stages of dying/grieving: denial. The rhetoric of danger and impending doom escalates around day 17, when "The Girlfriend Speaks Out" in chapter 23. Spurlock's girlfriend, Alexandra Jamieson, who works as a vegan chef, voices her concern about the negative effects the McDiet is having on Spurlock's health. Her complaints extend to the declining quality of their sex life. Like Jean in *David's Redhaired Death*, the mourning Jamieson experiences is double—she mourns for the (possible) death of her mate, as well as for the current death of their sex life. Spurlock's mother also voices her concern for the possibly irreversible danger her son is subjecting himself to. Unlike the girlfriend's, the mother's mourning is ongoing: she grieves for the health her son may already have squandered through his experiment. After trying to persuade him to stop eating this way, she volunteers to donate part of her liver to him should his fail as a result of this act of folly. Spurlock's apparent disregard of the negative effects of his actions on his relatives' emotional well being could also be read as selfishness or alienation, further warning signs of latent suicidal tendencies.

On Day 18 of his experiment, Spurlock becomes concerned for his own well being because of a splitting headache he just cannot shake. He visits Dr. Daryl Isaacs, who informs him that his blood pressure has gone up to 150/90 on one arm and 150/130 on the other, and his

cholesterol level has risen to 225. The doctor once again warns Spurlock that he is basically “wiping out” his liver by continuing on this eating regimen and that he will continue to “pickle” it unless he stops. The narrative suspense concerning the deteriorating state of Spurlock’s health reaches a climax on day 21, “Chest Pains,” when the filmmaker speaks directly into the camera at 2 in the morning to complain of chest pains so strong they woke him up. Throughout the course of the day, he is on the phone with all three doctors who inform him that they have given orders to all the local hospitals to admit Spurlock without delay should his symptoms worsen. Just when the non-fiction documentary seems to have finally intersected with its fictional filmic counterpart as it was almost destined to do from the outset, chaos is averted because Spurlock experiences no further episodes of ill health. Structurally, given the scary statistics and doom-and-gloom interviews he conducts with specialists of all kinds during the length of his documentary, almost the only way in which his theory that McDonald’s food constitutes a dangerous threat to the American public health could be fully vindicated would have been if Spurlock had died, suffered a stroke, or experienced any other catastrophic or irreversible health condition as a result of his thirty-day Mickey D’s binge.

His very resilience undoes some of the dramatic impact of the narrative he set in motion. Far from having the “average” American’s experience of eating fast food, he indulges in a dietary regimen every bit as strict and carefully orchestrated as his girlfriend’s vegan lifestyle. The experiment is as much a performance piece as it is an act of scientific inquiry, albeit of limited scope. Instead of being life affirming, Spurlock’s survival of this ordeal is anticlimactic and a bit disappointing. Sadly, he succeeds in producing an audience reaction that is more morally murky than the clear ideological victory he had hoped to achieve at the outset: even as his health is threatened, we cheer for him to continue his “taboo” behavior, on the off-chance, I

argue, that we'll see him die. Whereas Schlosser holds the example of Hank's sad fate as a representative of others in similar situations in *Fast Food Nation*, Morgan Spurlock presents himself as the surrogate of the "average" American by both his willing and lucid cooperation with what he believes to be a corrupt system as well as by the physical extremes to which he is willing to subject himself. He eats so much McDonald's so we will not have to in the future.

By overdetermining his narrative from the start through his allusion to the Pelman vs. McDonald's Corporation trial, as well as by the comparisons to *Leaving Las Vegas*, Spurlock suggests that suicide is as much a function of discourse as it is of self-injurious actions. In *Super Size Me*, McDonald's plays the role of an enabler, making it easy for the very addicts it creates to get their fast food fix. *Fast Food Nation's* more negative portrayal of the McDonald's Corporation as a behind-the-scenes puppet master suggests that the rising number of suicides and accidental deaths of workers in affiliated industries amount to little more than collateral damage in the endless war to win consumer loyalty and profit. *David's Redhaired Death's* benign portrayal of the fast food giant as a master purveyor of affordable minimal creature comforts—food, shelter, and familiarity—balances out the more negative portrayals of this industry by hinting at the reason why their popularity does not wane despite the repeated warnings of health pundits and governmental agencies.

In times of uncertainty and emotional turmoil, such as when faced with the death of a loved one, people reach out to what they know best in order to reaffirm their sense of self. For better or worse, *Super Size Me*, *Fast Food Nation* and *David's Redhaired Death* suggest McDonald's has really made an impact in defining what it means to be living in America today. Given the contemporary obsession with the "obesity epidemic," this play, exposé and

documentary open a much needed dialogue on the personal and public toll of death, grief and mourning instead of creating so much anxiety about the possibility of getting fat and sick.

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Notes

¹ Schlosser eventually agrees to a sit-down, on-camera interview with Spurlock for the DVD version of *Super Size Me*.

² Spurlock does not interview the two teenagers whose parents brought the suit against McDonald's: Ashley Pelman and Jazlen Bradley. Robert Gearty reported in an article published on September 5, 2003 in the *Daily News* that Ashley Pelman who was fourteen years old at the time, measured 4 foot 10 inches and weighed 140 pounds while Jazlyn (sic) Bradley was nineteen years of age, measured five feet six inches and weighed 270 pounds. I repeat this information as a counterbalance to Morgan Spurlock's account of gaining over twenty pounds in one month.