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PHOTOFEST

A scene from "The Corporation"

Documentaries Cast a Cold Eye on Corporate America

By Julia M. Klein

PHILADELPHIA

THE INSPIRATION came to him on Thanksgiving. Spurred by lawsuits involving the hazards of fast food, Morgan Spurlock, a wiry athletic man in his early 30s, decided to turn himself into a test case by adopting a 30-day regimen of all McDonald's, all the time.

The title of Spurlock's film about his culinary travails, *Super Size Me,* derives from one of his self-imposed rules: If he is asked by a McDonald's employee whether he'd like to "Supersize" his order, he must do so—even if it means imbibing mammoth portions of sugar-rich sodas and fat-laden fries. Between meals, Spurlock interviews experts and consumers about the perils of fast food, the awfulness of school lunches, and the slothfulness of the American public.

Spurlock's own rapid weight gain (nearly 25 pounds) is predictable enough, as is the stonewalling of McDonald's officials. But there are surprises: His girlfriend, a vegan cook, charmingly complains about his diminished sex drive; he reports headaches and mood swings; and his soaring cholesterol level and liver damage shock the doctors monitoring his experiment. At Day 21, they urge him to stop. "What am I doing to myself all in the name of art?" Spurlock said he asked himself. At the Philadelphia Film Festival, he also recounted seeking the advice of his older brother, who said: "People eat this shit their whole lives. Do you really think it's going to kill you in nine more days?"

Winner of the documentary-directing prize at the Sundance Film Festival and a sellout here in Philadelphia, *Super Size Me* (opening May 7) is more propaganda than art. But as propaganda it is memorable and effective. Spurlock takes some credit for the McDonald's Corporation's recent decision to eliminate its "Supersize" option, but the chain denies that the film played a role. The film is one of four in the Philadelphia Film Festival's documentary series that wage frontal assaults on corporate America, evoking the rabble-rousing work (*Roger and Me, The Big One, Bowling for Columbine*) of the Academy Award-winning director Michael Moore. Lest the comparison be missed, two of the films—*Orwell Rolls in His Grave* and *The Corporation*—feature Moore himself.

Subtlety is not their selling point. In one scene in *Super Size Me,* for example, Spurlock vomits up his meal. Through repetition and metaphor run rampant, these films pound home their messages. Even so, they remind us of the overlap between art and propaganda: Each can help us forge new understandings of the world. Whatever their flaws, these propagandistic documentaries manage to shift our perspective on everything from Big Macs to the role of propaganda itself.

SUCH SHIFTS animate Ross McElwee's *Bright Leaves,* a leisurely, meandering attack on smoking and the tobacco industry dressed up as a cinematic memoir. McElwee, whose past work (like his 1986 film, *Sherman's March)* also had an autobiographical tinge, begins this feature with a gloriously seductive shot of bright green leaves of tobacco. He doesn't shrink from exploring what he calls the "entrancing allure" of smoking, its ability—like filmmaking, he says—to make time stop. But he also returns repeatedly to a couple who try, in vain, to swear off the habit, and to chronicles of tobacco-related deaths remembered and foretold.

Of course, we're no strangers to tobacco's addictive and destructive qualities. Even the frisson supplied by McElwee's personal connection to the story—he is the great-grandson of a (failed) tobacco titan—is hardly unique. Such ties (remember Patrick Reynolds, the outspoken anti-smoking heir to the R.J. Reynolds fortune?) typically leave legacies of guilt, as well as denial. In North Carolina, still the country's leading tobacco producer, McElwee reveals that the conflict between agricultural livelihoods and public health obscures more intimate tragedies: Tobacco growers and their families suffer from an epidemic of smoking-related maladies.

McElwee's great-grandfather, John Harvey McElwee, is a complicated figure—a pioneer of the bright-leaf variety of tobacco who was eventually ruined by a competitor, John Buchanan Duke, and "disappeared" from history. The director pokes sardonic fun at the contrast between the Duke legacy (which includes Duke University and R.J. Reynolds) and his own family's now-decrepit factory and obscure memorial park.

John Harvey McElwee does have one

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FIRST RUN FEATURES

"Bright Leaves" filmmaker Ross McElwee on location in a North Carolina tobacco field

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claim to fame, his great-grandson discovers: He is the model for the protagonist (played by Gary Cooper) in the 1950 Michael Curtiz melodrama *Bright Leaf.* Or is he? McElwee interweaves black-and-white frames of *Bright Leaf* with his own North Carolina footage, interviews the widow of the novelist whose book inspired the film, visits a tobacco museum, and even chats, unhelpfully, with Patricia Neal, Cooper's co-star and real-life paramour. This idiosyncratic reporting ultimately changes McElwee's perspective on just who and what Cooper's character represents. Does it matter, given that just about no one has seen *Bright Leaf* to begin with? Well, maybe—if only as a reminder of the unreliability of family myths and the ambiguities of film interpretation.

For all its sickbed and graveyard scenes, *Bright Leaves*, which opens in August, is the most low-key of the four documentaries. By contrast, *The Corporation* (which opens June 4) is a sprawling screed with a jumpy visual style that grows irksome. At 145 minutes, this Canadian production is about 20 minutes shorter than the original director's cut, but still seems overlong. Nevertheless, its argument for corporate responsibility and environmental sustainability has struck a chord with film-festival audiences, who have showered it with awards.

The film, by Mark Achbar, Jennifer Abbott, and Joel Bakan, begins with a quick, clever trip into a boardroom where a television plays clips about corporate misdeeds perpetrated by a few "bad apples." After comparing the modern corporation to everything from a family to a whale, *The Corporation* unveils its central conceit: a symptom-by-symptom comparison of a prototypical corporation's behavior with the diagnostic criteria for psychopathology. Like the psychopath, for example, the corporation is described as having "callous unconcern for the feelings of others" and an "incapacity for maintaining enduring relationships."

Segments on advertising, the privatization of natural resources, and other issues feature commentary by maverick corporate chieftains, corporate spies, authors, and such icons as Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. In one sequence, Michael Moore talks about his interactions with Phil Knight, CEO of Nike, for Moore's documentary *The Big One,* interspersed with clips from that film. Moore produced a pair of first-class airplane tickets and challenged Knight to visit his company's Indonesian sweatshops, which Knight had never seen. He declined, but later, bizarrely, extended Moore an invitation to the Australian Open.

The Corporation is most effective when it slows its frenetic pace and indulges in actual narrative. The film's best segment is the tale of how Fox News apparently bowed to pressure from the Monsanto Company to keep off the air a story about the company's bovine growth hormone and its potential health effects. The former Fox investigative reporters Jane Akre and Steve Wilson, who eventually lost a whistle-blower lawsuit on a technicality, relate the network's attempts to frustrate, intimidate, and buy them off. They say the station manager told them at one point: "We paid $3-billion for these television stations. . . . The news is what we say it is."

THAT pretty well sums up the argument of Robert Kane Pappas's *Orwell Rolls in His Grave,* which laments the effects of media consolidation on American democracy. Pappas plays off George Orwell's *1984,* with its familiar allusions to Big Brother and the art of doublespeak. Opening June 23 in Silver Spring, Md., the film is also larded with inflammatory Nazi analogies—including the comparison by Mark Crispin Miller, professor of culture and communications at New York University, of the propaganda savvy of Hitler and Goebbels to the control exercised by today's media monopolies.

Like McElwee and Spurlock, Pappas has a strong, quirky narrative voice. But he makes his points largely through a series of talking and speechifying heads, among them the ubiquitous Moore; U.S. Rep. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont Independent; and the impressive Charles Lewis, a former *60 Minutes* producer and founding director of the nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity. The heads agree that the battle for diversity is all but lost, with the Internet a lone (but threatened) bastion of free speech. No mention is made of alternative publications like *The Nation* or *Mother Jones.*

Pappas's general indictment is bolstered by some startling details on, for instance, the media's handling of the 2000 Florida vote count. Particularly telling is the BBC reporter Greg Palast's reporting that 57,000 alleged "felons"—most of them not felons at all, but more than half of them black—were purged from the state's voter rolls. CBS News started to pursue the story, but, according to the film, retreated after Florida Gov. Jeb Bush denied it.

Orwell has been criticized for its unsophisticated technique, and audience members at the Philadelphia Film Festival noted its one-sidedness. Certainly, the film makes no obeisances to the journalism gods of balance and objectivity. "It just seems that the facts are the facts," Pappas said at the festival. No corporate titans appear on camera to deny their control over the news, no top newspaper editors or station heads to proclaim their independence. The liberal reporters whose stories are supposedly being squelched aren't represented either. Will no one but disgruntled ex-employees and journalism professors discuss this looming threat? Apparently not. "Largely, they wouldn't talk to me," Pappas said of his efforts to land media bigwigs. "The best way to undermine stories . . . is not to discuss [them] seriously. That's a big issue here." In addition, Pappas told festival viewers, "there were a number of people . . . in the networks that said, 'If I speak to you, I'll lose my job.' "

None of these four documentaries displays the narrative drive or the sheer artfulness of two popular documentaries from last year's festival, *Spellbound* and *My Architect.* But their exploration of the tightening grip of corporations on American cultural and economic life has a cumulative force that is hard to gainsay. That the *cri de coeur* of these impassioned independent filmmakers is destined to be heard this spring and summer in movie theaters around the country is persuasive evidence that the grip is not yet a stranglehold.

Julia M. Klein is a cultural reporter and critic in Philadelphia.