

McDICULOUS

(MAY 2004)

Staying alive is complicated. It's the single most difficult thing every single person does every single day. There is just so much in this wicked world that can kill us: cancer, avalanches, liver failure, street gangs wearing baseball uniforms, gravity, electric chairs, death squads, hammerhead sharks, werewolves, hemlock, and a boundless cornucopia of other coldhearted entities who solely exist so that we may not. Everything is bad for you. Food is bad for you. Food—something you need in order to stay alive—is killing you right now. Food hates you. But food cannot be held accountable for its diabolical actions, even if Morgan Spurlock thinks otherwise.

Spurlock is the director of the new documentary *Super Size Me*. The film chronicles Spurlock's performance-testing on his own thirty-two-year-old body: For thirty days, he ate nothing but food from McDonald's. If it wasn't on the menu, he did not consume it. (For example, he wouldn't even take aspirin, as McDonald's does not offer pharmaceuticals.) Within the reality of the movie, the results are staggering; Spurlock gains twenty-five pounds, watches his cholesterol spike sixty-two points, shows signs of liver failure, becomes profoundly depressed, and sporadically vomits. The goal of *Super Size Me* is to illustrate how fast-food restaurants contribute to the overall obesity of America. (Currently, 60 percent of U.S. adults are overweight.) You may remember a situation in 2002 where two girls unsuccessfully sued McDonald's, basing their lawsuit on the presupposition that their inability to stop eating was the fault of McDonald's. (One of the plaintiffs was five foot six and weighed 270 pounds.) Perhaps you thought that lawsuit was frivolous. Well, that's because it was. It was

completely idiotic, as is the entire philosophical premise for this movie.

Now, before I get into this, I want to be clear about something. *Super Size Me* is not an unwatchable movie. It's generally interesting and always entertaining. Moreover, Spurlock seems like a great guy; he came over to my apartment to screen his documentary on my living-room TV, and he drank four Sierra Nevada beers, and he has a cool-looking Jack McDowell mustache and a vegan girlfriend who vaguely resembles *Brady Bunch* star Eve Plumb. I hope Spurlock makes money from this movie. In fact, I actively want people to see *Super Size Me*, if for no other reason than to consider its two problems.

The first problem is tangible: *Is this movie true?*

I'm not sure. Maybe it is and maybe it isn't.

The second problem is ideological: *Does this movie make a valid point?*

No.

Let me first address the former query. It may seem irrational to question the reality of *Super Size Me*, since the evidence appears on the screen: we see Spurlock go to the doctor, we see him eat a shitload of Big Macs, and then we see him go back to his physician to track his devolution. Around Day 21, a doctor suggests that Spurlock may die if he doesn't change his diet. I question that diagnosis, and here's why: I once did something *very* similar to this. In 1996, I ate only Chicken McNuggets for an entire week. For seven straight days, I consumed nothing else: no fries, no fish sandwiches, no McDonaldland cookies, no nothing. McNuggets were my sole diet, and I ate somewhere between 230 and 280 of them. And you know what happened to me? Nothing. Nothing happened. I gained exactly one pound. In fact, my cholesterol and blood pressure went *down*.

Now, did I feel stellar at the end of that week? Not quite. I felt like I was coated in petroleum jelly, and I consciously exaggerated that discomfort for the benefit of the article. But I've definitely felt far worse at other points in my life; I think

I feel worse right now. It wasn't a big deal. But in this movie, Spurlock starts struggling *immediately*. By the third day of the experiment, he starts to act like a smack junkie. It all seems pretty sketchy.

Certainly, it's possible that I'm especially well suited for this kind of constructed gluttony; for some reason, my body has an unbelievably high tolerance to everything. My organs are indestructible. But I still suspect *Super Size Me* is somewhat exaggerated; if it wasn't, it couldn't exist. You could not sell a movie about eating fast food and feeling fine. Moreover, Spurlock didn't just eat—he gorged himself at every possible turn. He was ramming down five thousand calories a day. He was eating unreasonably on purpose. But when I pointed that out, he implied that I was missing the point.

"Someone else asked me about that," he said. "And they argued that if I ate nothing but broccoli for a month, that would make you sick, too. And that's probably true. But you know what? Nobody is telling you that broccoli is a meal. McDonald's is trying to convince people that their stuff is a legitimate meal, and that you can eat it every day."

Here is where the second problem with *Super Size Me*—the larger, philosophical problem—comes into focus. This is a movie about alleged victimization. The biggest problem with America is not faceless corporate forces; the biggest problem with America is people who blame faceless corporate forces instead of accepting accountability for their own lives.¹ And that's what *Super Size Me* is ultimately about: it's about blaming a chain restaurant for offering a product that people choose to consume.

Early in the documentary, Spurlock poses an important question: he asks us where personal responsibility ends and corporate responsibility begins. *Super Size Me* never answers that question, but I will. Corporate responsibility begins

when corporations start breaking the law, and personal responsibility never stops. Spurlock questions the ethics of offering consumers mammoth 64-ounce beverages and massive portions of fries, because people can't help themselves. "It's just human nature to eat what you get, even if you don't need it or want it," Spurlock says. Well, whose fucking fault is that? Why is a restaurant supposed to worry about people who get fat *by eating food they supposedly don't want*?

Don't get me wrong; I don't feel altogether comfortable defending McDonald's. It almost feels like I'm saying, "Hey, man, Darth Vader had every right to build that Death Star. He had all the proper zoning permits." However, the paradigm advocated by *Super Size Me* is wrong. McDonald's is a publicly traded capitalist venture; its function is to earn as much as it can by giving people a product they want. Perhaps you hate that notion. Well, go ahead and hate it. Hate it hard. But your personal distaste for an ideology has nothing to do with your real-world problems.

Spurlock criticizes McDonald's for not being up-front about the lack of nutrition in its food; this reminds me of people who sue tobacco companies because nobody told them that inhaling smoke is less healthy than inhaling oxygen. Spurlock attacks the prevalence of McDonald's advertising campaigns, and he hates the way they target children; this is intriguing, because I remember seeing thousands of "Just Say No" advertisements when I was young, and those didn't exactly take. All those "Got Milk?" ads don't seem to make people crazy for milk, either. Why is it that the only advertising campaigns that work seem to sell all the bad things people actually desire? Isn't that a weird coincidence?

Commercials for McDonald's claim their food is marvelous and that you should eat it constantly. And maybe you believe that. Maybe you need documentary filmmakers to protect you from yourself, because life is dangerous. And life is dangerous. Like I said, staying alive is complicated. But I'll take my chances.

1. Actually, this is more like the second biggest problem in America; the biggest is that in 2000 and 2004, we somehow managed to elect the worst U.S. president since Ulysses S. Grant. But it's tight.