Fast Food Nation

Synopsis

Don Henderson (Greg Kinnear), successful marketing executive, has recently joined the boardroom at hamburger chain Mickey's when he is asked to follow up worrying test results on the content of their burgers. His investigations lead him from the Uni Globe meat processing plant to a number of shocking revelations about the company's production practices. In the same town, two Mexican sisters, illegal immigrants to the US, struggle to make a living and rely on the meat production industry for their family's income. Meanwhile Amber, top student, conscientious citizen and Mickey's employee, struggles with her conscience and her job as she begins to get a political education from her uncle (Ethan Hawke), and her college friends. Don's journey only takes him so far as he learns in a meeting that his job could be at risk if he reveals what his learned. The closing scene is of him announcing at a marketing meeting the next product in the Mickey's range.

Introduction

This resource is useful for students of Film and Media Studies at GCSE level and above, as well as AS and A2 students of General Studies, Citizenship, Politics and Economics.

Before Viewing

Before you see this film, you may find it useful to discuss or research the following things:

♦ Does the film title (Fast Food Nation) and the success of Super Size Me provide expectations as to the nature of this film?
♦ How great a role do you think the fast food industry plays in UK society and the UK economy? You might want to consider profits, employment and local development as well as the dietary habits of groups and individuals.
♦ Does the UK government have any involvement in the nation's health, from the perspective of food production and consumption?
♦ How do you feel fast food is being represented in the UK press at the moment?
♦ Have fast food retailers made any changes to their products or marketing in the last two years? What reasons can you think of for any changes made?

Narrative

As you view the film, consider the different narrative strands: Don and his investigation of Mickey's production practises; the Mexican immigrants, especially Coco and Sylvia; Amber, her family, friends and colleagues.

♦ How do these various strands work in narrative terms?
♦ Do you like the film's narrative structure, or were you expecting more of a resolution for the various strands? Were they expecting them to be more interlinked?
♦ How is the narrative different from mainstream Hollywood texts?

Big Business

Fast Food Nation depicts fictional businesses: the burger chain, Mickey's, and the meat processing plant, Uni Globe. You might notice in the film that other, real, businesses are briefly mentioned.

♦ Why do you think fictional, rather than real businesses, feature in the main narrative?
♦ How is the impact of 'big business' represented? Consider its effects on the marketing manager as well as on the workers at the meat processing plant, the employees of Mickey's and the college students.
♦ Does this representation fit with your perception of global brands?

Political Action; Political Processes
- ♦ In your opinion, are any of the characters motivated by political ideals?
- ♦ Would you say the film has a political agenda, and if so, what is it?

Immigration and the labour market
In the film, we see the dangers and problems faced by illegal immigrants to the US. Their relevance to the story comes in when they get jobs in the meat-packing plant.

- ♦ What did you know about immigrant workers before watching the film?
- ♦ How is the experience of Mexican workers in the US represented in the film?

You may wish to research the experiences of immigrant workers in the UK: for example, do they receive a guaranteed minimum wage?

Representations of teenagers
Think back to the teenage characters in the film: the employees at Mickey's including Amber, and the friends she makes at college.

- ♦ Amongst the teenagers, what different character types are represented?
- ♦ What are your responses to these characters?

Independent Film
Fast Food Nation had a limited cinema release. Think about the following:
- ♦ How might you market this film?
- ♦ What elements might you use to promote the film - stars, director, genre? You may wish to look at other Richard Linklater films for examples.
- ♦ Would you say Richard Linklater has a distinctive directorial style? Can we describe him as an auteur?

Conclusion
Despite what he has learned about Mickey's, Don still continues to eat their food. Amber's plan to save the cows doesn't work, but she does finally leave her job. At the very end, Don is shown presenting a new burger concept.
- ♦ Does the fictionalised approach of this film, and the angle on the fast food industry it shows, add anything to your understanding of 'food politics' in addition to the messages about health?
- ♦ Have your attitudes towards the fast food industry been changed?
- ♦ Do you feel consumers have a moral obligation to take a stand? Does it make a difference? After watching the film, would YOU now go out to a fast food chain and buy a burger?