

# Fast Food Nation offers some bitter truths about America

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*Fast Food Nation*, directed by Richard Linklater, screenplay by Richard Linklater and Eric Schlosser

Richard Linklater's film version of *Fast Food Nation*, the best-selling 2001 exposé by Eric Schlosser, is an effort that cannot and should not be dismissed, despite major and somewhat predictable weaknesses. Linklater has something to say, not only about the fast food industry, but about the overall state of US society. It's not every day that a major American film depicts "illegal" immigrant workers sympathetically, with dialogue about the worthlessness of the Democratic and Republican parties and "the machine that's taken over the country."

Linklater has worked with Schlosser to turn his non-fiction investigative journalism into a fictional narrative, undoubtedly in an effort to draw a wider movie audience. Three separate strands of the story are woven together in an attempt to give the issues raised in Schlosser's book concrete human form.

First there is Don Anderson, a vice president of marketing for the fictional Mickey's fast food chain, named obviously with McDonald's in mind. Anderson (Greg Kinnear), a rising star in the company as the man who conceived of "The Big One," the firm's number-one product, is asked to travel to Colorado to investigate high fecal coliform counts in The Big One, or, in the words of the company's chairman, reports that "there's shit in the meat."

Anderson arrives at the huge meat-processing plant in Cody, Colorado, a fictional town whose depiction is among the film's strong points. There is a ring of truth to the scenes of life here. Cody denotes a typical American town of the twenty-first century, one of the rapidly growing suburbs or exurbs that provide millions of low-wage jobs in fast food restaurants and similar establishments to workers who are barely able to make ends meet, and then only by shopping at low-cost retailers such as Wal-Mart.

As the company official arrives, the film cuts to the story of a group of Mexican immigrants making the dangerous crossing of the U.S. border on foot, guided by a coyote, and then handed over to a driver who takes them hundreds of miles to Colorado, where they are immediately hired at the packing plant. Of special importance is a young couple, Sylvia (Catalina Sandino Moreno) and Raul (Wilmer Valderrama). Sylvia decides to take

a lower-paid job as a motel housekeeper, but her sister Coco (Ana Claudia Talancon), along with Raul, goes to work in the plant.

The third element of the narrative concerns Amber (Ashley Johnson) and her family. Amber, a bright high school student, works at one of the local Mickey's franchise stores. She lives with her mother, who has a similar low-wage job.

Families getting by on low-wage jobs; high school students nonchalantly passing through metal detectors and accompanied by uniformed cops with drug-sniffing dogs in school hallways; desperate immigrants looking over their shoulder and facing constant legal and physical risks as they work in dangerous jobs to escape grinding and unrelieved poverty in the land of their birth—much of this speaks for itself, and powerfully.

While the three elements of the film all take place in the same city, there is no real connection between them. Anderson is shown near the plant as the immigrants, unknown to him, are brought in to be interviewed and hired. Later, he shows up at the outlet where Amber works and engages her in friendly conversation. Between the immigrants and Amber's family there is no connection at all. This state of affairs has its own significance, demonstrating in part the kind of stratification of the working class that is produced by contemporary capitalism.

None of the various protagonists in *Fast Food Nation* achieve their goals. Anderson earnestly investigates, until he is warned off in no uncertain terms by company inspector Harry Rydell (Bruce Willis), who cautions him, somewhat menacingly, with a phrase that must be taken literally as well as figuratively, "It's a sad fact of life, Don, but the truth is we all have to eat a little shit every now and then." Anderson quietly abandons any notion of a whistle-blowing role, going back to his marketing and plans for bigger and better "big ones."

The immigrants are brutalized both by the physical nightmare of work at the Uniglobe Meatpacking Company and also by their sadistic supervisor Mike (Bobby Cannavale), who demands sexual favors from the frightened women and quickly has his way with Coco. The inhuman speed at which they are forced to do such jobs as removing kidneys from slaughtered cattle is a primary cause of the fecal contamination. Raul is badly injured in an accident, and Sylvia is forced by economic necessity to take a job in the plant.

Amber falls in with a group of student protesters looking for a way to do something about the exploitation in the plant as well as their conceptions of animal rights and rampant consumerism. The students argue over how to carry out an effective action, and their protest also comes to naught.

While this outline of the plot indicates promise, it must be said that much of the film falls flat. The idea of converting an investigation of fast food into fiction has some obvious pitfalls, and *Fast Food Nation* falls into a number of them. There is very little development of these characters, particularly the immigrants. One never really feels that one is getting to know them.

Several characters are simply inserted in what are virtually cameo roles, with little or no explanation of their background, for the purpose of articulating ideas that the filmmaker wants to see expressed.

There is Rudy Martin (Kris Kristofferson), for instance, an old cattle rancher who tells Don Anderson about “the machine.” The fuller excerpt is, “This isn’t about good people vs. bad people. This is about the machine that’s taken over the country.”

These are important words, no doubt, but simply inserted without much context they don’t ring true or illuminate very much.

Amber’s uncle Pete (Ethan Hawke) serves a similar purpose, as a voice of liberal protest and, it’s fair to say, a kind of alter ego for Linklater himself. He talks to Amber about why she is working at Mickey’s, suggesting instead that she “follow your passion.” This is accompanied by a brief denunciation of Wal-Mart, KFC, Wendy’s, IHOP, Arby’s and others. Pete goes on to explain how he took over a campus office at the University of Colorado to protest the school’s investment in apartheid South Africa. The “CU Nine” were expelled, but a year later divestment took place and Nelson Mandela was freed. “If enough people try to do something, you can actually change things for the better,” Pete tells Amber.

This is pretty tame, both as an attempt to explain recent events as well as a prescription for social and political change.

Then there is the argument that takes place among the student protesters. When some suggest a letter-writing campaign to protest conditions at the meatpacking plant, one student radical ridicules this. “Are you kidding me?” he asks, explaining that Uniglobe Meatpacking had given \$200,000 to the Governor’s election campaign and calling instead for Greenpeace-type direct action. The students decide to release the cows from the area near the plant where they are penned up before they are slaughtered.

This supposed choice between impotent letter writing and equally impotent “direct action” in turn sets the stage for a particularly silly moment. The cows refuse to move. “Babies, run for it!” the students yell, but for all of their efforts the animals refuse to take advantage of their chance to escape to freedom.

The allegory is obvious, crude and not very accurate. Linklater is venting his frustration. On the one hand, he strongly suggests that liberal student protest will solve the problems depicted in *Fast Food Nation*. At the same time, he implies that the American people are allowing themselves to be exploited and lied to, or worse, like the cattle in Cody, Colorado.

Linklater is a principled and talented filmmaker. He refuses to submit to the dictates of Hollywood and is outspoken in his criticism of the status quo, as he indicated in an interview with the WSWS more than eight years ago (“You can’t hold back the human spirit”). It is significant that he has involved a number of talented actors (Kristofferson, Hawke, Cannavale and Catalina Moreno, nominated for an Oscar for last year’s *Maria Full of Grace*). Undoubtedly, these performers also share his interest in the issues raised by the movie.

Nevertheless, the weaknesses of the film are major and glaring. It is not a matter of simply judging it by the correctness or completeness of its political perspective. Linklater is an artist, not a political leader. However, *Fast Food Nation* is a forthright piece of social criticism and deserves to be criticized from that point of view. The film’s serious flaws, in the end, are inseparable from the fact that it does not probe nearly deeply enough or thoughtfully enough into the very issues that it raises.

There is an organic connection between the dramatic weaknesses, the stilted dialogue and characters who do not truly come alive, on the one hand, and amorphous or inadequately worked-out social views, on the other, including the notion that workers, immigrant and native-born alike, are inevitably passive victims of exploitation. Linklater means well, opposes injustice and wishes the world were a better place, but when he turns directly to the state of American society, his present ideas prove somewhat pale and inadequate. *Fast Food Nation*, like numerous other recent films infused by social and political protest, reflects perplexity and bewilderment in the face of the complex problems posed by the present situation.



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