

Memphis Pigs

Director's Notes by Hope Hudson

Introduction

Memphis Pigs is a short, experimental documentary that provides a glimpse into the historical, environmental, and cultural impact that pigs have had on Memphis and this region. Using real life footage, stop-motion puppets, shadow puppets, and performance art, this movie mixes fairytale and fact in attempt to change the way pigs are seen in a city known for barbecued pork.

These director's notes expand on the film by providing insight on my personal background, the film's earliest stages of conceptualization, experiences filming at Barbecue Fest and Loch Holland Farm, and my creative influences and processes.

My Background

Growing up in Memphis I've been surrounded by barbecue since I can remember. When I was a little kid I brought my Piglet doll to Barbecue Fest and comically covered his eyes so he wouldn't be sad. I obviously understood that there was a life behind the food I was eating, and my New Year's resolution in third grade was actually to quit eating meat, but I was so entrenched in the culture that my inclinations of compassion were left unsupported. It's nearly impossible to see pigs as anything but meat in Memphis. Almost every family gathering is

catered by a barbecue place. My dad is a painter, and one of his main sources of income has been commissions from barbecue shops: paintings of smiling pigs in support of barbecue. The sheer presence of barbecue in my life alone announces its importance in Memphis and the region.

I finally quit eating animals in 2008. My best friend was a vegan, and her rhetoric really convinced me to change my eating habits. My family was convinced I was “just going through a phase.” Fortunately, more and more young people are becoming vegetarian so I had a support system beyond my family and the hegemonic mouth of Memphis. Besides finding a niche, I’ve been navigating around meat, in conversation so to avoid argument, as well as in physical space because I don’t like to be reminded of it. I have removed myself from the meat eating culture in Memphis as much as possible. This way is comfortable, but I haven’t made much of an impact outside of my little herbivorous community, and I certainly haven’t learned much about my city.

Conceptualizing *Memphis Pigs*

I began with this question: *Why does Memphis love to eat pigs?* I planned to make a documentary consisting mostly of interviews with Memphians who like barbecue. I was excited to explore the issue sociologically, considering race and age and gender, because I know that meat consumption has different connotations for different humans. For example, according to a national survey by the USDA, men eat more of every type of meat than women do, and people of color eat more beef, chicken, and pork than white people, on average. This project

was my attempt to re-enter the culture that I had left behind in 2008, my attempt to understand a culture that I was once submerged in and now am isolated from.

I quickly realized that this was a daunting task, and I felt sad and weird about how I could pull it off. I didn't want to make a pro-meat statement by sharing the supposed relevance of pork consumption in Memphis with positive interviews. I also didn't want to edit in a way that would be disrespectful to my interviewees but would allow me to use my voice as a vegan more loudly. I felt uncomfortable about interviewing people so integral in the barbecue culture in Memphis, not knowing if I should tell them that I am a vegan or not. And, most of all, I didn't want this story about barbecue to focus on humans.

Faced with these challenges, I changed my mind about what I wanted to make. Because I wanted to avoid anthropocentrism, decided to make a film about some of the non-human animals in Memphis who are important to our landscape: horses who pull carriages downtown, ducks at the Peabody, stray dogs in the city, and pigs. That idea proved too ambitious because I wanted to do every species justice in telling their stories. Then I changed my mind again to follow a pig around from life to death, but I didn't have enough time or footage for that; small farms who would allow me to film their pigs usually don't have at any given time pigs of all different stages of life. Additionally, most of the animals eaten in the United States are grown in factory farms, so I didn't want to be misleading about the real daily lives of the pigs who become Memphis barbecue.

Finally I arrived at the idea for *Memphis Pigs*, a short film about pigs in Memphis, from their arrival here in the early stages of European colonization to the current state of barbecue

culture. The film focuses on pigs, aligning directly with my creative and conceptual interests much more effectively than my original, anthropocentric idea. Pigs have been historically important and remain a crucial part of our landscape, but they are also thoroughly disrespected in this city, and in the United States in general.

Our language reflects this. The word “pig” is now synonymous with “glutton” or “slob.” The other day I made a status on Facebook asking if I could borrow a pig mask from anyone, and someone replied that they have a Donald Trump mask that might work. I said that pigs are the opposite of Donald Trump because they are smart and beautiful and sweet!

This tendency to associate pigs with everyone bad is extra strange when combined with the other tendency to remember pigs’ flesh as some of the most delicious, a major food staple beyond the barbecue culture of Memphis. I’m working to shed a light on the creatures who inhabit these sacred bodies of “meat,” because they are much more interesting and important than their bad reputation and simplification to a food group would suggest.

By the way, with this film I in no way wish to condemn meat eaters. Contrarily, I subscribe to the belief that humans in this deep-seated culture of speciesism are victims as well. We are taught that it’s normal to eat animals; that cows are beef and pigs are pork. This psychology behind meat consumption is the topic of Melanie Joy’s book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*. The meat industry goes to great lengths to desensitize consumers and convince them that factory farms are okay, and that there is such a thing as “humanely” breeding and raising someone to be killed. But I don’t even want to condemn small farms. I want to condemn, with this movie, the factory farming of pigs and the strange culture that has

evolved around the barbecue industry in Memphis. My film is thus designed to provide a critical glimpse into the large-scale production of pork, using images and facts from Joy's book and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*.

This movie also comments on imperialism, workers' rights, environmental issues, and sexism. The pigs' story happens to offer space to talk about other issues that are also wrapped up in this specific history of Southern Capitalism.

When colonizers brought pigs here in 1539, they were a non-native species. Through trial and error we now know that non-native species are disruptive to native natural processes. The feral pigs that I idealize in *Memphis Pigs*, on which I elaborate in the next section, compete with native species like deer and birds for food. The pigs that remained in captivity for food were the main vehicle which spread smallpox to Native Americans, thus wiping out their population in this region.

The film discusses the low wages and poor treatment of workers in factory farms. According to the Food Empowerment Project website, many are undocumented civilians, who are exploited and feel unable to complain about conditions. Their duties, in whatever stage of pigs' lives they work, include hurting pigs, who often hurt them in return. Workers are around harmful gases and toxic chemicals.

According to *Eating Animals*, a typical factory pig farm produces 7.2 million pounds of manure annually; all in all, American factory farmed animals produce 130 times the poop of the human population of the United States, and it is 160 times more polluting than human sewage, but with no waste-treatment. Pig poop and other excrements are put into toxic open-air fields,

directly causing asthma and other diseases in communities nearby, breaching into waterways, killing wildlife (Foer, 178).

I discovered the sexism in Memphis's barbecue culture while at Barbecue Fest this year, on which I elaborate in the following paragraphs about my research.

Visiting Barbecue Fest

The first stage of filming took place at Memphis in May's Barbecue Fest. It's certainly the most concentrated and explicit version of Memphis's pig meat love. So I went to this place to which I haven't been since I quit meat, and upon closer inspection, it is reminiscent of what I've read about the Yulin Dog Meat Festival in China that Americans so readily criticize. At this festival, humans eat about 10,000 dogs annually, according to Forbes. The only difference between Barbecue Fest and Yulin, besides the remarkably similar species eaten, is the way the local governments treat the events. Memphis embraces Barbecue Fest, while Yulin does not endorse the Dog Meat Festival (Forbes). While Americans feel uncomfortable about Yulin's eating dogs, I feel perhaps more uncomfortable that my government supports such similar carnage, not only in Memphis at Barbecue Fest.

At first I was just observing the festival, so I didn't get many shots for a while. Then, I started noticing -that a common theme amongst the team logos is anthropomorphizing *and* sexualizing the image of a pig. So there are all these humans walking around trying to have fun

and eating dead bodies, surrounded by highly disrespectful (to pigs, as well as women), badly-painted images of pigs with human boobs and hourglass figures and big butts, who are apparently happy and alive, supporting the consumption of their sisters.

Upon reflecting on the weird, sexy pig imagery, I knew I needed to talk about it in the movie. So I asked my friends for some barbecue sauce, and I rubbed it all over my face in an exaggeratedly erotic way. These shots in *Memphis Pigs* are paired with footage from the festival of barbecued pig faces and bodies, an attempt to compare humans and pigs, as well as criticize the sexist, speciesist portrayal of pigs.

Visiting Loch Holland Farm

After Barbecue Fest, I tried to get a few different small farmers to let me film their pigs. I knew this wasn't the most accurate depiction of the vast majority of pigs that Memphis eats, but I also knew small farmers were my only option because factory farms are kept secret since they are so bad. So the footage I got from my visit at Loch Holland Farm isn't really usable except to talk about pre-factory-farm days.

But I learned a lot about pigs from them. I learned that pigs eat plants down to the roots, so when they aren't fed mostly grains and kept in concrete buildings, they really do a lot of good for the soil. They remove plants like kudzu so that native plants can grow where they've been kicked out. Pigs are therefore good for making soil farmable again. They can eat so much grass in a couple days! Claire and Chris Peterson, who run the farm, rotate their pig enclosure around a huge field twice a week, so they can keep eating grass. It's remarkable.

(Chris told me that none of the pigs used at Barbecue Fest are raised by small farmers. He wants that to change. I think it's interesting that these humans who are such connoisseurs aren't more interested in the lives of the pigs they use.)

I also noted a lot of cute pig behaviors. They argue, snuggle, and lick each other. They wag their tails and run around when they're excited. A couple times one would plop right into their water basin, and Chris would ask him to get out but eventually give up. The pig was so satisfied in there. As much as I'm skeptical that "humane" animal farming can ever exist, these pigs seemed to have a good time, and they were a joy to behold. I love pigs!

What I learned about kudzu from Chris inspired the storyline's diverging in the beginning of *Memphis Pigs*. I reference the real history of de Soto's pigs escaping and becoming the first feral pigs in what is now the United States. But I'm interested in this idealist fantasy I've created that if pigs were all wild (or even "pets" like dogs) and not farmed for meat, they would certainly and noticeably improve the environment. Instead, factory farming, especially of pigs, is one of the top polluting industries in the United States.

My idealization of feral pigs in *Memphis Pigs* is reminiscent of a very short-lived idea for the movie that I had, in which I would make up a legend for how pigs arrived in this region, using the feral pig as a sort of environmental savior. This, of course, is not true because they are a non-native species, who compete for food with native species, like deer. Wildness versus human interference is an undertone in this movie. I portray feral pigs as helpful, happy, and harmless, romanticizing the non-native species to provide a contrast with farmed pigs. I show the history of farmed pigs more accurately.

Making Puppets, Adding Whimsy

I soon found out I wouldn't have enough footage of real pigs to tell the history, so I started making puppets. The puppets in the movie are either colorful fabric shot as stop-motion or shadow puppets shot as video. I was inspired to make stop-motion puppets by Bright Eyes' "Bowl of Oranges" music video. This video is beautiful and simple and sad, feelings I wanted *Memphis Pigs* to include. The shadow puppets were inspired by the short movie "Mutschmag" by Memphis-native Morgan Stewart. This film can be viewed on YouTube, and it is amazingly smart and heartfelt, in story and image. I also used puppets in real landscapes, and I even filmed a performance art segment (the sexy barbecue sauce one mentioned above).

I decided to really open up the options for this film, and it got whimsical quickly. It was challenging to decide how factual I want to make it. I ended up using a mixture of fairytale-ish narrative and cold hard statistics. This way I'm faithful to my ideal of the savoir-pig and to my criticism of factory farming and modern barbecue culture.

I like the idea of the whole film's being different interpretations of pigs: my romantic interpretation, using puppets, and the interpretations of those at Barbecue Fest, with my criticism. There are layers of interpretation happening, which is interesting, but I'm also concerned that I don't reference real-life pigs enough. I think the footage from Loch Holland Farm interspersed in the movie is crucial for the image of the pig to be neutralized. Real, breathing pigs are neither like my fantastical images, nor like Barbecue Fest's disrespectful images. They are a smart, complex species, capable of harming and helping.

Conclusion

The process of making this film has impacted me in multiple ways. The way I make art has crossed a threshold. The film's combination of truth and heart is very fulfilling to me as an artist, and it's a combination that I haven't attempted before in a piece of art. My work has been either personal or political, and *Memphis Pigs* finally bridges the two.

Also, my view of the city of Memphis and of pigs as a species has been enhanced incredibly. I have officially stepped into barbecue culture in Memphis, and I think that step was crucial to my growth as a Memphian and vegan and as an artist and scholar. I am honored to have briefly told the story of a species so integral and underappreciated in Memphis, a species which I have long admired.

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