

Politics of meat and hidden animal suffering: Discursive responses to the documentary *Food for Profit*

Política de la carne y sufrimiento animal oculto: respuestas discursivas al documental *Food for Profit*

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Abstract

In meat, egg, and dairy production and consumption systems, the physical and psychological suffering of the animals involved is not immediately apparent in the final products reaching consumers. The bodies and lives of these animals, together with the knowledge and emotions related to their experiences, exploitation, and slaughter, are largely excluded from public perception. In public spaces, documentary representations can assume an ethical and political role by highlighting the hidden aspects of everyday practices such as consumption, revealing their "backstage," namely the conditions of animals in farms and slaughterhouses, and exposing the role of lobbies and economic and political interest groups in keeping these conditions concealed. Through qualitative discourse analysis, this study examines a sample of 16 Italian online reviews of the documentary *Food for Profit* (Italy, 2024), published by newspapers and websites that vary in content and purpose. The analysis focuses on discursive structures that express or imply: (1) reviewers' emotional responses associated with informational content, and their attribution of the documentary's potential impact on values, ethical and political behaviors; (2) positioning of the discourses in relation to the power structures addressed in the documentary and their underlying value orientations; (3) emergence of areas of opacity and the gap between dominant social perceptions and the informational content presented in the documentary. The findings suggest that representations of animal suffering and of its links to the politics of meat evoke moral shock, foster critical awareness, and encourage a sense of responsibility.

Keywords: documentary representation, meat industry, intensive farming, moral shock, politics of meat.

Resumen

En los sistemas de producción y consumo de carne, huevos y productos lácteos, el sufrimiento físico y psicológico de los animales implicados no resulta inmediatamente evidente en los productos finales que llegan a los consumidores. Los cuerpos y las vidas de estos animales, junto con los conocimientos y las emociones relacionados con sus experiencias, explotación y sacrificio, quedan en gran medida excluidos de la percepción pública. En los espacios públicos, las representaciones documentales pueden asumir un papel ético y político al poner de relieve los aspectos ocultos de prácticas cotidianas como el consumo, revelando su «backstage», es decir, las condiciones de los animales en las granjas y los mataderos, y poniendo de manifiesto el papel de los lobbies y de los grupos de interés económicos

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y políticos en el mantenimiento de estas condiciones ocultas. Mediante un análisis cualitativo del discurso, este estudio examina una muestra de 16 reseñas italianas en línea del documental *Food for Profit* (Italia, 2024), publicadas por periódicos y sitios web que difieren en contenido y finalidad. El análisis se centra en las estructuras discursivas que expresan o implican: (1) las respuestas emocionales de los autores de las reseñas asociadas a contenidos informativos, así como la atribución al documental de un posible impacto sobre los valores y los comportamientos éticos y políticos; (2) el posicionamiento de los discursos en relación con las estructuras de poder abordadas en el documental y sus orientaciones de valor subyacentes; (3) la emergencia de ámbitos de opacidad y la brecha entre las percepciones sociales dominantes y el contenido informativo presentado en el documental. Los resultados sugieren que las representaciones del sufrimiento animal y de sus vínculos con la política de la carne suscitan un impacto moral, favorecen la conciencia crítica y fomentan un sentido de responsabilidad.

Palabras clave: representación documental, industria cárnica, ganadería intensiva, shock moral, política de la carne.

1. Introduction

Industrial animal agriculture and farming practices place billions of individuals from different species in conditions that are incompatible with their physical, biological, and psychological needs. The standards and production logic of animal-derived food products turn the animal's own body into a machine (Harrison, 1964) for producing other bodies or food that serve human consumption directly (as meat) or indirectly (through reproductive labor, eggs, milk, etc.). The drive to optimize time, space, and costs within the production process (Blanchette, 2020; Pachirat, 2011) entails conditions of life and death marked by profound suffering, violence, and the denial of rights. Various animal welfare regulations and legislative measures, even when complied with, do not constitute an adequate normative instrument for guaranteeing fundamental rights (Jena, 2017; Nussbaum, 2006; 2022) and certain species are excluded from welfare protections in some contexts. The logics of *animal welfare* themselves ultimately function to sustain a system grounded in the instrumental reification of the nonhuman other. Everyday practices and habitual behaviors, such as food consumption and a diet that includes animal bodies and animal-derived products, by sustaining production systems grounded in animal exploitation and oppression, have a profound impact on the conditions of these animals and on their instrumental reification.

With the spatial reconfiguration brought about by processes of urbanization and industrialization, the relationship between humans and animals used in industrial production has increasingly come to be shaped through multiple mediations, reducing their spatial proximity (Berger 1980; Franklin 1999). Historically, in the nineteenth century, the expansion of animal farming and consumption occurred alongside a shift in the population's attitudes toward violence against nonhuman animals. Franklin (1999, p. 42) refers to the "ambiguity and reticence" surrounding farmed animals: "One resolution was spatially to separate the livestock industry from urban populations; another was to differentiate the animal from the meat" (p. 42). The bodies of animals raised for consumption have thus been rendered imperceptible as whole, living bodies: "the animal was no longer recognizable from the displayed pieces in the butchers' shops and supermarkets; the pieces were smaller, typically boned, skinned, plucked and filleted" (Franklin 1999, p. 42).

While the origins of this phenomenon can be traced back to the nineteenth century, the current phase represents an extreme manifestation of a fundamental contradiction in social behaviors. The social

perception of a contradiction – between the different ways species destined for consumption are perceived and those, for example, involved in affectionate relationships with humans – is inhibited by these forms of mediation and concealment, reinforced by the sharp separation between ordinary living contexts and the spaces designated for farming and slaughter, as well as by their material and symbolic inaccessibility. This allows for the maintenance of a condition of “ambiguous hypocrisy” (Tota, 2023, p. 220), through which one seeks to forget the individual “to whom that meat once belonged. In this way, an irreducible symbolic distance is produced between a lifeless chicken breast and the mental image of some whole hen that, with that breast, spent her brief life in this world” (Tota, 2023, p. 220).

In the meat industry, not only is the physical and psychological suffering of the animal not immediately discernible from the finished product that reaches distribution, but the living, whole animal body – and the associated cognitive and emotional knowledge derived from experiencing it – is absent from the consumption experience. In a society where affective and family bonds with nonhuman individuals are widespread, and where explicit violence toward both human and nonhuman individuals does not receive direct and explicit approval from public opinion, the invisibility of violence (Joy, 2010; Tota, 2023) becomes one of the enabling conditions for its perpetuation. Yet the invisibility of violence is closely linked to systemic aspects involving production sectors, institutions, and economic power structures. The systemic aspects and dynamics in this domain carry significant political, ideological, and cultural weight. Invisibility is the corollary of naturalization – a fundamental component of the legitimating framework of meat culture (Potts, 2016) and of carnism (Joy, 2010), as an ideology that is invisible precisely because it is both an ideology and a system (Joy, 2010). The exploitation of nonhuman bodies is naturalized and therefore tends not to be problematized. This process of naturalization is characteristic of neoliberal ideology, which, as Cammaerts (2015, p. 2) argues, has managed to present itself “as quintessentially anti-ideological, as rational and as a natural state of affairs, as invisible.” A similar dynamic can be observed in carnism (Michielsen and van der Horst 2022). Consumer behavior sustains situations of cruelty and suffering that do not involve the subjective experience of cruelty and that, in general, do not receive – or would not receive – moral approval: “the overwhelming majority of animal suffering at human hands is not the result of cruelty, but rather, these animals suffer because of normal animal use and socially acceptable motives” (Rollin, 2006, p. 525).

Media narratives and representations can foster reflection on and problematization of habitual and unreflective behaviors, making visible aspects of consumption that would otherwise remain hidden. With regard to the exploitation of individuals of other species in animal agribusiness, media representations can facilitate reflexive distancing from habitual consumption behaviors to the extent that content and information are provided and conveyed in ways that expose audiences to the “backstage” (Goffman, 1959) of consumption. In doing so, they can make more perceptible the causal link between everyday consumption practices and the exploitative conditions to which such practices contribute. The normalization of violence inherent in widespread social behaviors, such as meat consumption and the consumption of animal-derived products, highlights the need for narratives and representations capable of connecting production mechanisms with consumption, revealing both the effects of these practices on the condition of nonhuman animals and the productive logics and economic and political interests that sustain and legitimize these practices.

Media narratives and representations can influence consumer choices by revealing the causal link between consumption practices and their consequences for the living and dying conditions of nonhuman animals (Pabian et al., 2020). Information conveyed through the media can play a fundamental role in counteracting forms of oblivion, denial, and denialism (Almiron and Moreno 2022) regarding the conditions of animals of other species in contexts of human-imposed suffering and domination, and in making the conditions of animals reared for consumption – and human responsibilities – more tangible to our perception (Nussbaum, 2006; Freeman, 2016), thereby amplifying critical-reflective distancing from routine behaviors that are not immediately perceived as matters of choice and thus evade self-normativity based on values and justice (Malknecht, 2021). While it is true that merely depicting suffering “is not enough” to induce full awareness of the dignity and rights of nonhuman animals (Taylor, 2015), information conveyed by the media, together with its emotional correlate, can exert a degree of influence on public opinion. Moreover, media representations of animal conditions can challenge those discursive coalitions that contribute to the denial, concealment, and perpetuation of the exploitation of individuals from other species (Almiron, Rodrigo-Alsina, & Moreno 2022).

These coalitions rely on denial and denialist strategies and rhetoric (Hannan, 2020; Almiron & Moreno, 2022) promoted by actors with vested interests in the farming and slaughter of nonhuman animals. The model proposed by Stanley Cohen (2001) – which has already been effectively employed in the scientific literature in relation to climate change and intensive farming (Almiron, Rodrigo-Alsina, & Moreno 2022; Almiron & Moreno, 2022) – identifies three types of denial: (1) literal denial, which concerns the denial of facts and evidence; (2) interpretative denial, which concerns the denial of the consequences deriving from facts and evidence; (3) implicatory denial, which concerns the denial of the psychological, moral, and political implications. This categorization is also used in this study as an analytical framework for identifying the different forms of denial discussed in the reviews and for examining how the documentary is understood to expose, contest, or challenge them (see Section 5).

The exposure of audiences to the conditions of nonhuman animals in intensive farming through documentary representations provides mediated access to the backstage of food consumption. By showing the production processes of meat and animal-derived products, these representations confront individuals with the consequences of their own consumption. They also function as counter-narratives to the narratives and communication strategies that support carnism and meat culture. Information about the animal agriculture industry, its power dynamics, its relationships with politics, and its strategies of concealment and persuasive communication (Almiron, 2024) can contribute to revealing its systemic aspects and forms of legitimation, with the aim of bringing the system of animal oppression out of the invisibility that prevents it from being properly recognized as a system (Joy, 2010).

2. Case study

To gain further insight into these dynamics, this paper uses as a case study the documentary *Food for Profit*, which offers particularly interesting insights into the relationship between documentary representation, moral shock (Jasper and Paulsen, 1995), ethics, and agency. Directed by Pablo D'Ambrosi and Giulia Innocenzi, *Food for Profit* (Italy, 2024) is an investigative

documentary that examines the relationships between the meat industry, agribusiness lobbies, and European political institutions. Through an investigation conducted across several European countries, the film reveals how substantial EU public funds are allocated to intensive animal farming, highlighting the consequences of this system for animal conditions, the environment, and public health. Using undercover journalism and interviews with experts, farmers, politicians, and representatives of the meat industry, the documentary highlights economic and political forces that sustain the European industrial animal farming system. It also explores issues such as pollution, antibiotic resistance, biodiversity loss, poor working conditions across the supply chain, and the exploitation of migrant workers in intensive animal farming. In particular, *Food for Profit* represents the conditions of animals raised in intensive farming systems in Europe, the violence within these practices and contexts, and the behaviors, attitudes, and policies adopted by European institutional actors.

3. Methodology and sample

Through the selection of a specific sample – Italian reviews of the documentary – this article aims to examine the reactions and reflective engagement generated by viewing *Food for Profit* (Italy, 2024), specifically investigating: (1) how reviewers respond emotionally to the conditions of nonhuman animals in intensive farming systems; (2) how reviewers interpret and evaluate the documentary's representations of the meat and dairy industry, particularly the forms of deliberate concealment revealed by the documentary, and whether and how these representations shape critical attitudes; (3) how reviewers interpret and negotiate questions of responsibility and ethical and political agency.

This study investigated the discursive responses to *Food for Profit* through a qualitative discourse analysis of 16 online reviews published between February and April 2024. The corpus was constructed through systematic searches conducted on Google using the Italian search terms “Food for Profit”, “recensione Food for Profit”, “recensione documentario Food for Profit”, and “Food for Profit Film”. For each query, the first five pages of search results were screened. Texts were included if they (1) provided an editorial review or critical discussion of the documentary, (2) were published by an identifiable media outlet (a publicly recognizable and traceable journalistic or media organization with an identifiable editorial identity), review platform, or specialized website, and (3) were publicly accessible online during the data collection period. User-generated content, including comments posted beneath articles or on social media platforms, was excluded because the analysis focused on editorially produced media discourse rather than audience discussions. Applying these criteria resulted in a final corpus of 16 reviews, comprising all eligible texts identified through the search procedure. A complete list of the reviews included in the analysis, together with links to the original sources, is provided in the Appendix.

The analytical and coding framework used to examine the reviews is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Analytical and coding framework

Step	Explanation	Focus (implicit and explicit)
1. Object of interpretation	Identify the aspects of the documentary addressed by reviewers	Animal exploitation; intensive animal farming; interest groups in meat and dairy production; European policies and regulation; production and financing of the agrifood industry; food consumption
2. Reviewer's perceptions	Analyze reviewers' interpretations of the documentary	Knowledge and information; emotional responses; beliefs and values; behavior and agency
3. Discursive positioning	Examine how reviewers position themselves in relation to the realities represented	Power structures; cultural norms; values; dominant discourses and practices
4. Reflexive processes	Trace processes of confirmation, questioning or transformation	Confirmation; change; re-evaluation; contradictions; perceived gaps between dominant perceptions and documentary information
5. Discursive relationships	Interpret the identified perceptions and positions within broader discourses	Argumentative structures; modes of meaning organization; contextual relations; interactions between documentary representation and review reception

Source. Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of the reviews allows us to examine two interconnected dimensions of their discourse. On the one hand, the reviews provide evidence of the authors' own perceptions and responses to the documentary, as expressed through their interpretations and evaluations of its content. On the other hand, the reviews are themselves acts of mediation: by selecting, interpreting, and framing particular aspects of the documentary for their readers, they potentially shape how the documentary and the issues it addresses are presented to audiences. In this sense, this study is interested not only in what reviewers say about the documentary, but also in how their interpretations and attributions of meaning (Weber, 1922) are discursively constructed within the review as a media text and thereby presented to readers.

The textual corpus was analyzed using qualitative discourse analysis methodologies (Fair, 2018; Fairclough, 2010; Snape and Spencer, 2003; Wodak and Krzyzanowsky, 2008). Because the documentary highlights interactions between the statements, attitudes, and behaviors of the subjects represented, analyzing the reviews makes it possible to examine how reviewers interpret these different discursive dimensions and the relationships between them (Fair, 2018, p. 22). The reviews reflexively engage with linguistic and extralinguistic elements made perceptible through audiovisual representation. Building on this reflexive and interpretive articulation, the analysis was conducted by identifying argumentative structures and modes of meaning organization that either reflect or challenge discourses, categorizations, and practices related to: 1) the condition of animals involved in instrumental relationships with humans in the industrial production of meat and other animal-derived products; 2) human consumption of animal bodies; 3) the systems of regulation, production, and financing of the agrifood industry – relevant elements for understanding the functions and value assigned to nonhuman animals within human societies. The argumentative structures and modes of meaning organization were interpreted in relation to the context, itself discursive (Laclau, 2009, p. 61; 2003, 2014), open yet partially structured by the interaction between

documentary representation, its textual levels, and the receptive-reflective-interpretive dimension of the reviews.

The analysis of the textual corpus made it possible to identify the following discursive and interpretive dimensions: (a) Disclosure and visibility; (b) Concealment and responsibility; (c) Emotional responses; (d) Ethical and political responses; (e) Critical reviews. The following section examines these discursive dimensions as they emerged from the corpus, illustrating them through excerpts representative of the identified patterns.

4. Discourses of Unveiling: Shock, Denial, and Agency

The analysis of the reviews reveals a predominantly positive or sympathetic reception of *Food for Profit*, organized around a recurring understanding of the documentary as a mechanism of disclosure. Across the corpus, reviewers repeatedly construct the film as making visible information that is perceived to remain inaccessible within everyday experiences of food consumption. This process of disclosure is associated with three interconnected dynamics: first, the exposure of the “backstage” of animal production and the gap between ordinary consumption and the conditions under which animal-derived products are produced; second, the attribution of this gap to processes of concealment, denial, and the actions of political, economic, and media actors; and third, the emotional, ethical, and political significance attributed to such disclosure. A smaller set of critical reviews challenges the documentary’s representativeness and epistemic authority, providing a counter-discursive perspective that complicates the predominantly positive reception.

4.1. Disclosure and Visibility

This section concerns reviewers’ responses to the disclosure of relevant informational content presented in the documentary and the gap between the reality perceived in everyday contexts of life (food consumption) and the informational content conveyed by the documentary representation (agrifood systems and animal exploitation).

In the textual corpus¹ of the analyzed reviews, the emphasis is predominantly placed on the revelation of content to which audiences do not usually have access. For example, the documentary “*uncovers the dark side of intensive farming*” (Gambero Rosso) and “*denounces an entire system and documents the reality behind 90 % of the meat and animal-derived products on the market*” (Huffington Post).

A key aspect emerging from this analysis is the gap between the front stage (Goffman, 1959) and the backstage of the food industry in collective perception. In the reviews, there is frequent reference to a misperception that is immediately overturned by exposure to the documentary content: “*No, this is not a horror film, but reality. This is the reality of the food we find in our supermarkets and consume every day. This is the reality of the European Union’s money, which is also ours, that goes to fund these horrors*” (Inside the Show); “*the cameras show the real conditions of the animals that end up on our tables*” (Today.it). This lack of access to the informational content represented in the documentary

¹ All quotations were translated from Italian; exact fidelity to the original wording cannot be guaranteed.

is partially attributed to a lack of awareness regarding what lies behind consumption and dietary habits: “What we do not see does not exist; what is hidden from our eyes does not seem real to us, simply because it is covered by a wall” (Inside the Show); “the condition of animals in intensive farms is known to be terrible; yet sometimes we no longer feel compelled to question the issue” (Hall of Series).

4.2. Concealment and Responsibility

This section examines how reviewers interpret and discuss responsibility and intentionality of the relevant interest groups identified in the documentary. It addresses practices and discourses of denial, denialism, and concealment regarding conditions of suffering and exploitation in animal farming. It also considers the role played by these interest groups and the media in the process of concealment.

In line with the framework provided by *Food for Profit*, a lack of access to information is predominantly attributed to the deliberate concealment of information by actors with primarily economic or political interests, represented within the documentary itself, to whom responsibility and accountability for what is shown are assigned. Reviewers used expressions such as “misleading words” (Inside the Show), “manipulation of public opinion” (L’Espresso), “contradictions” (Mescalina), and “horrible secrets” (Cinema e Critica). In particular, the reviews portray *Food for Profit* as exposing hidden practices, contradictions, and vested interests within the agrifood system and European political institutions. The press release of the Lega Anti Vivisezione cited in the review by *Antimafia 2000* refers to “a thorough work that has uncovered Pandora’s box of the interests of profiteers and certain Members of the European Parliament”. Similarly, *L’Indipendente* states: “Intensive farms where ‘waste’ is eliminated through violent practices, proliferation of diseases treated by untrained personnel, residual slurry discharged outdoors, pollution, and even biological risks, all while politicians in Brussels lie, contradicted by their own words recorded in different contexts.”

The documentary is thus interpreted as exposing both what is hidden and who benefits from its remaining hidden. In particular, the perceived gap between the “front stage” and the “backstage” (Goffman, 1959) of the represented situation is articulated in the reviews and attributed to the documentary’s exposure of these conditions. One aspect of this configuration concerns the official statements and positions of economic and political interest groups engaged in defending the European agrifood system, who are criticized for intentionally presenting a misleading depiction of reality and of their own intentions: “The striking difference between the statements captured by the hidden camera and those given during official interviews is, to say the least, embarrassing” (*Antimafia 2000*); “Spanish MEP Clara Aguilera, in the hidden camera footage, openly states that she does not care about the welfare of an animal in a farm (literal: ‘I do not care about the happiness of the chicken, the rabbit, or the cat. I eat them anyway’). Yet, in the official interview, she claims that she does not agree ‘with any activity that mistreats animals’ and that similar farming models (where animals suffer) are not funded by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)” (*Antimafia 2000*). The documentary’s exposure of the backstage is framed not only as revealing hidden production practices but also as uncovering the mechanisms through which these practices are publicly concealed. A recurring theme in the coverage is denial of the existence of intensive farming by industry representatives and agricultural lobby groups, who are depicted as rejecting the existence of the very systems documented by the film: “Pesonen is the head of Copa-Cogeca, the union of European farmers, but also the most powerful lobby of

the European agrifood sector. He goes so far as to deny to Giulia Innocenzi the existence of intensive farms in Europe” (Antimafia 2000); “the most important of the lobbies, Copa-Cogeca, whose head goes as far as to deny the existence of intensive farms in Europe” (Gambero Rosso); “the owners and workers of the factories deny the evidence shown in the photographs. It even comes to the point of claiming that intensive farms do not exist in Italy” (Inside the Show).

In the reviews, the documentary also appears to assume a counter-narrative function with respect to celebratory narratives surrounding – for instance – the Italian meat and dairy industries: “*The footage in Food for Profit, including that from the most well-known Italian farms, those considered ‘excellent,’ shows floors that have not been cleaned or disinfected for years, filled with bacteria and viruses, where animals fall and lie, becoming sick: pigs, chickens, turkeys, cows, many of which are injured or mutilated, killed brutally, deprived of veterinary care, and receiving, just to survive long enough to be slaughtered, continuous injections of antibiotics*” (Inside the Show). With regard to the forms of concealment highlighted, the documentary is presented in the sample as revealing power structures in a way that carries a significant ethical and political connotation. From this perspective, the intentional nature of the silence surrounding and denial of animal suffering on farms emerges as a means of protecting the interests of the animal agriculture industry (cf. Hannan, 2020). Silence and denial are thus not only a condition resulting from the spatial and symbolic separation of farms and slaughterhouses, but the product of rhetoric and policies aimed at maintaining this area of opacity. In relation to these dynamics, the documentary allows viewers to “*recover a sense of truth long trampled upon in our latitudes [...] refracting an ethical significance by opening up a political reading that, conversely, political forces in regulatory settings have preferred to bury*” (Cinema e Critica); “*The documentary particularly exposes the link between the meat industry, agrifood lobbies, and political power, the impact that intensive farming has on health and the environment, the incredibly cruel mistreatment of animals, and the exploitation of labor, in a journey through Italy, Spain, and the German model, which proves to be far from virtuous*” (Mescalina); “*reveals the link between the meat industry, agrifood lobbies, and political power*” (L’Espresso).

The role of the media in the process of concealment is also highlighted. The media system is represented as complicit in the “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) surrounding the agrifood system and the conditions of animals within it. For example, the informational content of the documentary is explicitly addressed in relation to the difficulties encountered during an early phase of its production and distribution: “*In the upcoming European elections on 8 and 9 June, citizens across Europe can sweep away corruptible politicians and their trusted lobbyists with a single vote. And it is precisely this ‘risk’ that probably explains the refusal of major streaming platforms to host Food for Profit, as it was considered ‘a political movie’*” (Antimafia 2000). Some reviewers also emphasize the documentary’s focus on an issue they perceive as overlooked by mainstream media and its critical stance toward media systems considered influenced by powerful economic and political interests. “*the issue at the center of the documentary is one that mainstream media tend to overlook, preferring to look away rather than show the horrors of intensive animal farming [...] the first civil cinema film in this country after many years of narrative apathy and production choices that have pleased and satisfied those in power*” (Cinema e Critica); “*mass media – both private and public –, which are largely subservient to the richest elite*” (Film TV).

4.3. Emotional Responses

The emotional impact of the documentary representation and its content on reviewers need to be considered. The process of revelation is closely linked to the attribution of emotional significance: images depicting the conditions of animals are framed in a clearly negative emotional light. The intensity of this emotional response appears to be related to a lack of prior knowledge or experience regarding the conditions of the animals portrayed. Reviews frequently describe the images of animals as disturbing, traumatic, or difficult to endure, using expressions such as “a journey into the abyss,” “raw images, difficult to bear,” and “a punch to the stomach” (Cinema e Critica; Antimafia 2000; Huffington Post). The emotional vocabulary employed across the reviews conveys a range of responses, including distress, shock, and outrage, often emphasizing the difficulty of witnessing animal suffering and the violence and brutality depicted. These responses are further intensified by descriptions of the images as psychologically difficult to process: “*The sequence showing the scheduled culling of animals that do not reach marketable weight will remain in memory*” (Cinema e Critica); “*Graphic images depict the abuses committed in meat farms across much of Europe*” (Gambero Rosso). The expressions used in the reviews are particularly strong and morally charged: “*Those who struggle to endure these scenes will certainly find it difficult to finish watching. We still encourage doing so, perhaps averting one’s gaze at certain moments, [...] the violence against animals and the conditions in which many of them live are terrifying*” (Hall of Series); “*a holocaust that has been ongoing for years, financed by all of us, in general indifference*” (Huffington Post)

4.4. Ethical and political responses

This section examines how reviewers interpret and discuss the contribution of the documentary to problematizing the issues addressed, and its potential effects on agency and ethical reflection. The process of revelation not only emerges as a shift in the perception of farms, the animal agriculture industry, and the powers that govern it, but also explicitly highlights the link between information, awareness, and agency. In many reviews, emotional shock is explicitly connected to the informational function of the documentary and to a process of moral problematization. The reviews emphasize the documentary’s capacity to raise awareness and fill an information gap, encouraging viewers to engage with previously overlooked aspects of food production. They also frame outrage not as a temporary emotional reaction, but as a potential catalyst for greater awareness, participation, and social change. In particular, some reviews highlight the documentary’s ability to translate indignation into concrete forms of action, including support for political and institutional reforms concerning intensive farming and agricultural subsidies. Food for Profit and its aims are described as a “*call for action*”, “*instances of resistance*”, “*a disruptive force that can be realized through conscious actions by an informed collective*” (Antimafia 2000), “*An invitation to knowledge and participation*” (Cinema e Critica). The reviews themselves seek to encourage forms of direct action: “*what we are seeing belongs to us without reservation [...] provides a clearly defined option for reclaiming a new phase of civilization*” (Cinema e Critica); “*The authors of the investigation put forward a threefold proposal, with an attached petition on the Eumans website, consisting of a request to stop subsidies to intensive farms, a moratorium on the establishment of new intensive farms, and a reform of the Common Agricultural Policy*” (Huffington Post).

The documentary is thus presented as encouraging critical reflection on the reality underlying consumption, particularly by framing the animal question as a matter of justice and prompting viewers to reconsider the moral implications of their everyday food choice: *“What kind of human beings are we to endorse a food system like this?”* (Gambero Rosso); *“Food for Profit could open your eyes to dynamics and issues you are aware of but whose importance and impact you have underestimated”* (Hall of Series). The connection between acquiring information and being enabled to exercise ethical and political choice is also emphasized: *“The documentary puts Italian and European citizens in front of a choice: continue to have corruptible Members of the European Parliament making decisions based on the profit of a few, or change course”* (LAV press release cited in Antimafia 2000).

Reviewers emphasize the potential impact that greater awareness can have on everyday food choices, particularly by encouraging a reduction in meat consumption and a reconsideration of vegetarianism as an ethical or civic stance. As one review notes, *“every choice we make about the food we eat has an impact, and that we can make a difference through our daily actions”* (Naturalmente Verde). Similarly, another reviewer describes the documentary as encouraging viewers to *“not to eat meat”* (*“in the face of intensive farming, it becomes a civic duty”*) and to recognize the ethical implications of their consumption choices (Mescalina). Overall, the reviews construct awareness not as an end in itself, but as a basis for individual action and broader change: *“This system [...] can only be changed by us, who become aware of it, who have the courage to look, who do not pretend nothing is happening”* (Inside the Show), *“I asked my butcher whether he sourced from intensive farms, and for some time now I have reduced my meat consumption”* (La Repubblica).

4.5. Critical Reviews

Some consideration should also be given to reviews that express a negative view of the documentary. Although the predominant pattern in the corpus is one of support for the documentary’s revelatory function, a smaller number of reviews challenge either the documentary’s modes of representation and investigation or its interpretation of animal farming. These two reviews, out of the sixteen analyzed, represent the minority position in the corpus.

The review published in *Rivista Studio* is highly critical of the investigative journalism approach adopted in the documentary, which it considers overly simplistic in its representation of a complex reality and morally polarizing. It criticizes the binary opposition between good and evil, arguing that the documentary leaves little room for context, nuance, or alternative perspectives. However, even in this review, the documentary’s role in revealing realities that are usually hidden or “repressed” from the public sphere emerges: *“Thank you for bringing into the public debate a topic that struggles so much to reach it. The meat industry is a repressed element of the contemporary ecological conversation.”* The documentary images of animal suffering and abuse are compared with those in other similar documentaries, which are credited with raising awareness and potentially influencing dietary behaviors: *“There are the traumatic images of animals’ conditions in farms: but YouTube is already full of anthologies of beaten cattle, mountains of rotting chickens, terrified pigs – the path of self-awareness of every person who becomes vegan or vegetarian at some point goes through that”*.

The content published on *Ruminantia* adopts a different tone, denying or attempting to refute the informational content of the film, and arguing that the farms shown do not represent the reality

– or the current reality – of the “vast majority” of farms: “*The documentary by Giulia Innocenzi and Pablo D’Ambrosi portrayed a livestock reality typical of decades ago, now largely outdated by European and national laws and regulations, and by the widespread awareness among farmers that mistreating animals is foolish because it generates no profit [...]*” Overall, the *Ruminantia* review performs a legitimizing function with regard to animal oppression and portrays nonhuman otherness as instrumental. In this sense, the ethical potential of the emotional impact of the images is categorized as a propaganda tool, while the significance of animal suffering is relativized: “*Images of sick and suffering animals were thrown in the viewers’ faces, as if, even in intensive human cities, there weren’t people who suffer, die, and receive care.*”

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Taken as a whole, the analyzed textual corpus centers on discursive patterns that: (1) follow an oppositional logic of disclosure/occlusion dynamics, both unintentional and, above all, intentional; (2) convey a perceived gap between the front stage and backstage of the situations depicted, to which moral and political significance is attributed, particularly in terms of holding the actors involved in the concealment process accountable; (3) express a negatively charged emotional response to the representation of animals’ suffering and killing within industrial animal farming systems, linked to moral responsibility; (4) reveal the transformative potential of the documentary’s disclosure in ethical and political terms, with the potential to influence both political choices and consumption practices. In particular, the disclosure of the backstage of food production and consumption corresponds to the opportunity to problematize everyday behaviors and practices, such as dietary habits. This problematization is presented as a possible premise for change that affects not only consumption practices but also the systemic structures underlying them.

In reviews with a predominantly positive slant (14 out of 16), the documentary’s revelatory role and its informational significance are consistently emphasized. Overall, 15 out of 16 analyzed reviews express empathy toward animal suffering and reject the suffering and violence depicted in the documentary. The expressions used in the reviews of *Food for Profit* seem to reflect a perception of the loss of dignity of the nonhuman body, which threatens the relationship between human and nonhuman animals and, ultimately, human dignity itself. In the words of Anna Lisa Tota, “[it is] the loss of dignity of the body of the interspecific other that constitutes the true point of no return. It is as if, beyond that threshold, humanity were confronted directly with a horror, offering nothing to the eye but atrocities, torture, and violence” (Tota, 2023, p. 219, my translation).

In the reviews of *Food for Profit*, the perception of violations of the body, psyche, and affective life of the nonhuman other is articulated as a form of awareness whose effects are envisaged in terms of agency and potential for change. The analysis of the textual corpus shows that the revelation of previously hidden realities is experienced as a traumatic act, but it also appears as a premise for reflective distancing that prompts the recognition of animal otherness precisely in terms of dignity and rights. The documentary is received as a *moral shock*, thus reflecting communicative dynamics more broadly associated with animal advocacy: “the moral shock strategy is not limited to creating change at an individual level and can also positively promote structural change” (Fernández, 2020, p. 57).

The exposure of audiences to the violence and forms of exploitation perpetrated within industrial animal complexes, particularly through undercover investigations, fosters awareness and promotes public debate on the animal question, sometimes leading to regulatory interventions and the closure of specific facilities where abuses have been documented and exposed (Fernández, 2020). *Food for Profit* circulated in different European contexts in the period leading up to the 2024 European elections, including a screening at the European Parliament in February 2024, where the filmmakers explicitly sought to convey a political message. Following the release of the documentary, several media outlets reported that former Members of the European Parliament Clara Aguilera (Spain) and Paolo De Castro (Italy) – whose statements and conflicts of interest in the agrifood sector were challenged in the film – were not renominated (Gaita, 2024), and operations at one of the Italian farms where abuse of turkeys had been filmed were halted (Gaita, 2025).

In light of these findings and the analysis of the sample, documentary representation emerges as a potentially effective communicative device for countering forms of denial and denialism regarding the conditions of animals within farming systems at different levels. The forms of denial categorized by Cohen (2001) are here used to highlight specific dynamics emerging from the analysis of the textual corpus: 1) the literal denial – such as the denial of the existence of intensive farming systems or of institutional funding and support – emerges in relation to the statements of interested parties in the meat industry represented and discussed in the documentary, reflecting an attitude not only of denial but also of denialism (Almiron & Moreno, 2022), which is both contested and criticized in the documentary itself and in the vast majority of the reviews analyzed; (2) interpretative denial, which concerns, for instance, the causal link between food consumption involving animal-derived products, intensive farming, and animal suffering. In the textual corpus, such forms of interpretative denial are attributed to institutional actors but are also extended to other spheres of responsibility, such as the lack of information provided by the media, which the documentary representation helps to address; (3) implicatory denial appears to be the type of denial most directly challenged by the documentary representation, as it involves forms of denial that also concern audiences and consumers. As highlighted, viewing the documentary – and, in particular, recognizing denial and the causal link between the represented situations and social and institutional behaviors – is associated in the reviews with calls for changes in consumption practices and in ethical and political choices.

Documentary representation therefore appears useful in exposing or countering all three forms of denial. The documentary emerges from the analysis as a tool whose informative function takes the form of disclosure, making both habitual behaviors and structural dynamics (Nibert, 2002) that define the “animal question” intelligible and open to scrutiny. In this sense, the documentary representation appears to contribute to processes through which the “indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues” (Mills, 1959, p. 5). In the texts analyzed, the animal question thus appears to be predominantly recognized as a salient moral and political issue. The acknowledgment and denunciation of a “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) involving the production sectors, politics, and the media system itself also point in this direction. In the context examined, such disclosure emerges as a preliminary step toward a reflective process of awareness and the assumption of responsibility on the part of the public, potentially influencing not only consumption practices but also ethical and civic consciousness, as well as explicitly political choices.

This research presents some limitations. The textual corpus includes only reviews of *Food for Profit*, whereas the analysis could usefully be extended to other documentaries addressing similar topics.

Moreover, the study deliberately focuses on communicative aspects and primarily on a microsocial level of analysis, while issues related to the political economy of meat in Europe – which nonetheless contribute significantly to defining the context of the content and aims of this research – remain implicit and are addressed mostly indirectly through the referenced bibliography.

However, this research constitutes an attempt to encourage continued reflection on these issues, and in particular on the close relationship between the communicative sphere, the political economy of meat, and social behaviors and responses. Making these connections visible has scientific relevance, as it contributes to understanding key aspects of contemporary societies in terms of “power, hegemony, ideology, propaganda or social change” (Almiron and Fernández, 2021) at both macro- and microsocial levels. It also has ethical value and an explicitly emancipatory purpose.

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7. Statement on the use of artificial intelligence

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8. Profile of the author

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Appendix

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