

MAN-EATING MONSTERS

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MAN-EATING MONSTERS

Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture

EDITED BY

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Foreword

What Do Humans Taste Like?

That question came to mind when Dina Khapaeva asked me to write the foreword for *Man-Eating Monsters: Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture*. Certainly, the book's title and focus — popular culture's love affair with human-eating monsters, intrigued me. Being devoured is a primordial fear, which explains why mythic monsters of the ancient world, the Brothers Grimm, and vampire lore feast on human flesh and blood.

Of werewolves, vampires, zombies, sci-fi aliens, man-eating beasts and cannibals, only beasts and cannibals are 'real.' I live in coastal California, and occasionally a Great White shark or mountain lion claims the life of a human who has invaded its domain. I remember the cannibal scenes in *Tarzan* films, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and ruminate on the lyrics from *Timothy* (1970), sung by the Buoys, about three hungry friends in a collapsed mine who eat one of their own. I think about the pioneer Donner party, snowbound in the Sierra Nevada in 1846–1847, eating their dead to survive;¹ stories of shipwrecked sailors drawing lots to determine who to kill and eat; and the Uruguayan rugby players who crashed in the Andes in 1972 and stayed alive by eating the dead. And then there are the notorious cannibalistic serial killers — the fictional Hannibal Lector and the factual "Milwaukee Cannibal," Jeffrey Dahmer.

Am I cannibalizing myself when I clean a bloody wound with my mouth or nip off a hanging cuticle? Is that what humans taste like? Under what conditions would I eat another human being? When did cannibalism disappear in Western culture, except in exceptional circumstances or in the realm of sociopathy? Curious, I visit the record-breaking exhibition "Cannibals: Myth and Reality" (San Diego Museum of Man, 2016–2020) which taps into the current obsession with humans as food.² As I wander through the multimedia exhibition, I see a silhouette of a person marked for butchery — chuck, ribs, loin, shank, hock, and round. I learn that tasting my own blood is in fact a cannibalistic practice and "there's a good chance" my DNA proves my European ancestors ate people for food as well as for religious and medical purposes. In the eighteenth century, apothecarists offered powdered human skin, placenta, and blood to treat ailments from diarrhea to epilepsy. While consuming people as food has died off in the West, biological and genomic technology allows us to "ingest" them in other way, making us an "empire of the living dead" (Bogard, 2008). Informed by

¹The pass where they were trapped is now called Donner Pass.

²Replacing the long-playing exhibition "Instruments of Torture." July 2012–January 2016.

scholarship about the colonization and the exploitation of non-Western peoples, the exhibition provides ample proof that since the Age of Exploration, Europeans have made charges of cannibalism to justify enslaving others, taking their territories, and making them barbarous spectacles, savages, “Others” (Said, 1993; Takaki, 1993). In this way, Europeans exonerated themselves from their ruthless “consumption” of the lives of the peoples they conquered.

This is the third volume in a series by Khapaeva focused on troubling developments in mass culture — the reveling in a Gothic Aesthetic and a growing antihumanism. First came *Nightmare* (2012), which examined the content of dark-themed dreams as a mental state not only in classic literature but as a disturbing requisite of contemporary novels, films, television, and video games. Next came *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (2017), which identified a worldwide cult of death. Now arrives *Man-eating Monsters: Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture*, an anthology that further develops the arguments of the first two books and examines the unprecedented uptick in people as foodstuff in mass culture.

To Eat or Not to Eat

One of the many contributions of *Man-eating Monsters: Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture* is the thoughtful way in which it problematizes the differences between the diets of human and nonhuman animals, and what is socially permissible to eat and what is not. Lions, tigers, bears, sharks, and even the occasional pig will eat each other and us. Billions of pounds of pork are eaten by human beings annually, but people are appalled when they hear about a human-eating hog. When I visited China in 1989, I was ethnocentrically aghast to see caged “young dog” and “old cat” in the food markets. Years ago, a restaurant in San Diego put lion on the menu until a community uproar ended the addition. In Iceland, whale and horse are served at some restaurants, but Icelandic locals tell me these traditional foods are mostly consumed by tourists. “They are no longer needed for food, and we want to protect these majestic animals,” an Icelandic, who can trace his lineage back to the ninth-century Viking settlements, tells me.

What is behind these restrictions? Having plentiful other food choices is one factor, as is a cultural shift of people redefining themselves as animal lovers rather than animal eaters. In the West, we increasingly have folded other members of the animal kingdom into a food source taboo that we have accorded our own species and special animals we deem companions. Many individuals have become ethically concerned about the well-being and lives of other sensate animals through the animal rights movement, PETA, and scholarship of bioethicists like Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation* (1975). Learning about the sufferings of animals in factory farms and the hidden world of the abattoir has changed many a human diet. In a secular era, this rethinking of our food sources is also a disavowal of the old Great Chain of Being that placed humans at the top of the animal world, free to do whatever they wanted to those further down the ladder. There’s been an expansion of egalitarian movements that have

widened conceptions of equality beyond our own species and amplified the anthropomorphism of animals in popular culture, as well. *Babe* (1995), a fantasy film about a charming talking pig determined to save its life, convinced a former student of mine to stop eating meat. The environmental movement has also played a role in the reorganization of the Western selection of food. Our carnivorous diet has been blamed for global warming, droughts, the annihilation of other species, an insatiable wrecking of the world's resources and habitats, and is positioned as unhealthy and as an unneeded luxury, a form of conspicuous waste, to use Veblen's classic term (1970). In the land of plenty, we have become fat, food obsessed, and food phobic. I think about vegans and vegetarian acquaintances and friends who shudder at the thought of eating meat but are entranced by popular entertainment featuring werewolves, vampires, zombies, and other humanoid monsters who not only devour "us" but are portrayed as sympathetic, alluring creatures, even role models. I am in two minds about these developments. Certainly, we can solve the ethical problems described above in ways other than defining ourselves as merely another beast to eat!

Since popular culture reflects events, trends, and attitudes in mass culture, perhaps we have redefined ourselves as food for monsters as penance for our collective guilt for being the ultimate monsters: consumers of other creatures and despoilers of their and our own habitats. This 'monsters-within-us' theme has a precedent nearly 60 years ago in 'To Serve Man' (1962), Episode 89 of the television horror-fantasy series *The Twilight Zone* (1959–1964).³ The Kanamits, a giant, ghastly looking but seemingly altruistic race of space aliens, visit earth, speak to the United Nations, and offer their advance technology "to serve man." They propose to end famines, wars, energy shortages, nuclear proliferation, and other human-made disasters, as well as supply us with life-extension medicines and trips to their planet. At the end of the episode, cryptographers translate the Kanamits *How to Serve Man* book and reveal it is a cookbook! The coda: "The cycle of going from dust to dessert. The metamorphosis from being the ruler of a planet to an ingredient in someone's soup." The moral: the extinction of human life caused by hubristic and self-destructive impulses in a dystopian future. If 'To Serve Man' were remade today, would there be a moral built into the nightmarish plot or would it merely be presented as a diversion? Would the Kanamits be re-imagined as attractive popular culture icons with Instagram followings?

Presenting humans as food is yet another way to 'consume' dying, death, and the dead in the information-entertainment-industrial complex. In search of an audience and profits, mass culture has tackled one body taboo after another — illicit sex, illicit death, and now illicit food. It has demystified sex with the porno-ization of culture, celebrated gruesome deaths and ghoulish images of the fictive and real dead (including celebrities), macabrely mixes sex and death in

³Another example of a dystopian future where humans become a food source is the 1973 film *Soylent Green*.

what I call “corpse porn,” and now has turned to the ultimate form of human dying, being eaten, preferably while alive so others can witness one’s horrific death — and one can witness it oneself. As members of consumer society, we have become food for monsters because we have an insatiable desire for what’s new (Baudrillard, 1998; Lipovetsky, 1993). To watch a human being eaten in the fictional world is titillating and transgressive because it breaks taken-for-granted taboos. In the topsy-turvy world of fantasy, humans are the ultimate Other, exciting to eat because we are forbidden fruit. To that end, we create legions of the ‘undead,’ who while alive, as humans, lived by eating what they killed, and who now kill and feast on humans to perpetuate and propagate their species. Since food and death are in fashion, is it time to revisit my claim that “death is the new sex”?⁴ Is food the new death?

As we cannibalize ourselves and push the boundaries of popular culture by “playing” with death in this food-fantasy-fetishistic way, isn’t it ironic that funerals are giving way to memorial services and most people in advanced Western societies have not and do not want to see an actual death or dead person? Who do we think we are kidding? Certainly not the Grim Reaper.⁵

Our highly visible yet “invisible culture,” to use the anthropologist Edward T. Hall’s term, “hides more than it reveals [...] most effectively from its own participants” (Hall, 1959, p. 53). Perhaps popular culture and death share a “hidden identity,” to use a concept of Freud’s (1952). Making ourselves food for monsters may thus also be a way to articulate an anxiety about and desire for death, driven by an instinct (*thanatos*) that propels us to our prior state of non-being. Freud argued that this death instinct underlies violent fantasies, arguably, including the human-eating monsters featured so prominently in contemporary popular culture. Jung (1975) speculated that each of us carries a primitive side to our personalities he called the “Shadow” and theorized that the less this black side appears in our conscious life, the darker it will appear in our unconscious impulses, dreams, and fantasies. If we modify Lacan (1992), we can surmise that the gruesome man-eating creatures that we create and entertain ourselves with maybe guiding us to our own demises by presenting death as a “dazzling sight” (p. 62). This may be a foreshadowing; after all, our mortal remains will one day be consumed by fire or eaten by worms or other organisms.

Beyond the insights of psychoanalysis, grisly fictitious death as something to be amused by and to profit from is a feature of Western late- or post- or liquid-modern society. In our secular era, popular culture has taken over religion in attempting to make sense of death and in increasingly bizarre ways. In the history of “death mentalities” (Ariès, 1974), we have reached the phase Jacobsen (2016) calls “spectacular death,” a way of thinking about human mortality that replaced the twentieth-century constructs of “forbidden death” (Ariès, 1974) and interdicted death (Gorer, 1955), a period that hid death away as antithetical to

⁴See Bibliography, for relevant writings by J. L. Foltyn.

⁵See Bibliography, for relevant writings by J. L. Foltyn.

the modern, a failure of a cure (Ariès, 1974).⁶ In the era of spectacular death, death is discussed openly in the media and academic research and is commercialized in the arts, fashion, and popular culture, even as it is hidden away on the level of the personal. This development in social life is part of our larger society, which on a most fundamental level can be understood as people coming together as they march toward death (Berger, 1969). Lest we forget, culture in its various forms helps make life, with the inescapability of death, bearable (Bauman, 2006).

Jacque Lynn Foltyn

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⁶According to Ariès, in *Western Attitudes toward Death*, (1974), over a thousand-year period in the West there were four death mentalities: tamed death, death of one's own, death of the other, and forbidden death. Jacobsen (2016) proposes a fifth: "spectacular death."

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