

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE 1

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## Children of the Quorn: *The Vegetarian*, *Raw*, and the Horrors of Vegetarianism<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Flesh, consumption, and the Gothic have enjoyed a productive consanguinity for centuries—from the reconstituted body of the creature in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), to the vampires and zombies that have proliferated across the genre. This article considers this Gothic preoccupation in light of a particularly prominent trend in contemporary Gothic and horror stories: vegetarian horror. The article positions vegetarian horror as an off-shoot of Gothic Nature and the ecoGothic, exploring the history of the Gothic’s politics of consumption in light of ecological concerns, paying particular attention to Han Kang’s surreal and unsettling novel *The Vegetarian* (2007; English translation 2015) and Julia Ducournau’s vegetarian cannibal film *Raw* (2016). These narratives develop vegetarian horror in relation to enduring concerns surrounding the ethics and implications of meat-eating: they insist fundamentally on the unbroken spectrum that exists between inanimate nature, the animal and nonhuman world, and the human. Further, they illustrate the violence, and most significantly the self-violence, that emanates from a system that tries to proclaim humanity’s distinguished place in, or separation from, this spectrum. Where vegetarian horror differs from the traditional blood-suckers and cannibalistic undead is in its figuration not of monstrously Other practitioners of transgressive eating, but of the everyday eating practices of large swathes of humanity as a site of gory Gothic horror. These works reiterate that acts of consumption are always political. Finally, however, contemporary vegetarian horror narratives offer no easy answers—vegetarianism and veganism are not simply proclaimed as more ethically sound, less horrific ways of engaging with the more-than-human world. Rather, they illuminate the ever-present spectre of violence that

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predominates humanity's ways of engaging with the world and suggest the pitfalls of many—if not all—ethical and moral codes.

‘Your body smells of meat’.

(Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*)

Having recently celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Frankenstein* (1818), it seems apt to return to the creature's *roots*: that is, to the fruit and fibre that comprise its diet in Mary Shelley's novel. ‘I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my appetite’, the creature tells Frankenstein, since ‘acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment’ (Shelley, 2018: pp. 137-138). The insistence here between conventional human appetites and the necessity of violence and destruction to appease those appetites is unequivocal. Where the creature's vegetarian diet is presented as moderate and humanely nourishing, humanity's carnivorousness is in thrall to its own excessive cravings. Tellingly, the creature makes reference to ‘glutting’ two other times in the novel, and in both instances it expresses an intemperate desire to wreak his vengeance on a human world that has spurned him. First, the creature approaches Frankenstein on Mont Blanc and demands that Victor, as creator, fulfil his duty towards his creation; ‘if you refuse’, the creature warns, ‘I will glut the maw of death, until it be satiated with the blood of your remaining friends’ (p. 90). Second, recalling his rejection by the De Lacey family, who he had hoped would treat him kindly, the creature remarks that ‘I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery’ (p. 128).

‘Glutting’ in *Frankenstein* is figured as a death-dealing voraciousness, a term suggestive of feeding on and finding satiation through the extirpation and misery of (human) community. When the creature uses this term later, then, in his invocation of humanity's eating habits, it carries with it this previously established significance: the implication is surely that other life forms, other communities, are ruined and made miserable as humanity gluts its appetite. The creature's own source of nourishment, by contrast, serves to establish a more benignant ethical engagement with the natural world, and specifically its (other) nonhuman inhabitants. It is, Carol J. Adams (2015) argues, through the creature's vegetarianism that we witness its ‘inclusive moral code’, indicative of an ethics that incorporates the nonhuman animal and that stands as ‘an emblem for what [the creature] hoped for and needed—but failed to receive—from human society’. In contrast to the creature, human society—or ‘the closed

circle of patriarchy’—equates men with the human in a schema that positions women and the animal beneath or outside it. This society operates through rigorous processes of exclusion, excluding, for instance, the creature, the animal, vegetarianism, and the feminism that Adams associates with the creature’s morally-inclusive, socially-excluded standing (p. 97, p. 105).

In the last few years, two particularly striking examples of what might be termed ‘vegetarian horror’ have emerged in the English-speaking market: Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian* (originally published in Korean in 2007 and translated by Deborah Smith into English in 2015) and Julia Ducournau’s French-Belgian horror film, *Raw* (released theatrically in 2017). These narratives revisit the concerns *Frankenstein* touches upon, doing so in ways that develop vegetarian horror in light of enduring concerns surrounding the ethics and implications of meat-eating: they insist fundamentally on the unbroken spectrum that exists between inanimate nature, the animal and the nonhuman world, and the human; and they illustrate the violence, and most significantly the *self*-violence, that emanates from a system that tries to proclaim humanity’s distinguished place in, or separation from, this spectrum. Where *Frankenstein*’s creature articulates a clear moral code, however, these contemporary narratives do not, and part of what makes the (re)emergence of this vegetarian horror tradition in recent years worth attending to is its refusal to neatly demarcate between a vegetarianism that is ethically sound and a carnivorousness that is ethically flawed. What I wish to do in this essay is propose vegetarian horror as an off-shoot of Gothic Nature and the ecoGothic, exploring the history of the Gothic’s politics of consumption in light of ecological concerns, before turning to *The Vegetarian* and *Raw* as particularly salient, but by no means isolated, contemporary examples of this genre and the modes of thinking it prompts.

As a term, ‘vegetarian horror’ can be understood to refer to a Gothic mode that explicitly foregrounds the troubling intersection of the human subject with food and flesh, the ethics of consumption, and the natural world. For Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013), the ecoGothic is characterised by its ‘presumptive dystopianism’, in which something called ‘nature’ is figured as ‘a type of blankness’ and inscrutable ‘space of crisis’ which humanity seeks to control, inscribe or narrativize, and render meaningful (p. 3). If this is a site that resists simple representation, reading with an ecoGothic lens further allows us to see, via nature’s resistance to anthropocentric or anthropomorphic modes of interpretation, ‘the role that the environment, species, and nonhuman play in the construction of monstrosity and fear’ (Del Principe, 2014a: p. 1). Vegetarian horror develops this line of thinking in two ways.

First, vegetarian horror provides commentary on the extent to which our engagement with nature for the most part takes place within the world of culture. It insists less on a pre-existing Gothic nature (which is Gothic because it remains largely inscrutable to the human), but rather on a nature that is Gothicised at the point of (and because of) contact with the violence(s) of a human culture, where the consumption of the nonhuman can be understood as a form of ecological despoliation. Second, vegetarian horror repositions the site of the ecoGothic's 'crisis': it shifts focus from the external wilderness beyond the human to the interior of the human subject itself, the stability of whose subjectivity may be compromised through its butchery and ingestion of the more-than-human world. Vegetarian horror works to render carnivorous consumption strange, insisting on the slipperiness of the spectrum by which the stable human subject is opposed to the edible (nonhuman or animal) Other. In common with other Gothic narratives—such as those of the conventional vampire or the modern zombie—vegetarian horror works to destabilise long-standing notions of humanity's position at the top of the food chain, thereby seeking to challenge enduring conceptions of the human's relationship with the natural world beyond it. Where vegetarian horror may differ from the blood-suckers and the cannibalistic undead is in its figuration not of monstrosity Other practitioners of transgressive eating, but of the everyday eating practices of large swathes of humanity as a site of gory Gothic horror.

### **Flesh, Blood, and Gothic Cuisine**

Questions surrounding the consumption of flesh and blood, human or otherwise, have had a fruitful consanguinity in horror narratives since *Frankenstein*: in novels like *Dracula* (1897) or *Under the Skin* (2000), in zombie cinema or the Italian cannibal-sploitation boom of the 1980s, acts of consumption are a litmus test for the ethical and ontological limits of the human, or for the exploration of the prospect of the human-as-animal (and therefore, implicitly, of the human-as-meat). Entwined with the recent turn in Gothic studies towards ecocritical considerations of a Gothicised nature is a critical interest in Gothic cuisine – in both the food and drink of Gothic narratives and the Gothicising of processes of food production and consumption. The Gothic is a genre of what Elizabeth Andrews (2008) has termed 'morbid eating' (p. ii). David Del Principe (2014b) argues that a general neglect in the scholarship of the Gothic's politics of meat may be down to the fact that questioning human carnivorous

behaviour ‘remains a tabooed subject in Western, flesh-eating society’ (p. 25).<sup>2</sup> Meat-eating is hyper-normalised, and, Lorna Piatti-Farnell (2016) notes, even as it is ‘neatly package[d]’ and ‘sanitised’, it ‘continues to possess [...] an aura of potency and power’ (p. 160); further, meat is manly (Adams, 2016), ‘typically marketed and modeled as a masculine food’ and thereby aligned with hegemonic conceptions of masculinity (Love and Sulikowski, 2018: p. 2). Gothic and horror are well established as literatures of transgression, giving voice to and troubling a whole smörgåsbord of institutionalised ideologies, prohibitions, limits, and taboos (Botting, 2014). As such, these literary and cinematic modes provide an evocative discourse through which to broach our seemingly disturbing relationship with flesh and with our ‘flesh-eating society’ and the nonhuman ecologies obliged and exploited to uphold it.

The emergence and heyday of the Gothic is roughly coextensive with the First Industrial Revolution (c.1760-1840), an upheaval in manufacturing processes that initiated ‘a paradigm shift in the agricultural means of production’ (Del Principe, 2014b: p. 25). An effect of the industrialisation and mechanisation of labour was the transformation of the place of the animal in this system. On the one hand, work once undertaken by animals could be done by machinery, and humans could afford to foster more emotional bonds with their closest domestic animals (Tuan, 1984; Carr, 2015). At the same time, the processing of animals into food—a process that might be read as a translation from nonhuman subject to consumable object—shifted to ‘more remote, “off-site” respositor[ies]’ such as slaughterhouses (Del Principe, 2014b: p. 25; see also Lee, 2008). If this removal served to obscure the transformational processes that turned livestock (a term whose overt insistence on the animal’s status as ‘living’ already gestures towards its opposite) into a comestible – if, that is, industrial farming obscured the workings of production, the Gothic brings back into view this abjected flesh through its pronounced interest in monstrous, animalised, nonhuman bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> In some sense, of course, Gothic scholarship that has given attention to the figure of the vampire and the contemporary zombie has *always* been interested in the politics of consumption, but recent studies to specifically foreground food as a prominent feature of Gothic or horror narratives include Elizabeth Andrew’s doctoral thesis, ‘Devouring the Gothic: Food and the Gothic Body’ (2008); Maria Parrino’s doctoral thesis, ‘Mouths Wide Open: Food, Voice and Hospitality in Nineteenth-Century Gothic fiction’ (2013); Jennifer Brown, *Cannibalism in Literature and Film* (2013); the special issue of *Gothic Studies* on ‘The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century’ (16(1): 2014); Lorna Piatti-Farnell’s *Consuming Gothic: Food and Horror in Film* (2017); Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper, *What’s Eating You? Food and Horror on Screen* (2017); Emilia Quinn, ‘Monstrous Vegan Narratives: Margaret Atwood’s Hideous Progeny’ (2018). Emily Carr (2013), too, offers a deeply compelling theorisation of an ecofeminist Gothic that returns to Carol J. Adams’ work, in ‘The riddle was the angel in the house: towards an American ecofeminist Gothic’.

Reading the Gothic for what it might tell us about our relationship with food and flesh, we are witnesses to a return of the processed – that is, a return of the nonhuman subjects who are obscured as they are sliced-up and transformed from the individuated animal into ‘meat’, a nonspecific term which, as critics have noted, renders the particular animal an unspoken, unacknowledged referent (Adams, 2015). Indeed, as Othering serves to consolidate senses of human subjectivity—generating and abjecting the ‘not-me’ by which the ‘me’ can be known—then by looking to acts of incorporation we might see a literalising of the metaphor: as the nonhuman Other is consumed and thereby internalised by the human subject, the Other is returned into an interior space to which it, so long as it is performing ‘Otherness’, has always already belonged. *Frankenstein*, as I have suggested above, can be read as one of the most explicit Gothic texts to explore subjectivity and its relationship with nature and the more-than-human world.<sup>3</sup> As Jackson Petsche (2014) writes, the creature ‘is created from “pieces” of nonhuman animals killed for their flesh’; he is ‘a bizarre by-product of eating’ and ‘threaten[s] the carnivorous and speciesist social order which underscores human-animal relations’ (pp. 98-99). Beyond Shelley’s novel, the Gothic and horror genres are rife with acts of incorporation that trouble the boundaries between human and animal, human and nonhuman, human and monster, and indeed human and human. If there is any suggestion of truth in the old adage ‘we are what we eat’, then the remarkable instances of horrific consumption that occur across the pages of Gothic fiction open up an opportunity to see how such an act might inflect one’s physical and moral constitution.

There is one more connection we might elaborate between the consumption of meat and a discourse of horror and the grotesque. As advocates of vegetarianism and veganism present their diets as morally responsible so is a language of horror invoked to elaborate the relationship between meat and the meat-eating subject. For Percy Bysshe Shelley (1884), the preparation of meat works simply to overcome a natural horror at the prospect of consuming unprepared flesh: ‘It is only by softening and disguising dead flesh by culinary preparation that it is rendered susceptible of mastication or digestion, and that the sight of its bloody juices and raw horror does not excite intolerable loathing and disgust’ (p. 13). Eating meat, he argues, is a sign of ‘the depravity of the physical and moral nature of man’ (p. 9), and even as cookery gives a veneer of cultivation to this process, it is nonetheless a thin disguise for the unpalatable

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013) also turn to *Frankenstein*’s engagement with nature in their work towards a definition of the ‘ecoGothic’, specifically reading it as a ‘critique of a Romantic idealism which asserts that nature can be apprehended as natural rather than cultural’ (p. 2).



horrors beneath. More recently, the most extreme animal rights activist groups—such as 269 Life—construe humanity’s relationship with the more-than-human world as explicitly bloody and grotesque. 269 Life’s protests—which have been seen as fundamentally sexist and racist (Jadalizadeh, 2015)—unfold as graphic horror shows, which include human branding, the packaging of humans as meat in plastic wrapping, and the staged slaughtering of human bodies as if animals in an abattoir. The implication is clearly that only through the excessive language of horror and the grotesque can our ‘flesh-eating society’ be understood for what it is.

The Gothic serves us, then, with a reminder of the flesh and blood that constitute a carnivorous diet, as in the horrible visibility of Frankenstein’s creature. Further, the Gothic also places the human itself in a continuum in which the human’s fleshy body is material to be harvested and processed into meat, as seen when Jonathan Harker is left to mature in Castle Dracula or in the interplanetary farming of ‘vodseles’ in *Under the Skin*. By asking us to see how else we might eat, and how we might do so less destructively, less violently, Gothic and horror show themselves to be deeply concerned with the morality of consumption and the means by which humans might further embrace an ecocentric subject position. The ecoGothic provides a lens by which humanity might not merely recognise its place in the interconnected network of the more-than-human world, but by which it might seek to live with an awareness of the diversity of other subjects and other kinds of sentience inhabiting this network.

Where a novel such as *Frankenstein* clearly posits vegetarianism as the moral alternative to meat-eating, however, contemporary vegetarian horror narratives are less clear cut. Vegetarianism is still clearly presented as an unusual and uncommon choice within the societies depicted in *The Vegetarian* and *Raw* – it still renders one, like the creature, an outsider. But it is also rendered strange by the narratives themselves, which chart the disturbing trajectory or gesture towards the unsettling implications of a vegetarian diet; it is difficult to read either text as a whole-hearted endorsement of vegetarianism. *The Vegetarian* and *Raw* deal graphically with the consuming of meat and proffer the idea—through their nightmare imagery and scenes of human and animal terror—that this act of consumption may ultimately prove to be just as traumatic as the production of meat almost certainly is. More crucially, both narratives feature female protagonists whose self-proclaimed vegetarianism positions them as



a curious—at times, monstrous—presence within the communities they uneasily inhabit.<sup>4</sup> Bonds of sisterhood, too, bring these two texts together: in each case, the protagonist's Gothicised eating shines a light on the prospect of sisterly unity as a means of resisting the forces of an oppressive patriarchal world that sees such eating only as something that needs to be controlled or tamed – and, if this is not possible, abjected. I want to argue that *The Vegetarian* and *Raw* present vegetarianism (and cannibalism, which *Raw* posits as a related phenomenon) not simply as a type of protest against human ravishment of the more-than-human world. More than this, these texts suggest vegetarianism might be a security against the inevitability of a violence that is as harmful to the self as to other subjects and which is indicative of humanity's engagement with the interrelated worlds of culture and nature. At best, these texts suggest that such a lifestyle choice keeps one's worst habits in check; at worst, they suggest that vegetarianism is simply a means of redirecting this inevitable violence in new directions, including inwards towards the self rather than outwards towards another.

#### **‘[T]hat Vivid, Strange, Horribly Uncanny Feeling’: *The Vegetarian***

*The Vegetarian* tells the story of Yeong-hye, whose turn to vegetarianism early on in the novel isolates her from her conservative family and the enduringly patriarchal world of South Korea more generally. Only two characters make any effort to retain a meaningful connection with Yeong-hye: her struggling-artist brother-in-law, with whom Yeong-hye establishes an erotic relationship predicated on painting their naked bodies with images of flowers; and her sister, In-hye, who alone keeps up visits to Yeong-hye in the novel's final section, and who, more profoundly, gradually helps reveal the abuse both sisters suffered under their father. In the end, *The Vegetarian* is not really about a vegetarian: rapidly, Yeong-hye opts out of almost all forms of consumption, until, in the novel's final sequence, she is institutionalised and (barely) living on water and sunlight alone, seeking to transform herself into a tree. Critical reception of quite what stance Kang's novel takes on its titular subject matter has insisted on the puzzling—even troubling—ambiguity with which the writer treats vegetarianism.

Margarita Carretero-González (2019) suggests that the novel places greatest emphasis in its final section on the sisters' 'hidden story of shared oppression and expectations' (p. 177).

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<sup>4</sup> Linking vegetarianism with women, these narratives reflect the fact that men are greater consumers of meat than women, and that women are more commonly vegetarian than men (Love and Sulikowski, 2018: p. 2).

At the same time, vegetarians or vegans would struggle to find something fully politically affirming in *The Vegetarian*: it is ‘disquieting reading [...] It is the story of a woman on the verge of death. Yeong-hye’s body is, actually, a diseased one’, as the novel elides veganism as a lifestyle choice with ‘eating disorder[s]’ (pp. 175-176). Indeed, shifting between ‘vegetarian’ and ‘vegan’ as the appropriate term for Yeong-hye’s position, Carretero-González’s essay attests to the ambiguity and slipperiness writ deeply in Kang’s novel. In interviews, Kang has said that vegetarianism is a means of talking about the possibility of existing in a world non-violently. The novel ‘depicts a woman who rejects an omnipresent and precarious violence even at a cost to herself’ (Lee, 2016).

For Kang, it seems, the novel is a meditation on the ultimate *impossibility* of living without violence, and a working-through of the troubling prospects of that impossibility: ‘Violence is part of being human, and how can I accept that I am one of those human beings?’, Kang asks. If Yeong-hye is committed to *not* accepting that, then the novel paints a bleak picture for others who would follow in her footsteps. Neat lines of division cannot be drawn across Kang’s novel, as ethical behaviour merges into mental instability. Yet this may also be where it is most intriguing: *The Vegetarian* may be approached as a novel explicitly about the blurring of boundaries and the difficulties of navigating between modes of being and socially-sanctioned behaviours, and the different ways one can incorporate or be incorporated by the more-than-human world. To this end, the novel is also, it seems, concerned with different kinds of material immanence – inflected by the animal or the ecological. Yeong-hye’s struggle may be productively glossed by, even as it diverges from, ideas raised by ecofeminist writers like Mary Mellor. In *Feminism and Ecology* (1997), Mellor advocates for an ecocentric human engagement with nonhuman nature that acknowledges ‘an awareness of ecological holism, of the immanence of humanity as a material fact’ – an effort to read the human and nonhuman as interconnected and interdependent. ‘Humanity’s connection to an ecological “whole” has a material form and material consequences’. Such a politics, Mellor writes, inevitably ‘raises fundamental questions about the nature of human subjectivity’ (p. 147). It is the troubling question of how subjectivity may be sustained as one works towards the embodiment of a subject position that celebrates ‘ecological holism’ that Kang’s novel ultimately wrangles with.

At the beginning of *The Vegetarian*, it is Yeong-hye’s italicised nightmares that offer the reader a glimpse into the profoundly troubling influence the consumption of meat is having:

*'Dreams of murder.*

*Murderer or murdered...hazy distinctions, boundaries wearing thin. Familiarity bleeds into strangeness, certainty becomes impossible. Only the violence is vivid enough to stick. A sound, the elasticity of the instant when the metal struck the victim's head...the shadow that crumpled and fell gleams cold in the darkness.'* (Kang, 2015: p. 28)

The narrator—Yeong-hye's husband, Mr Cheong—remarks of Yeong-hye's father, a violent carnivore and proud Vietnam veteran, that 'Shame and empathy just didn't suit him' (p. 29). The suggestion that Yeong-hye's father cannot feel shame or empathy, connected as it is in a single paragraph that recounts his military service, his traditional patriarchal values, his violence towards his children, and his bewilderment that Yeong-hye won't eat meat, establishes a network of interrelated traits that Yeong-hye's political stance pushes back against. Vegetarianism here reveals how the politics of meat—of one's relationship with meat—seeps into all corners of culture; vegetarianism, then, becomes a tool to dismantle culture, akin to the work Petsche understands Frankenstein's creature to undertake. But in *The Vegetarian* there is a dismantling of subjectivity, too, as Yeong-hye's dream hints. There are '*hazy distinctions*' and '*boundaries wearing thin*'. The processing of the animal for meat has generated a dissolution of the subjectivity of the meat-eater: the violence one performs—or implicitly sanctions—as a meat-eater rebounds on the self as the body is suffused by the blood and remnants of the animals one has done violence to, as '*their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides*' and '*a different person rises up inside me, devours me*' (pp. 49, 32). As the nonhuman Other is incorporated into the human self, the self here is remade by that Other – a failure, or sign of the futility, of abjection as a means of establishing the 'me' against the 'not-me'. The result is a '*vivid, strange, horribly uncanny feeling*' (p. 12), a sensation invoking the faithful spectre of the Gothic: the familiar-unfamiliarity of the *Unheimliche*. By contrast, from the perspective of the carnivores of this novel, vegetarianism dissolves one's bonds not just with culture, but with community, with the living: numerous characters, numerous times, see Yeong-hye as 'just a ghost' (p. 45).

An earlier memory of Yeong-hye's summons the spirit of Sylvia Plath's 'Cut' (1962). Yeong-hye remembers the morning before her dream: as she is mincing meat she accidentally slices off the end of a finger and takes pleasure in some negligible autophagia, sucking the blood from the wound. '*My hand, the chopping board, the meat, and then the knife, slicing*

*cold into my finger. A drop of red blood already blossoming out of the cut. [...] Sticking the finger in my mouth calmed me [...], left me strangely pacified* (p. 19). In ‘Cut’, we read:

‘What a thrill—  
My thumb instead of an onion.  
The top quite gone  
Except for a sort of hinge

Of skin [...]’ (Plath, 1965: p. 23)

The pleasure of ‘Cut’ is in the vivid, even life-affirming, glimpse of lifeblood ebbing out. In *The Vegetarian* pacification comes as the ‘blossoming’ blood—a word that serves to connect the vital fluid with the novel’s pervasive interest in flowers and flowering—is redirected inwards in an image of self-sustaining sustenance, a ‘closed circle’ of bloodshed and nourishment (to re-appropriate Adams’ terminology).

For all the uncanny revulsion Yeong-hye feels in response to the dreams and messages from her subconscious, the dissolution of subjectivity is not necessarily something she wishes to turn away from. Instead, it is something Yeong-hye wishes to achieve by travelling in the opposite direction: away from consumption, towards a (fatal) unification with the nonhuman, the non-animal, the vegetal. We might here see *The Vegetarian* seeking to embrace what Dawn Keetley (2016) has identified in the ecoGothic strain of the comic book *Manifest Destiny* (2014): the articulation of ‘a thorough-going interpenetration of human and plant’ and an awareness of ‘our always already-present vegetal otherness’ (p. 25). More than bridging the human-animal divide, *The Vegetarian* explores the prospect of bridging between sentient and non-sentient life. Yeong-hye’s first sustained effort to achieve this is with her brother-in-law, who films the sex they have while covered in painted-on flowers. At the novel’s end, In-hye finally sees the potential of these videos made by her sister and (now) ex-husband:

‘Covered with flowers and leaves and twisting green stems, those bodies were so altered it was as though they no longer belonged to human beings. The writhing movements of those bodies made it seem as though they were trying to shuck off the human.’ (Kang, 2015: p. 179)

Next, Yeong-hye works to become tree in more than just superficial detail via a transformation of self with Ovidian overtones. The mythic-Romantic effort to lose oneself not simply in but *to* nature carries with it also its Gothic undertones in the further disintegration of a troubled mind that such a process is suggested to embody. In-hye visits her sister in a psychiatric ward, and finds her doing handstands. Yeong-hye explains that trees ‘stand with both arms in the earth’ and that

‘I was in a dream, and I was standing on my head...leaves were growing from my body, and roots were sprouting from my hands...so I dug down into the earth. On and on...I wanted flowers to bloom from my crotch so I spread my legs.’ (p. 148)

The image is faintly ludicrous perhaps, but this literal inversion of the human finds Yeong-hye itching to ‘shuck off’ the indices of the animal. As she tells her sister ‘I’m not an animal any more’ she remarks too that soon ‘words and thoughts will all disappear’ (pp. 153-154).

Ultimately, Yeong-hye’s effort to find sympathetic communion and solidarity with the nonhuman and vegetal world has led to her awareness of all that prevents the human from achieving this. As she suggests, language—and sentient thought—are barriers to the prospect of any real kind of immanent integration with this world. Such things, as the work of Julia Kristeva (1982) demonstrates, root one fundamentally in a symbolic world, the world of culture and violence, of signs and an awareness of one’s separation from the real (see pp. 1-32). Whether or not Yeong-hye ever succeeds in her project is unknown; indeed, by her own logic, Yeong-hye herself will never know of the success, because success itself depends upon unknowing, of forgetting what it means to know, of abandoning one’s subjectivity. *The Vegetarian* celebrates the power of vegetarianism and veganism to help challenge and dismantle culture and the violence of patriarchy. The failure and flaws of Yeong-hye’s protest are in her refusal to compromise. Her story illustrates the impracticability of establishing a compromise in which human immanence in the material world beyond it is not antithetical to remaining simultaneously in the human world of culture. For to do so is to occupy a subject position that implicates itself in a culture that does not feel shame or empathy, one predicated on the denial of the value of marginalised or abjected bodies, whether human or not. Here, participation or compromise are impossible positions to countenance, just as the alternative itself may be impossible.

The final perspective offered in the novel is that of Yeong-hye's sister, In-hye. At the end of the book, In-hye seems to exhibit some sympathy with Yeong-hye's acts, while at the same time keeping her distance. As Yeong-hye is taken away in an ambulance, 'In-hye stares fiercely at the trees. As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent' (Kang, 2015: p. 183). The answer that In-hye seeks, the same perhaps that her sister and Han Kang seek, is impossibly located in an inscrutable nature that, as we've seen, exists beyond 'words and thoughts': the trees are not, cannot be, forthcoming. The novel's final section both reaffirms the sisterly bond and reiterates the unbroachable divide between the two women. This bond is one that also receives significant scrutiny in Julia Ducournau's vegetarian horror film, *Raw*: the sister-sister bond is both safe haven and productive of remarkable violence, physical and emotional.

#### **'Bite him, Justine': *Raw***

*Raw* follows vegetarian veterinarian student, Justine (Garance Marillier), through the hazing rituals of the first week of college: she is immersed in blood and forced to consume various morsels of animal. These sequences invite comparison with *The Vegetarian* and with the shock-tactics of a group like 269 Life, suggesting as they do that to emerge into the world of human culture is to be symbolically reborn into a hierarchical world of institutionally sanctioned violence. Along the way, Justine appears to discover both her sexuality and her cannibalistic tendencies. Reviews of *Raw* have—quite appropriately—read it as a feminist coming-of-age parable: it is an 'intimate tale of identity crisis', a 'jangly opera of sexual and dietary awakening', a horror film where 'turning into a monster also means sexual liberation', where Justine finds 'empowerment [...] crossing the no-man's-land between girlhood and womanhood' (Kermode, 2017; Catsoulis 2017; Newman, 2017; Fear, 2017). De Sade's *Justine* (1791), Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974), and the films *Suspiria* (1977) and *We Are What We Are* (2010) have been common reference points in these reviews. For the director, Ducournau, *Raw* throws the net slightly wider: it is about 'interpersonal devouring', in society, in the family, and in love (BUILD series, 2017). Acts of consumption drive this narrative and function as a means to talk about the treatment of women's bodies under patriarchy. This is most overt when Justine's trichophagia is mistaken, entirely without fuss, for bulimia by a fellow student.

But vegetarianism and cannibalism are not working solely metaphorically here; nor is consumption solely a gateway to liberation or self-discovery. The film prompts us to think carefully about the relationship between the human body and the nonhuman body, to think about what might be incorporated under the term ‘animal’, and what the human subject might be doing to the nonhuman subject it carves up and incorporates.<sup>5</sup> As Justine becomes rapidly indiscriminate about the type of meat she’ll eat, the question is raised: if one is going to eat meat, what justification is there for being picky about the kind of meat one eats? There are suggestive overlaps with a novel like *Dracula*, as Justine embodies a form of vampirism, feeding on the blood of other humans, sustaining her body at the expense of others’. Visually, the film repeatedly aligns Justine at her most cannibalistic with *Raw*’s numerous dogs. In this respect, Ducournau’s narrative takes us in the absolute opposite direction to Kang’s: *Raw*’s vegetarian is cannibalistic carnivore, where *The Vegetarian*’s undertakes a near-total rejection of the very notion of consumption and the inescapable violence that comes with such a process.

At the film’s halfway mark, Justine’s sister, Alexia (Ella Rumpf), attempts to give Justine a Brazilian wax. It goes quite spectacularly wrong, and the camera tracks both Justine and the dog, Quicky, hunting around on the floor for Alexia’s severed finger, a prelude to the film’s most prolonged sequence of cannibalism. The sequence is also invested with a vaguely Freudian, quasi-erotic queerness, as Justine savours Alexia’s ‘castrated’ finger while holding her sister’s gaze in her own. This cannibalism is then a challenge to the normative family unit, and to heteronormativity more broadly. Indeed, in giving queer sexualities such prominence, *Raw* continually excludes heteronormative masculinity in displays of love and desire that result quite literally in the consumption—or incorporation—of the desired object.

In losing her finger, Alexia joins the film’s cast of human bodies that don’t quite meet the standards that a character like the sisters’ mother would hold them to; indeed, the entire Brazilian sequence is part of Alexia’s effort to ensure Justine conforms to mainstream beauty standards. *Raw* subtly gestures towards these wounded human bodies within the world of a veterinarian college, in which nonhuman bodies are repeatedly opened-up, plunged into, and taken apart as a matter of course. Justine’s body is covered in a rash after being forced to eat

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<sup>5</sup> To this end, *Raw* is comparable to novels like *Under the Skin* and such films as *Okja* (2017) and *Carnage* (2017), even *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974)—films about animal rights and the meat industry—as readily as the coming-of-age horrors it has frequently been compared with. Another notable development of the vegetarian horror trend can be seen in *Rabid* (2019), the Soska sister’s upcoming remake of David Cronenberg’s body horror film.



raw rabbit kidney; Alexia recounts her bewilderment in discovering she once hooked up with a ‘one-armed guy’; at the hospital, Justine watches an old man dislocating his false teeth. Ableism, too, inflects how human bodies are seen in this film: the sisters’ mother is unable to see Alexia as anything other than disabled after the loss of a finger, forcing Alexia to remain in a wheelchair she quite clearly doesn’t need. If the focus on these bodies suggests the human body cannot be held to normative, ableist standards, it also becomes a means for *Raw* to establish a connection between human and nonhuman, one that is less sensationalist than Justine’s canine behaviour and which allows us to think less hierarchically about the human-nonhuman relationship.

On Justine’s turn to cannibalism, one reviewer emphasises Justine’s ‘descent into animalism’ (Yoshida, 2017). We are urged to make this connection with the animal – most evidently when Justine is seen drunkenly crawling on the floor of a morgue, being goaded to ‘Go fetch’ and ‘Bite him’, as Alexia waves a cadaver’s arm at her sister. But it is worth considering whether the film offers an opportunity to push back against the implications of a word like ‘descent’ here, as the film may be seen to disavow a clear human-nonhuman hierarchy. ‘An animal who has tasted human flesh isn’t safe’, says Justine’s father, after Quicky is scapegoated for eating Alexia’s finger and must be put down. Presumably, *Raw* implies, a human who has tasted animal flesh isn’t safe, either: in blood-soaked initiation ceremonies, carnivorous humans continually demonstrate their savage ‘animality’. Further, the elision of the human with the animal gives us an opportunity to see in *Raw* the intersection of vegetarian horror and what has been termed ‘animal horror’, those narratives in which ‘a particular animal or animal species commits a transgression against humanity and then recounts the punishment the animal must suffer as a consequence’ (Gregersdotter, et al., 2015: p. 3).

‘Animal horror’ as a critical perspective allows us to focus on ‘the relation between “human” and “animal” as categories unrelated to their places in the ecosystem’ (Gregersdotter, et al., 2015: p. 4). *Raw* demonstrates little interest in ecologies or the ecoGothic proper, insofar as it does not position its human characters in the midst of a hostile wilderness; the setting is conspicuously urban, artificial, and indeed sterile (in such spaces as a veterinary school and a hospital). Once again moving in the opposite direction to *The Vegetarian*, we might read *Raw* as a film that invites its animals into the world of culture and illuminates the human-nonhuman relationship accordingly (by so doing, of course, it further blurs a clear boundary between the natural and the cultural). Justine’s unrestrained acts of carnivorism—a mere extension, we

might say, of her peers' eating habits—position her as the figure 'transgress[ing] against humanity'. In part, this transgression echoes the theories of cooking elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss (2008), in which 'the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw' (p. 37). Of different types of cooking, Lévi-Strauss argues that 'the roasted is on the side of nature, the boiled on the side of culture' – to roast is an 'unmediated conjunction' of food and fire, whereas boiling is 'doubly mediated' by water and a receptacle. As Piatti-Farnell (2017) notes, there are evident shortcomings to Lévi-Strauss' concept, but it is nevertheless suggestive, and *Raw*'s very title proclaims that which Lévi-Strauss tip-toes around – the prospect of eating 'pure rawness' (p. 158).

For Lévi-Strauss no food is truly consumed raw, for it has all been 'selected, washed, pared or cut, or even seasoned' (p. 37). As such, 'no human is conceptually allowed to eat raw meat' for it is 'too unashamedly reminiscent of the live animal' (Piatti-Farnell, 2017: p. 158). Justine's crime—her status as unassuming Gothic monster—may depend less on her choice of meat and more on her failure to properly prepare it for consumption: she eats in a way that situates her beyond what Lévi-Strauss constructs as the limits of human culture, and beyond the carnivalesque performance of eating 'pure rawness' that her peers undertake in their hazing rituals. In this way, *Raw* illuminates the contradictions and exclusions that undergird cultural hierarchies and social practice. By its final scene, the film has associated womanhood with vegetarianism, vegetarianism with cannibalism, and cannibalism with queerness, incest, and the animal. This spiralling sequence of subjects and practices that are notionally excluded from the centre of a patriarchal system of power and oppression signify, in the end, in quite the opposite way. As that which is excluded proliferates via this (by no means unproblematic) associative chain, the possibility of a normative masculinity that endures or wholly dominates is increasingly shown to be an untenable prospect.

The film's most provocative sequence involves a conversation that brings together sexual politics, homophobia, violence against women, and animal rights. At lunch, a student quizzes Justine's gay roommate, Adrien (Rabah Naït Oufella), on whether it is possible to give monkeys HIV by having sex with them. Adrien is unsurprisingly hostile to the implications in this line of questioning—wondering whether this student was 'raised by wolves'—while Justine reasons that, as animals with sentience and rights, a monkey that is a victim of sexual assault 'suffers like a woman'. Here, Justine's opinion clearly isolates her among her peers, while aberrant or distasteful human behaviour sees the offending human colloquially relegated

to the animal world (where being ‘raised by wolves’ situates them outside society’s ‘closed circle’). Curiously, the character whose opinion on animals most closely echoes Justine’s is one she meets at a late-night petrol station. As the stranger gropes an evidently uncomfortable Adrien, he says to the vet students: ‘Pigs are almost like humans. You learned that yet? Genetically or something’. The statement itself implies the proximity of the human to the nonhuman, though it is uttered by a morally unsavoury character who is sexually aggressive and keeps a pig in his truck in order to substitute its blood for his own to conceal his drunk driving. In this instance, the nonhuman is brought into a corrupt human world, in which a violence towards animals legitimates or begets violence towards humans. Justine’s unpopular opinion, on the other hand, envisages an ethical collapsing of the different worlds inhabited by human and nonhuman, in which one readily extends both citizenship and empathy to others regardless of species. In either scenario, the erasure of difference is not without its troubling aspects.

*Raw* is a deeply compelling film, even as its politics remain slippery. Sharing this moral and political slipperiness with *The Vegetarian*, one wonders whether this is suggestive of a greater difficulty in deploying vegetarianism as a political signifier in horror narratives. As another commentator has noted, *Raw* seems quite explicitly to be about animal rights, but precisely what its ethical position is here remains more oblique; the overlapping of interrelated concerns in the film is suggestive rather than prescriptive (“Rick”, 2017). In the final sequence of the film, Justine’s father reveals that her cannibalism is inherited from her mother, and his own scarred body stands as a visible testament to her appetite. In *The Vegetarian*, Yeong-hye’s lifestyle choice is figured, as Carretero-González notes, as a disorder. At the same time (or, perhaps, the novel suggests, ‘accordingly’), *The Vegetarian*’s ‘vegetarianism’ is symbolic of a more all-encompassing opting-out—of the human world, of the animal world—asserting a solidarity with the seeming nonviolence of the natural world, or the ‘vegetal’, to adopt the word that resonates most strikingly within the novel itself. Vegetarianism, then, is a safeguard against a monstrous carnivorousness which is detrimental to both human and nonhuman alike.

In a final turn of the screw, *Raw*—via the patriarchal figure of the father—aligns cannibalism with women, at which point it seems to urge us to read ‘vegetarianism’ as a safeguard against women’s desires. ‘I’m sure you’ll find a solution, honey’, Justine’s father tells her just before the credits roll. But what is he urging Justine to find a solution *to*: her cannibalism? Her vegetarianism? Or her desires – for flesh, for men, or for the power(s) men

assume under patriarchy? It is the father who speaks of the need to put Quicky down for tasting human flesh. And, in the end, his uneasy final lines echo this sentiment, striving to maintain order in the household, and to maintain a fundamental difference between human and nonhuman, operating, to recall Adams, through a process of exclusion. From this last perspective, vegetarianism itself is a monstrous form of control. It is the connections made throughout *Raw* between human and nonhuman bodies—bodies that cross and collapse a murky nature-culture divide—that help us to read against the father’s words towards a different ethical engagement with flesh, human or otherwise.

### **Conclusion: Food for Thought**

Food—and meat in particular—is a site and symbol of power, especially, commentators note, male power (Adams, 2015). ‘The blood is the life’, we might say, echoing *Dracula*’s zoöphagous madman, Renfield (Stoker, 2003: p. 152). The symbolic potency of consumption is richly explored by the Gothic and horror, repeatedly demonstrating what it means for acts of incorporation to function as both performance and embodiment of power. To remain for a moment with *Dracula*, in Stoker’s text we encounter a novel stuffed with references to food, eating, and recipes (Parrino, 2013a). Jonathan Harker’s encounter with ‘paprika hendl’ in the opening pages of the novel is a good example of this. For more than one reader, Harker’s explicitly red meal is a sign of the novel’s overarching interest in blood lust, a taster of things to come, and, further, an indication of the power that (unfamiliar, foreign) food and inappropriate consumption can have over the human body (Del Principe, 2014b; Bale, 2018). It is also an enactment in miniature of the powerplays the novel will explore – including the power relations between men, between human and nonhuman, West and East, natural and unnatural. Harker records his meal in this way:

‘I had for dinner, or rather supper, a chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty. (*Mem.*, get recipe for Mina.) I asked the waiter, and he said it was called ‘paprika hendl’, and that, as it was a national dish, I should be able to get it anywhere along the Carpathians.’ (Stoker, 2003: p. 7)

That parenthetical aside—‘get recipe for Mina’—is an effort towards mastery over the exoticised Eastern world, a means of identifying, documenting, and reconstituting back in the imperial heartland a symbol of another national culture; it is a ritualistic process that converts

the potentially dangerous Other into something safer, recalling perhaps the ritualistic processes that keep vampiric infection at bay. Where Dracula later threatens Britain as an uncontrollable foreign power, at this early stage in the novel Harker seeks out that which can be contained and safely imported: the *right* kind of eating preserves the *right* kind of *status quo*. Yet the meal itself may ultimately replicate Dracula's power, another instance of what Stephen D. Arata (1990) has famously called Dracula's act of 'reverse colonisation'. Later that night, it is either this meal or the dogs' howling outside the window (he cannot be quite sure which) that gives Harker a poor night's sleep and 'all sorts of queer dreams' (Stoker, 2003: p. 8). What is at stake here in either case is the disturbance of the body, a disturbance rooted in an overt awareness of the presence of the nonhuman.

In the contemporary narratives discussed above, Renfield's mantra continues to resonate, but in markedly different ways. For *Raw*, the blood is the life and, as such, it is to be embraced as a site of oppositional empowerment disruptive to the very social norms a figure like Jonathan Harker is seeking to maintain. For *The Vegetarian*, the blood is the life and this is very much the problem, as the novel fathoms how one might sustain the life without the blood. The recent trend in vegetarian horror participates, then, in a long-standing Gothic discourse, calling attention to the persistent violence that underpins human interaction with a more-than-human world exploited to glut a human appetite, and explores how this violence is indicative of other manifestations of power and its abuse. More than this, vegetarian horror equates human animals with nonhuman animals by insisting on and rendering hypervisible a shared flesh-and-blood corporeality.

Both of the vegetarian horror narratives I have discussed in this essay posit an indeterminate, even arbitrary, dividing-line between the raw flesh of the nonhuman and the raw flesh of the human; further, these narratives illustrate the horror of coming into an awareness of the indistinguishability of the one from the other, of the human from its notional Other. Indeed, in both texts even a vegetarian diet is, in the end, figured simultaneously as an ethical stance one might take against one's carnivorous desires and, conversely, as a replication in a new context of the human propensity for violence against others. The alternative communities these texts gesture towards are articulated in the midst of a world that is fundamentally hostile to the notion of such alternatives: the ecocentrism of *The Vegetarian* is akin to madness; the reformulation of culture to include the nonhuman in *Raw* is interpreted as grotesquely misogynistic. As meditations on legitimate sources of foodstuff and the ethical limits of an

anthropocentric society, vegetarian horror reiterates that acts of consumption are always political. If we take the challenges they offer seriously, the texts urge us as participants in our own cultures to fathom the limits of our own ethics. They propose that, so long as we remain human, living wholly ethically will be an impossibility, and that ethical behaviour is instead always partial and contingent, a re-channelling of the flow of horror and not a complete stemming of it.

Nature, we might finally say, is Gothicised in *The Vegetarian* and *Raw* not at the moment of the human encounter ‘out there’, with an inscrutable and menacingly nonhuman natural world. Rather, nature is Gothicised at the moment the living nonhuman subject is incorporated into the human. When Yeong-hye expresses the loathing she feels for her husband, she explains to him that it is because of ‘The meat smell. Your body smells of meat’ (Kang, 2015: p. 17). These remarks cut two ways. On the one hand, like Jonathan Harker’s before him, the body of Mr Cheong signifies through its relationship with that which it has consumed: meat permeates the body, it seeps from the pores, and the bodily self is elided with the dead flesh that sustains it. On the other hand, the human body *is* meat, it is conterminous with the flesh it consumes, indistinguishable from it.

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