

# MAN-EATING MONSTERS

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# MAN-EATING MONSTERS

## Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture

EDITED BY

**DINA KHAPAEVA**

*Georgia Institute of Technology, USA*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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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;<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup>The pass where they were trapped is now called Donner Pass.

<sup>2</sup>Replacing 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).<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup>Another 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”?<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup>See Bibliography, for relevant writings by J. L. Foltyn.

<sup>5</sup>See Bibliography, for relevant writings by J. L. Foltyn.

the modern, a failure of a cure (Ariès, 1974).<sup>6</sup> 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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<sup>6</sup>According 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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## Introduction

# Food for Monsters: Popular Culture and Our Basic Food Taboo

*Dina Khapaeva*

Envisioned as a critical contribution to the rapidly developing field of food studies, this book analyzes the relations between monstrosity and food, and raises four interrelated questions: What role do man-eating monsters play in Western culture? How do contemporary monsters differ from their cultural predecessors? Is there any interconnection between the rising interest in cannibals, on the one hand, and the recent fascination with food as a subject of research and as a popular plot catalyst in fiction and movies, on the other? Are these new cultural developments influencing our basic food taboo, above all the taboo on eating humans?

The historical approach to the concepts of monsters and monstrosity allows this volume to explore the question of whether recent representations of humans as food in popular culture and academic discourse signify the emergence of new attitudes toward humans, monsters, animals, and death. The volume considers the cultural patterns that explain why cannibals, vampires, and zombies have emerged, at the turn of the twenty-first century, as new cultural idols.

Representations of food in popular culture are a well-researched topic. Scholars have studied in particular the relations between food, body, and culture, the ways in which media images of food reach out to various constituencies and audiences, and the reasons behind food's centrality to self-perception and identity.<sup>1</sup> However, monsters, horror, and the Gothic feature only peripherally in this research. Scholars address the images of food in horror films to the extent that they help to explore power relations, gender, class, and sexuality, but display little, if any, interest in how monsters – vampires, werewolves, zombies, or cannibals – affect representations of humans and alter our understanding of what may and may not be eaten. In addition, although cannibalism is sometimes

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<sup>1</sup>For these approaches in food studies, see, for example, [LeBesco and Naccarato \(2017\)](#), [Parasecoli \(2008\)](#), [Peri \(2016\)](#).

mentioned in these studies, the question of how viewing human beings as food for other species affects popular culture representations of cannibalism is not addressed. This collection of essays is focused on investigating the ways in which popular culture is eroding the borders between monsters, humans, and animals, and how this affects our basic food taboo on eating humans.

The normalization of cannibalism – and of representing humans as food is an important and recent – trend in popular culture. Although man-eating monsters have been prominent characters in epic and folklore since the dawn of time, none of these tales or myths celebrated predators feasting on people. Beasts like the Nemean lion or Beowulf's dragon were only waiting for their slayers, and it was always the heroic human, from Hercules to Wiglaf and so on, whom the audience was expected to admire and empathize with. Whether it be the witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, the ogre in *Puss in Boots*, or the Russian folklore witch, Baba Yaga, their desire to cook and eat humans was regarded as an atrocious aberration and a horrible crime. It was this desire, more than anything else, that made them monsters. The same was also true about the vampires in the narratives written or screened before the end of the twentieth century. In these storylines, vampires' attacks on people – be it in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Alexis Tolstoi's *La Famille du Vourdalak*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, or more recent novellas, novels, and movies – were seen as a crime and a violation of the natural and moral order. Vampires and werewolves, witches, warlocks, and shape-shifters of the Gothic novels were supposed to elicit dread and loathing from their readers, not admiration.<sup>2</sup> And in no way were people ever presented as the vampires' natural prey and food. In general, prior to the end of the twentieth century, the consumption of human bodies as food was described as an absolute taboo. Most importantly, predatory beasts, the criminally insane man-eaters, or aliens were never portrayed as the ultimate aesthetic ideal, as perfect creatures of a higher order whose very perfection gives them the right to claim people as their food source. Even as recently as the 1970s, popular culture regarded cannibalism as an ultimate expression of a nightmarish horror, as it is shown, for instance, in *Soylent Green* (Richard O. Fleischer, 1973). In this film, as well as in many other movies made prior to the 1990s, cannibalism epitomized “the complete breakdown of the social order and an offense against natural law” (Retzinger, 2008, p. 383).

The change in the representations of cannibals and of humans as food followed the change in those of other fictional monsters. In the late 1980s–early 1990s, a radical shift occurred in popular culture: the monster evolved from a grotesque criminal to a cult figure. In this decade, the image of the zombie, cannibal, serial killer, and vampire began to merge into an image of one compelling *idol-monster*. Today, bloodsucking vampires are described as “perfect” and

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<sup>2</sup>Rather than challenging the hierarchy as a principle of societal organization, as Deleuze and Guattari suggested (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004), the vampire reinforces instead the same hierarchical principle with the only one difference: for vampire fans and creators, it is the vampire who occupies the summit of the hierarchy of beings.

“godlike” in most vampire sagas.<sup>3</sup> The idol-monster, with whom the audience is supposed to enthusiastically identify, has appeared in the role that was previously reserved for human protagonists. The reader and viewers are to perceive the fictional world through the eyes, and the narration, of a monster (Khapaeva, 2017, pp. 23–47, 175–182). This shift in the representation of the monster, the significance of which is not fully appreciated, has arguably played a decisive role in normalizing cannibalism.<sup>4</sup>

The idea that humans can be regarded as objects of predation and consumption began conquering popular culture in 1992, when mass murderer, James Huberty, first used the expression “hunting humans.” Later on, Stephenie Meyer popularized the expression that the vampire “feeds” on people. Today, the idol-monster that “feeds” on human characters incurs no disgust or moral reproach: it is implied that humans simply belong to an inferior species, so there is nothing questionable about putting them on the menu. Movies and fiction featuring vampires, zombies, cannibals, and serial killers routinely present human characters as their legitimate food. In the vampire sagas considered by their fans the best expression of a romantic love story, such as *The Twilight Saga* or the TV series *The Vampire Diaries* (to cite only the most famous examples), humans are vampires’ natural nourishment. In *The Twilight Saga*, vampire Edward is constantly using food analogies to describe his feelings toward Bella, his girlfriend.<sup>5</sup> Her irresistible appeal to Edward – in the novel Bella is, after all, described as a pale and unattractive girl – consists simply of Bella’s odor, the smell of her blood. Although Edward abstains from consuming human blood, this good behavior does not change the hierarchy of beings in the *Twilight* universe, where the vampire is a predator, and humans are his prey and

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<sup>3</sup>For example, in the cult *Twilight Saga*, the vampire Edward Cullen is described by a human protagonist in the following terms:

I couldn’t imagine how an angel could be any more glorious. There was nothing about him that could be improved upon. (...) Edward in the sunlight was shocking. I couldn’t get used to it, though I’d been staring at him all afternoon. His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday’s hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening, pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn’t sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal. (Meyer, 2005, p. 260)

<sup>4</sup>For an interesting interpretation of the undead and the dead in popular culture as mobilizing the consumer’s consideration of mortality, see Penfold-Mounce (2018).

<sup>5</sup>“You know how everyone enjoys different flavors?” he began. ‘Some people love chocolate ice cream, others prefer strawberry?’ I nodded. ‘Sorry about the food analogy—I couldn’t think of another way to explain.’ I smiled. He smiled ruefully back.” (Meyer, 2005, p. 267).

food.<sup>6</sup> People are routinely called a “meat snack” in *True Blood* (e.g., season 5, episode 12). In *The Vampire Diaries*, the audience is supposed to empathize with the handsome bloodsucker Damon (Ian Somerhalder), even when he says: “Vampires eat people. It is part of the natural food pyramid” (season 4, episode 2). Although romance between a young woman and a vampire is the usual attribute of a vampire saga’s plot, it is hard to agree with the critics who believe that the vampire is the incarnation of the perfect lover. Rather, it raises a question: is the blood-sucking vampire a sought-after lover in the age of “Me Too?” What enables our culture to reconcile such a glaring contradiction?

The normalization of eating people is especially apparent in zombie fiction and movies, the allure of which skyrocketed when, for *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985), Dan O’Bannon invented a new diet for them – a preference for human brains.<sup>7</sup> For example, in the TV series *Santa Clarita Diet* (Victor Fresco, 2017–2019), cannibalism is presented as part of domestic suburban life. The realtor wife becomes a zombie and starts randomly killing and eating people. Her husband, a human, in an act of marital devotion, helps her in her cannibalistic adventures, and in doing so is positioned not as a criminal but as a protagonist to empathize with because he cannot share his family secret with anyone. The scenes of cannibalism are so gory that, according to *The Atlantic*, they are “testing viewer tolerance for graphic cannibalism and projectile vomiting, among other things.” What makes this show so compelling? According to *The Atlantic* critic, the zombie Sheila actually likes her new state for purely selfish reasons – she feels energized, her sex drive peaks, and so forth. The hedonism of a monster that preys on people is what makes the show so much fun (Gilbert, 2017). According to another critic, who reviewed Anne Rice’s 2012 novel *The Wolf Gift*, this very capacity of monsters to devour humans is what conditions their success – and the success of the novels, movies, and TV shows in which they feature: “Rice seems to have forgotten that readers don’t want werewolves with good taste; they want werewolves who think humans taste good” (Hand, 2012). In the movie *We Are What We Are* (Jim Mickle, 2013), which was much acclaimed by critics, cannibalism is presented as a family tradition that cannot be disrupted; therefore, the audience is compelled to empathize with the man-eaters who will continue passing it on from generation to generation.

In computer games, cannibalism has recently hit a new high, in that players are actually encouraged to act as cannibals. For example, the *Sunless Sea* survival videogame makes the player eat his/her crew to survive. The post-apocalyptic world of *Neo Scavenger* forces the player to kill humans and cook their flesh in order to survive. In *Rimworld*, the eating of cooked human flesh is rewarded by fewer points than the consumption of raw human flesh. *Fatality* of the Mortal Kombat shows gruesome acts of cannibalism in which

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<sup>6</sup>This is an attitude concisely articulated by Edward, who tells Bella, his “girl-food”: “I’m the world’s best predator, aren’t I? Everything about me invites you in—my voice, my face, even my smell” (Meyer, 2005, p. 263).

<sup>7</sup>On zombies as a philosophical problem, see Pihlström (2009, 2016).

Mileena, a protagonist, feasts on her victim's intestines. In *Skyrim*, if the player decides to kill Brother Verulus, a monk, and eat his flesh, the voice of Namira, who guides the player, tells him/her that they did "very well," rewards him/her with a special ring that allows the consumption of human flesh, and adds fifty "stamina" points and fifty "health" points to the player's score. *Fallout Series IV* stages acts of devouring human bodies with the utmost graphic details.

Could it be that man-eating monsters have become so appealing and trendy not because they represent the "repressed," serving as a metaphor for revolt against the unjust capitalist society and the like, as they are traditionally interpreted, but rather because drinking human blood, eating human brains, and mutilating human bodies is an integral part of their images? Should they not be understood in a less metaphorical and a more immediate way, as an important cultural medium that legitimizes screen violence against people, equates people with animals, and demotes humans to food?

The shift in popular culture from the taboo on eating humans and the condemnation of cannibalism to its aestheticization becomes evident when we compare, for instance, two hypostases of Hannibal, the character in Thomas Harris's novels as portrayed by Anthony Hopkins in the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991) and – almost twenty years later – by Mads Mikkelsen in the television series *Hannibal* (Bryon Fuller, 2013–2015). Hopkins' Lecter, however "attractive and fascinating," was unmistakably a criminal, a monster crafted in line with "traditional concepts of monstrosity" (Greek & Picart, 2003, p. 52). The contrast between his great sophistication and his penchant for cannibalism was at the heart of his image both in Thomas Harris' novels and in Jonathan Demme's movie. By contrast, in the 2013–2015 *Hannibal*, Lecter is positioned as an aesthetic model, and his cannibalism is shown not as absurd and bestial violence but as an integral part of his urbane magnetism and sublime sophistication, as the most refined component of human culture rather than its negation.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, the TV series puts considerable effort into showcasing Lecter's skills in the kitchen and invites viewers to appreciate his refined cooking of human flesh and his ability to pair those dishes with perfect wine. The names of the episodes further highlight this new gastronomic fashion: all the titles in the first series are taken from French haute cuisine, in the second from the Japanese, and the third from the Italian counterpart. The popularity of this TV series is impressive: the first episode of *Hannibal*'s first season alone was watched by 4.36 million viewers in the United States,<sup>9</sup> and enjoyed higher ratings from viewers and critics' approval than *Game of Thrones*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>For a more detailed discussion, see Khapaeva (2017, p. 103).

<sup>9</sup><http://deadline.com/2014/05/ratings-rat-race-hannibal-finale-up-what-would-you-do-debuts-even-735624/>

<sup>10</sup>8.5/10 for 200K+ ratings on IMDb. Ninety-two percent critic and 94% viewer approval on RottenTomatoes. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2243973/>; <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/hannibal>. Accessed June 2018.

The critics' response to the TV series offers a spectrum of consistent strategies to present cannibalism not only as norm but as a new fashion. Hannibal was lauded by *Metacritic*, the *New York Post*, and *HitFix* as the best of the current season's serial killer shows. *Entertainment Weekly* characterized it as "deliciously subversive," and *Variety* called it "the tastiest drama the network has introduced in a while." A critic from *Review* added:

A prequel TV series about Hannibal Lecter has to overcome a lot of preconceptions. (...) But guess what? None of that matters when you actually watch the show, because Hannibal is terrific.

*The Chicago Sun-Times* reportedly told its readers that Hannibal was "deliciously disturbing" and would leave viewers "hungry for more." *The Federalist* claimed that:

from the cannibalistic "food porn" to the moody, washed-out Baltimore background to the elegance of Hannibal's living spaces and psychiatry office, the show consistently draws you in with the captivating beauty of its visual style.<sup>11</sup>

These assessments of Hannibal are in various ways echoed in scholarly accounts as well. Some academics discuss the ways in which Mikkelsen's Hannibal – "the alluring antihero, the paradoxical ultra-civilized monster" – undermines the food taboo on eating people, find it educative, and conclude that "the series highlights the complicated and ambiguous nature of modern culinary values and practices" (Fuchs & Phillips, 2018, p. 626). Other researchers consider the representation of people as food in popular culture a matter of course: "As in the case of cannibals and vampires, the possibility that humanity itself is transformed into food constitutes the underlying theme of many narratives" (Parasecoli, 2008, p. 65).

In its attempts to dislodge "the savage/civilized opposition that was once essential to the formation of the modern Western self and Western forms of knowledge" (Lindenbaum, 2004), some scholarship on cannibalism may have contributed to legitimizing the representations of cannibalism in popular culture by arguing that Western culture and/or late capitalism is inherently cannibalistic. Some researchers go so far as to claim that cannibalism is "a cosmically

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<sup>11</sup>For details, see Alan Sepinwall, "Review: NBC's 'Hannibal', a riveting 'Silence of the Lambs' prequel," <http://tinyurl.com/bwqwndex>; Brian Lowry, "TV Review: 'Hannibal'", *Variety*, March 29, 2013, <http://variety.com/2013/tv/reviews/hannibal-nbc-bryan-fuller-1200330510>; Eric Goldman, "Delicious Television," [www.ign.com/articles/2013/03/30/hannibal-aperitif-review](http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/03/30/hannibal-aperitif-review); <http://eclipsemagazine.com/hannibal-returns-in-february/>; Payne, Daniel, 3 Reasons "Hannibal" Is The Best Worst Show. *The Federalist*, June 18, 2015. <http://thefederalist.com/2015/06/18/3-reasons-hannibal-is-the-best-worst-show/>

meaningful ritual” of the past (Sugg, 2012, p. 115) and to equate Western tourism with man-eating. Richard King concisely covers the gamut of such statements:

Crystal Bartolovich playfully glosses consumerism as the cultural logic of late capitalism; Bell Hooks speaks of the Euro-American desires for and incorporation of things ethnic as “eating the other”; and Rosalind Morris suggests that cannibalism is the essential metaphor for late capitalism. Dean MacCannell, in an exciting exploratory review of the documentary *Cannibal Tours*, makes explicit what O’Rourke left unsaid, that we are cannibals, and contemporary capitalism is neo-cannibalism. Perhaps more radically, Jack Forbes argues that Western civilization fosters cannibalism as an embodied, psychosocial condition or psychosis rooted in exploitation and consumption. Inspired at least in part by Forbes, Deborah Root rethinks Western civilization as cannibal culture.” (King, 2000, pp. 106–123)

Considering humans as food is sometimes advocated as a new ecological strategy: for example, Val Plumwood proposed a “food approach to death” and asserted that “we are all food, and through death nourish others.” According to her, “mortuary practices might affirm death as an opportunity of life for others in the ecological community” (Plumwood, 2008). Plumwood’s ideas exemplify a logical continuation of the discourse of radical environmentalism. This profound rejection of humanistic values engages society, on a daily basis, in the questioning of the supremacy of the value of human life. When, in 2018, CNN released a video of an expedition by anthropologist and CNN presenter Reza Aslan that showcased him eating human brains and drinking from a human skull at a feast with Aghori, a Hindu cannibal sect, comments on race and ethnicity, and anti-Hinduism abounded.<sup>12</sup> However, the question of the violation of human dignity and of the value of human life played only a minor role in these debates.

The prominence of images of eating humans on screen and in fiction certainly raises the question: is it pure coincidence that the normalization of cannibalism in popular culture – and, some of the scholarship – has coincided with the rising importance of food viewed as a matter of public debate and scholarly attention? Since the late 1980s, the obsession with food has become prominent in popular culture. This trend is manifested in a growing number of movies in which the main protagonist is a restaurant chef and the plot revolves around preparing food, as in *Big Night* (Stanley Tucci, Campbell Scott, 1996), *Ratatouille* (Brad Pitt, 2007), *Julie & Julia* (Nora Ephron, 2009), *Chef* (Jon Favreau, 2014).

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<sup>12</sup>See this video on [www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/10/reza-aslan-criticised-for-documentary-on-cannibalistic-hindus](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/10/reza-aslan-criticised-for-documentary-on-cannibalistic-hindus). Accessed May 2019.

Arguably, *Babette's Feast* (Gabriel Alex, 1988) was the earliest example of this trend. Food itself can be featured as a protagonist, as in the animated feature *Sausage Party* (Conrad Vernon, Greg Tiernan, 2016), which presents people as ruthless monsters because they consume not only sausages and other meat products but also carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables portrayed as sentient living beings and psychologically complex protagonists.

In parallel to this development, the field of food studies started to emerge in the 1980s: the *Association for the Study of Food and Society* was founded in 1985, "with the goals of promoting the interdisciplinary study of food and society," and the *Agriculture, Food, & Human Values Society* was formed in 1987 "to promote the study of values issues associated with the production, consumption, and distribution of food, fiber, and natural resources."<sup>13</sup> Obviously, care for sustainable development and overcoming hunger have motivated most participants in this field. However, the public attention that food has been receiving over the past three decades may have other reasons as well.

Many scholars in the field of food studies have emphasized that food preferences provide excellent material for understanding society and cultures, including social hierarchy, national and ethnic differences, power relations, and gender issues.<sup>14</sup> Scholars highlight that food "functions not merely as a source of sustenance," but "also [as] a means of identity building" (Neo & Emel, 2017, p. 11). In popular culture as well, changes in food habits are often evoked to indicate a catastrophic disruption in the way of life, as Jean P. Retzinger suggests: "Unfamiliar foods signal a world radically changed, with both nature and culture in jeopardy" (Retzinger, 2008, p. 378). It is no less true, that a reexamination of cannibalism and of eating people in contemporary media signals a drastic change in our culture and view of humanity. As I argue elsewhere (Khapaeva, 2017), changes in popular representations of death, the dead, and monsters not only overlap with changes in death-related cultural and social practices but may also be considered as fostering social change. At the very least, popular culture helps us understand the nature of social change.<sup>15</sup>

The growing interest in food may articulate, albeit perhaps only in part, an incipient cultural uncertainty as to what can and cannot be eaten. Intellectual and esthetic radicalization of the discourse on monsters and cannibals has prepared fertile ground for a welcoming reception of cannibalism in popular culture because it expresses the ultimate denial of anthropocentrism and the supremacy of human life.

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<sup>13</sup>See their mission statement at <https://www.food-culture.org> and <https://afhvs.wildapricot.org>. Accessed June 2019.

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Boswell (1990).

<sup>15</sup>For a detailed analysis of the development of the cult of death, see Khapaeva (2017, pp. 175–183). On transformations of death-related practices and the death turn, see Khapaeva (2017, pp. 47–81).