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### **When Humans Are the Food Product**

#### **An Ideological Look at Cannibal Films**

Cannibal films have a complex and unsettled relationship to food films. Discussing the food film genre that emerged in the 1980s, Anne Bower highlights the genre's use of restaurants, kitchens, and food shops, and its focus on food as a means for conveying characters' identities, social situations, and personal relations. Having identified food films' semantic patterns and central thematic concerns, which can be structured to emphasize utopian or dystopian visions of food and society, Bower tests the boundaries of the genre by considering the question: do cannibal films belong to the food film genre? The inquiry leads her to conclude that an "overreliance on strict genre definitions may be limiting" and that the "semiotic uses of food are even more multivalent and powerful than a concentration on 'food films' alone would allow us to understand" (6, 7).

Cannibal films confirm and illustrate Bower's point, for their "semiotic uses of food" provide a clear view of the characters' values, beliefs, and social status. Their depictions of cuisine choices, procurement policies, and eating protocols take on heightened significance precisely because human beings are placed in the food category. In this circumstance, characters' interaction with the food product becomes the most salient marker of individual and cultural identities: engaging

in cannibalism places characters squarely on one side of the divide between civilized and uncivilized behavior. Like dystopian food films, cannibal films often use characters' food behaviors to signal personal and social disorder. In addition, whereas some cannibal films do little more than exploit cultural taboos to generate sensation, other films use troubling representations of foodways to comment on class, colonial, and cultural injustice. By examining the larger implications of consumption, cannibal films delve into dimensions of food rarely featured in commercial cinema.

Films in which humans are the food product often comment on the symbolic but systemic cannibalism of imperial and economic ventures. They reflect the fact that empires have framed their military campaigns as righteous efforts to consume and cleanup "uncivilized" behavior. The films mirror the reality that corporations tout their ability to devour the competition; executives flaunt their ability to "eat that guy for lunch." With flesh-eating metaphors part of everyday life, cannibal films go on to complicate the simple opposition between civilized and uncivilized people. They tap into people's awareness that, historically, accounts of cannibalism have been unreliable, designed to serve the interests of "civilized" people in search of profit or lasting fame. Thus, today, cannibal films rely on people's knowledge that cannibalism can function as a sign of primitive savages *and* as a marker of savage empires and corporations.

Variations in the films that deal with cannibalism confound efforts to map out a set of shared semantic elements that extend beyond their common use of humans as the food product. Films also use cannibalism in different syntactical structures. For example, in a utopian film like *Bagdad Cafe*, the early references to cannibalism show that the isolated individuals need to create community. By comparison, *301/302* wraps up its deeply dystopian vision of food and society with the characters in power (the detective and the cooking-obsessed woman) engaging in cannibalism. Other representations of cannibalism reflect the utopian-dystopian spectrum. Cannibal films include comedies like Abbott and Costello's *Africa Screams* (Barton, 1949), Herschel Gordon Lewis's gore favorite *Blood Feast*, campy satires like *Eating Raoul*, psychological thrillers such as *The Silence of the Lambs*, and its sequel from 2001 and prequels from 2002 and 2007. Cannibalism is central to the

various comedy, horror, and musical versions of the pulp fiction and stage melodrama *Sweeney Todd* (1926, 1928, 1936, 2007), along with *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977), which led to Wes Craven's 1984 direct-to-video sequel as well as Alexandre Aja's 2006 remake of the original and the 2007 sequel to this remake directed by Martin Weiss.

The consumption of humans by flesh-eating zombies features prominently in several horror films, perhaps most notably in writer/director George Romero's numerous "living dead" films: *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). Although one could argue that zombie films do not feature actual cannibalism because zombies technically eat outside of their species—most zombies consume only humans or animals, not other zombies—these films are often lumped in with cannibal films due to their obvious similarities. Without a doubt, zombie films do contain some of the most striking instances of humans as food product, as these films regularly depict the human body being graphically torn apart and consumed by the ravenous undead in apocalyptic scenarios.

Cannibalism is a significant feature in the post-apocalyptic narratives *Tooth and Nail* (Young, 2007) and *The Road*. It anchors the troubling survival narratives of *Ravenous* (Bird, 1999), *Van Diemen's Land* (auf der Heide, 2009), *The Last Confession of Alexander Pearce* (Rowland, 2008), and even *The Life of Pi* (Lee, 2012). Cannibalism figures into films based on Jack Ketchum's misogynistic novels *Offspring* (van den Houten, 2007) and *The Woman* (McKee, 2011), which venture into increasingly problematic conventions of torture porn. In contrast, cannibalism plays a role in sentient comedies like *Fresh Meat* (Mulheron, 2013) and inventive dramas like *We Are What We Are* (Glau, 2010). Audience response confirms that cannibalism remains a hot topic for film lovers. Some of the most important and infamous cannibal films still belong to the cycle of Italian horror films released in the 1970s and 1980s, which includes *Deep River Savages* (Lenzi, 1972), *The Last Cannibal World* (Deodato, 1977), *Mountain of the Cannibal God* (Martino, 1978), *Cannibal Holocaust, Eaten Alive!* (Lenzi, 1980), *Cannibal Ferox* (Lenzi, 1981), and *Cannibal Holocaust II* (Climati, 1988).<sup>1</sup>

Despite their variations, cannibal films reflect the fact that food consumption in consumer society is fraught with uncertainties; people do

not know what they are eating; they do not know where their food comes from or where their disposed food will go. The films capture and hold audience attention because their shared focus on humans as the food product implicates all the other foodways elements. If a film presents humans as a food product, how does that figure into the characters' food performance system? Is cannibalism part of a rare, celebratory feast as in *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, or is it a regular part of the meal cycle of impoverished Americans as in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*? If humans are presented as a food product, could representation of food procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, consumption, and cleanup be anything but troubling? The question highlights the ramifications of narratives that present humans as the food product. Horror films like *Cannibal Holocaust* reveal that films explore those ramifications in sensationalized but potentially insightful ways.

### Cannibal Narratives

A range of sources continually reactivate interest in films that make humans the food product. For instance, although accounts of the routine or ritualized cannibalistic practices of "primitive" people have been called into doubt, anthropologists continue to offer new evidence of cannibal customs in remote places of the globe (the Wari in Brazil), in non-Anglo societies in North America (the Anasazi in Colorado), and in Europe's distant past, with marks on Neanderthal bones found in France providing the basis for claims that the cannibalism of Homo Sapiens led or contributed to Neanderthals' extinction (see Conklin; Turner and Turner; Rozzi et al.). Tellingly, these accounts are not confined to academic journals, but instead spice up headline news ("Scientist"). There are also intermittent reminders that humans do serve as food in extreme circumstances, as in the case of the people who turned to cannibalism to survive after their plane crashed in the Andes in 1972. The practices of serial killers such as Albert Fish and Jeffrey Dahmer are reminders that cannibalism occurs close to home. The news even carries stories about consensual cannibalism, as when Bernd-Jurgen Brandes answered Armin Meiwes's personal ad in 2001 for "Well-built men, 18–30, who like to be eaten by me" (Clark 1).

Less spectacularly, folk tales in various parts of the world make reference to cannibalism. The cannibalism in stories like “Hansel and Gretel” and “Jack and the Beanstalk” is so familiar one almost fails to notice it. Moreover, symbolic or sacred cannibalism is part of Christian culture. Some believers consider the Eucharist a symbolic act, whereas others adhere to the doctrine that transubstantiation transforms the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. The Christian idea of communion as an act that creates connection with the spiritual domain accords with both ecclesiastical and secular theory. Both perspectives envision a process of evolution in which people first killed and ate humans for food; then killed and ate humans only in ritual situations; then replaced humans with animals in ritual sacrifice; and eventually reached the point where “anthropophagy [the eating of human flesh by human beings was] replaced by a symbolic sacrifice and the consumption of a spiritual essence” (Arens 16).

The view that “primitive” people remain in the first two stages of spiritual and social evolution is often a corollary of the position that the Christian Eucharist is a sign of advanced civilization. However, as cultural theorist and anthropologist William Arens points out: “The most certain thing to be said is that all cultures, subcultures, religions, sects, secret societies and every other possible human association have been labeled anthropophagic by someone” (139). In other words, the “idea of ‘others’ as cannibals, rather than the act” is the central point in cannibal narratives (Arens 139). Noting that stories about cannibalism go back as far as Herodotus, who referred to the human flesh eating habit of very distant, unnamed nomads, Arens finds that accounts follow clear patterns. People locate cannibalism in “neighboring societies” (as Herodotus did). They “employ the idea as a mythic marker in the progress of their own cultural development” (as in the Christian scenario) (Arens 159). They also attribute cannibalism to members of their own society as part of explanations for the existence of misfortune (as in the Inquisition when witches, heretics, and sometimes Jews were accused of cannibalism) (Arens 10, 95).

The limited evidence of flesh-eating customs—as distinct from isolated incidents of survival or pathological cannibalism, customs of ritual killing, or sacred practices that involve ingesting literal or symbolic vestiges of a person—lead Arens to argue that the “significant

question is not why people eat human flesh, but why one group invariably assumes [and charges] that others do" (139). His position has stirred debate since the publication of his book *The Man-Eating Myth* (1979). Some anthropologists reject Arens's position that there is insufficient evidence to substantiate claims that established customs lead people to consume human flesh; others recognize the value of circumspect inquiry into the logic behind accounts of cannibalism (Osborne; Hulme).<sup>2</sup>

Rather than concerning themselves with researching the veracity of recorded accounts of cannibalism, scholars persuaded by Arens's views instead examine the rhetorical function of cannibal narratives and focus on who benefits from the circulation of these narratives. For example, analyzing depictions of cannibalism in missionary documents, in P. T. Barnum's display of "Fiji cannibals," and in various pieces of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, Jeff Berglund identifies patterns in the way cannibalism is used in narratives about "an alien Other" (22). Echoing Arens's position, Berglund finds that "cannibalism is often a verbally created reality predicated on false evidence, fanciful imaginings, or ideologically inflected logic" (3). He proposes that accounts and representations of cannibalism are best understood as establishing—rather than describing—the existence of cannibalistic practices (21).

Postcolonial scholarship amplifies Arens's view that cannibal narratives serve the interests of the people who formulate them. Official accounts that concern "cannibalism," rather than anthropophagy, reflect Europeans' New World colonial exploits, with their "intertwined projects of Christianizing, capitalism, and imperialism" (Berglund 22). As Arens and others point out, the term "cannibal" did not exist until Columbus published a summary of "his journey to the land of the 'Great Khan,'" in which he claimed that man-eating Carib Indians inhabited islands that he passed (Arens 46). Once established, the concept was put to use. As early as 1503, even though "official royal policy initially prohibited enslavement of the inhabitants of the [Caribbean] islands . . . the monarchs adhered to this policy except in the case of 'a certain people called Cannibals'" (Arens 49–50). The Caribs' continued resistance to pacification and colonization caused "resistance to foreign invasion" to become "the operational definition of cannibalism" and the pretext for "being sold into slavery" (Arens 51).

What is striking is that cannibalism is not only a “political fiction that Europeans employed to justify exploitation of indigenous people” (Cheyfitz 143), it is also “indelibly linked to notions of Americanness” because the concept “coincides with the founding moment of ‘the Americas’” (Berglund 3). Given that legacy, cannibalism has continually disturbed visions of food in powerful industrialized societies. The anxieties that privileged consumers have about unhealthy food and their gnawing awareness that food labor is generally “disappeared” translate rather easily into sensationalized narratives about cannibalism. Concerns about personal food choices and the experience of being cut off from food production gives resonance to disturbing stories about humans as the food product. With foodways’ many stages shrouded in mystery, cannibal narratives reflect consumers’ enduring unease about the methods that have long been used to make delicacies easily available to those in power.

### Cannibals from New York City

Ruggero Deodato’s *Cannibal Holocaust* is one of many films that critique first-world exploitation of “primitive” people and “civilized” experts’ attribution of cannibalism to indigenous people.<sup>3</sup> Pointed commentary about the “cannibalism” that goes along with the first world’s exercise of military, economic, and cultural power can be found in other Italian cannibal films produced in the 1970s and 1980s. These notoriously graphic films have their antecedents in adventure movies like *The Most Dangerous Game* (Pichel and Schoedsack, 1932) and *The Naked Prey* (Wilde, 1966). They compare to Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, its sequel *Dawn of the Dead*, and a cycle of Italian zombie films with splashy, over-the-top gore effects that followed in the wake of Romero’s bloody *Dawn*. They also parallel the ultraviolent spaghetti westerns of directors like Sergio Leone and Sergio Corbucci, the sado-voyeuristic *giallo* horror films of Mario Bava, Dario Argento, and Lucio Fulci, and the Italian shockumentary series initiated by *Mondo Cane* (Prosperi, 1962). Reflecting on Italy’s cannibal films, David Cook observes that while they are “arguably obscene, the apocalyptic carnality of several cannibal films [lends] them a perverse lyricism, attracting many steadfast and serious admirers as well as armies of outraged critics” (554–55).

The “apocalyptic carnality” of the Italian cannibal films also makes them useful material for ideological studies of food in film. With humans as the food product, all other foodways aspects become disturbed, and unusual depictions of foodways take center stage. Designed to get international attention in a global market dominated by big-budget Hollywood movies, Italian cannibal films feature gore, pornography, and the sacrilege of literal cannibalism. Surrounded by sensational stories at the time of its release and sometimes seen as the most infamous cannibal film of all time, *Cannibal Holocaust* has become an icon of cult cinema, with its continuing appeal illustrating how the cult and camp criticism of writers such as Manny Farber, Parker Tyler, and Jonas Mekas not only influenced viewers’ taste in film, but also “transformed the way we think about art” (Taylor 153). *Cannibal Holocaust* has a reputation for its visceral impact, yet the film comments on accepted truths of science, commerce, and global politics, in part because the film is about a North American news crew that fabricates eyewitness accounts of cannibalism in South America. With scenes in the Amazon jungle intercut with ones set in the concrete jungle of New York skyscrapers, and with depictions of the news crew raping and killing the people they characterize as threatening savages, *Cannibal Holocaust* makes a clear statement about the media’s misrepresentation of people in the third world.

The news crew fabricates stories about cannibalism to secure celebrity status. The film links their self-interested misrepresentations to academics’ exploitation of indigenous people. It takes direct aim at the North American anthropologists who made their careers circulating now suspect accounts of cannibalism in South America. American anthropologist Napoleon A. Chagnon provides the model for the film’s fictional New York University anthropologist who is sent on the mission to find the news crew that has gone missing in South America. Chagnon “made his reputation on his work with the Yanomami” and “had a virtual monopoly on the interpretation of Yanomami culture” (Rabben 13, 40).

Chagnon’s book *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* came out in 1968 and since that time has sold millions of copies. In addition, beginning in the late 1960s, the “Yanomami, like the Bushmen, became the most filmed non-Western, non-industrialized society in the world” (Ruby 22).



*Cannibal Holocaust* (*F. D. Cinematografica*) is an exploitation film with a social critique that features porn star Robert Kerman as the New York anthropologist with expertise in cannibalism.

While acts of cannibalism were never filmed, Chagnon's book created a sensation by alleging that there were cannibals living in northwest Brazil. Researchers have subsequently debunked Chagnon's "findings" and documented the destructive effects of the anthropologists' intrusions into Yanomami society (Rabben; Tierney 3–122). Deodato's 1980 film represents an early challenge to Chagnon's work. In the same way that *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* deconstructs "official" colonial reports of cannibals on Brazil's east coast, *Cannibal Holocaust* undercuts "expert" accounts of cannibalism among the Yanomami in northwest Brazil.

Deodato's film builds on skepticism first generated by *The Ax Fight* (Asch, 1975). This short film, which Tim Asch and Chagnon started in 1971, eventually discredited Chagnon's view that anthropology could offer "an accurate representation" of what researchers encounter in field work (Ruby 28). Asch's four-part film first shows unedited footage that Asch shot in a Yanomami village; then the screen goes black and audiences hear a conversation between Asch, Chagnon, and soundman Craig Johnson. The film's second segment returns to the footage using

“narration, slow-motion and arrows identifying the principals” (Ruby 26). This is followed by “a third section with kinship charts” (Ruby 26). The fourth segment shows an edited version that demonstrates the degree to which editing frames viewers’ interpretations (Ruby 26).

The contrast between the edited and unedited footage is troubling. However, the off-screen comments by the anthropologist and the filmmakers are what completely undercut “the ‘scientific’ certainty of anthropological explanations” (Ruby 25). Audiences hear the anthropologist and the filmmakers describe what they are watching as “wife-beating” and then as “a club fight” (Ruby 25). Audiences then hear contradictory statements about when the event began, what was involved, and why the incident took place (Ruby 25). Asch’s film never shows any scenes of a wife-beating or a club fight.

Deodato uses the unconfirmed comments and contradictory statements as a model for several scenes of the North American news crew recording false verbal descriptions of events. For example, audiences see the news crew set fire to a village. Then, in the aftermath, the journalists record a news segment that describes the destruction as the result of tribal warfare. Audiences see the men in the news crew gang rape a young woman. The film implies that they kill her and then impale her on a pole. Here again, the news crew prepares its report after the incident. With their news camera now rolling, journalist Alan Yates (Gabriel Yorke) attributes the girl’s fate to natives’ ritual killing. Anchored by scenes that point to the unreliability of authoritative accounts, Deodato’s film presents an angry challenge to “information” offered by social scientists and corporate media. *Cannibal Holocaust* reflects its era’s rethinking of anthropology and imperialism, expressing points made in volumes such as Talal Asad’s *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which proposed that “anthropologists have, sometimes unwittingly, contributed to maintaining the hierarchy of power of the colonial system” (López 30).

*Cannibal Holocaust* makes the unseemly and unethical aspects of “civilization” explicit. To highlight the savagery of modern corporations, the film’s final scene leads viewers to see that the sacred scar of the Atari tattoo, which had served to identify the film’s cannibals, is none other than the logo for Boise Cascade, the North American lumber company that has cleared acres of Brazilian rainforest. *Canni-*

*bal Holocaust*'s closing scene also draws attention to the "Avenue of the Americas" street sign and so suggests that the modern commerce represented by the busy city street depends, at least in part, on the kind of unethical behavior that marks the American "experts" in the film. *Cannibal Holocaust* employs these references in its narrative, mobilizing a ripple effect in which humans are the food product. Food procurement, preparation, and presentation all become tainted. Food consumption by the journalists and the anthropologist becomes a metaphor for first-world abuse of indigenous people. The North's consumption is framed as isolated personal gain that is anathema to community and survival in the South.

### A Frenchman: A Tasty Centerpiece for a Holiday Meal

Given its critique of first-world institutions, Deodato's horror film shares common ground with Third Cinema, which takes a path that differs from Hollywood (first cinema) and European art film (second cinema) by being accessible and socially conscious. For example, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, directed by Brazilian filmmaker Nelson Pereira dos Santos, has a whimsical tone that invites, rather than forces, audiences to reflect on the consequences of cultural imperialism. The film's fanciful depiction of Tupi Indian foodways allows audiences to consider colonial contact from the perspective of the indigenous people. Employing a method akin to de Antonio, where documentary evidence undercuts official accounts, dos Santos deconstructs one of the first purported eyewitness accounts of New World cannibalism, *Brazil: The True History of the Wild, Naked, Fierce, Man-Eating People*. The book, published in German in 1557, was based on the stories of German sailor Hans Staden, "who describes his capture by the cannibalistic Tupinambá when he was living among the Portuguese in the area now known as Rio de Janeiro" (Sadlier 58).<sup>4</sup> Staden's account may have led Chagnon to add the sensationalized subtitle "the fierce people" to his "scientific" study of the Yanomami.

However, rather than build on Staden's account, dos Santos makes the German sailor a Frenchman. The change reflects dos Santos's disinterest in sensationalized accounts and his concern with the often-overlooked influence French culture has had on Brazil. Dos Santos's

film also resists “the romanticizing and/or valorization of a victim identity” by showing the Tupi Indians as belonging to a complex society that could be as brutal, shortsighted, and capable as the Portuguese and French adventurers who came to the New World to make their fortunes (Berglund 24). The film reveals the shortcomings of the European imperialists and the New World inhabitants. It shows the greed of the Europeans as they devour New World riches (gold, pepper, wood). However, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* also proposes that New World people made a mistake by ingesting foreign influences. It thus illuminates the twofold problem of imperialism that stretches back to the sixteenth century: global powers destroy local cultures throughout the world, and people attracted to the toxic but tasty morsels offered by powerful institutions contribute to their own demise.

The film’s overt subject is the cannibalism of the Tupinambá Indians, “who have come down to us today as man-eaters *par excellence*” (Arens 22). This group of Tupi Indians came to be seen as the “quintessential cannibals” due to various classics of the early colonial period, “including the works of Hans Staden, André Thévet, Jean de Léry, and Michel Montaigne” (Watson 8). Whereas noble savages had been popular figures in nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, the Tupi Indians provided the inspiration for Oswald de Andrade’s 1928 “Manifesto antropófago.” Aiming to redefine Brazil’s national identity, the manifesto inverted the stigma of New World cannibalism to make it a metaphor for Brazil’s mosaic society that had been created by “internalizing pieces of other cultures” (Young 82).

Dos Santos uses Oswald de Andrade’s manifesto as a point of departure. His film more closely resembles Joaquim Pedro de Andrade’s *Macunaíma* (1969), which turned “the theme of cannibalism into the springboard for a critique of repressive military rule and of the predatory capitalist model of the short-lived Brazilian ‘economic miracle’” (Stam 239). Both films suggest that the “civilized” world has been and continues to be far more cannibalistic than any “primitive” culture. Both films are emblematic of the “cannibal-tropicalist” phase of Brazil’s Cinema Novo. This new wave film movement sought to create an “aesthetic of hunger” to oppose “digestive cinema” (Stam 239), which for the filmmakers consisted of local and international “films about rich people with pretty houses riding in luxurious automobiles; [and]

cheerful, fast-paced, empty films with purely industrial objectives” (Johnson and Stam 68).

Even though *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* is set in the late sixteenth century, dos Santos presents the story as if it were a contemporary subject, using natural light, hand-held camera, and other visible “techniques of *cinéma vérité*” (Peña 192). Tentatively comparing the film to a *vérité* “portrait film” such as *Dont Look Back* (Pennebaker, 1967) about Bob Dylan, Richard Peña notes that in the absence of interviews and voice-of-god narration, and with the presence of contradictory information, “we are forced to come to our own conclusions about the subjects of the portrait [by] considering the pattern and larger implications of their actions” (192–93). However, although there are points of contact between *vérité* and the approach used in *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, for dos Santos Euro-American *cinéma vérité* was not a recipe for authentic Brazilian cinema. Instead, as fellow Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha made clear in a manifesto published the year *How Tasty My Little Frenchman* went into production, Third Cinema filmmakers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America must set aside a host of influences: “the commercial-popular esthetics of Hollywood, the populist-demagogic esthetics of Moscow . . . the bourgeois-artistic esthetics of Europe,” and “neocolonialist left” work like *cinéma vérité* (Rocha 89).

Dos Santos’s depiction of the Tupi Indians aims to “faithfully replicate the lifestyle and language of a civilization that had suffered foreign invasion and extermination” (Sadlier 72). This approach presents events from the Tupi’s perspective and explores aspects of their lived experience omitted from official accounts. Darlene Sadlier notes that the film’s “documentary-like or ‘anthropological’ style directly participates in an effort of reinterpretation” (74). The film provides “the viewer with a simulation of what has been lost, not just in time but also through [a] selective cultural process [that has been shaped by] the interests and values of the dominant class in Brazil, which has always identified with Europeans, especially the French” (Sadlier 74).

The film’s almost commonplace “depiction of the Indians, who live a rather docile, mundane existence while trying to cope with foreign armies,” distinguishes *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* from both romanticized nineteenth-century Brazilian novels modeled on

European fiction and from Brazilian manifestos filled with polemical, French-influenced rhetoric (Sadlier 72). Breaking with French models is especially significant; as Sadlier points out, although “Brazil was a Portuguese colony until the early nineteenth century, its cultural and intellectual life after [it became an independent empire in] 1822 was far more profoundly influenced by France” (63). Like other former colonies, even after Brazil became a republic in 1889, it has been colonized by French aesthetic and cultural theory.<sup>5</sup>

Dos Santos’s consciously “Brazilian” depiction of Tupi daily life allows audiences to look at New World encounters from the perspective of the people who were there before tasty Frenchmen came to shore. The film does not dispute the idea that the Tupi were cannibals. Instead, it casts the activity in a new light. Dos Santos’s film suggests that the Tupi were not determined to destroy the Europeans invaders, but instead were willing to consume the foreign products that seemed tasty. It was not apparent to the Tupi that trading with and fighting alongside the French would lead to the Tupi’s destruction. Dos Santos’s film suggests that Europeans conquered Brazil’s indigenous people because the Europeans refused to consume New World culture in any meaningful way. By comparison, the pattern of seeing foreign products as more tasty than indigenous ones has made it possible for Brazil’s inhabitants to be conquered in military, financial, and cultural terms.

The film’s representation of Tupi foodways conveys those ideas in lucid terms. Its various scenes of Tupi women tending healthy fields of cultivated crops make the point that these “quintessential cannibals” were capable farmers who lived primarily on a plant-based diet. The Tupi’s interactions with the Frenchman throughout the film make it plain that he is a special dish for a holiday celebration. The Tupi do not eat him because they are starving, angry, greedy, or “primitive.” Instead, the Tupi make the Frenchman the centerpiece of their feast to celebrate the tribe’s victory over their rivals, the Tupiniquins, who fight alongside the Portuguese.

*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* takes audiences through all the steps that lead up to the holiday meal. Early on, there is the procurement process, with the Frenchman (Arduino Colassanti) taken by the Tupi chief as a spoil of war. Shown as a special but straightforward act, undertaken simply but deliberately, in much the same way someone

would order a Thanksgiving turkey at a butcher shop, the Tupi chief, Cunhambebe (Eduardo Imbassahy Filho), makes his selection from the choices available, opting for the blond-haired prisoner, the Frenchman, over the dark-haired (Portuguese) prisoners. Double-checking his decision, the Tupi chief sizes up the Frenchman's build the way someone would inspect a cut of meat. As he starts home, he remarks that he wants to show this unusual "Portuguese" prisoner to the women of the village. It is soon clear that he made the right food product choice; when the warriors return to the village, the women show that they are delighted about the tasty treat the chief has brought home.

In preparation for their holiday meal, the Tupi set out on an eight-month period of food preservation and preparation. The Frenchman is fed well; the Tupi keep him in good condition by making him help with hunting and warfare. Following food protocols, a beautiful young woman, Seboipepe (Ana Maria Magalhães), whose husband has been recently killed in battle, is assigned to be his companion. Although this aspect of the holiday meal preparation conforms to colonial fantasies, the film presents it as a prudent food preservation choice on the part of the Tupi, for only someone like this circumspect young woman could have kept the Frenchman from escaping. From the beginning to the end of the long preservation and preparation process, there is a heavy emphasis on following food protocols. Cunhambebe and Seboipepe provide detailed explanations of why the Frenchman should be eaten, how he should act at the ceremony in which he will be killed, and which body parts will be eaten by various members of the tribe.

As with many holiday meals, the social aspects of preparing their feast are paramount for the Tupi community. In a final ceremony, the Frenchman is presented to the village in elaborate bird feathers and body paint. Cunhambebe and Seboipepe again lead the proceedings and carefully follow Tupi rules of decorum by reiterating the reasons the Frenchman can and should be eaten. Given the event's symbolic focus, the practical dimensions of food preparation and consumption are secondary at best. Shown in an extreme wide shot, the Frenchman falls to the ground after a single blow to the head, and a few villagers carry his body to a funeral pyre. Celebrations unrelated to eating begin immediately. Racing through the village with two small cannons on his shoulders, Cunhambebe asserts his control of the weapons that



*The best parts of the holiday meal go to key members of society in How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman (Condor Filmes, Luiz Carlos Barreto Produções Cinematográficas, Regina Filmes).*

had once been the Frenchman's source of mystical power. Equally significant, the audience's only glimpse of cannibalism is a quick shot of Seboipepe, who for a moment looks directly at the camera as she takes a small bite from what appears to be the piece of the Frenchman she was promised. The brief, private, and singular moment of consumption suggests that eating human flesh is incidental to the Tupi system, whereas cannibalism, or symbolic cannibalism, belongs to Tupi sacred belief systems and is thus comparable to Christian norms. The shot's rupture of the conventional fourth wall, which normally allows viewers to gaze unseen into fictional worlds, is also a reminder that outsiders' belief that other people are cannibals is the salient factor in cannibal narratives.

By presenting the Frenchman as a highly symbolic aspect of a holiday meal, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* puts the cannibalism of the Tupi in an entirely new light. With the Frenchman falling into a category that is quite different from the food the Tupi raise or catch to eat during regular meals to sustain themselves, the film suggests that con-

suming the Frenchman at a special holiday feast is an activity designed to nourish the spiritual needs of the Tupi. It is a sacred and private act, not unlike the Christian Eucharist, in which people partake of the body and blood of Christ. With extensive screen time allotted to the steps leading up to the feast and only seconds given to what passes as flesh eating, the film makes the point that for the Tupi and their enemies, it is the idea of cannibalism that is important.

Concluding with what might be a wry allusion to cleanup, *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* tacitly reminds viewers that the Tupi's resistance to European incursions caused them to be wiped out in the same way other New World "cannibals" were. This final scene also highlights the distance between facts and European accounts of the New World. In doing so, the conclusion brings viewers back to the film's opening. There, the narration, which is based on an official Portuguese report from 1557, bears little relation to what is shown onscreen. The voiceover narration does not match the film's visual depiction of the Europeans' actions. The official Portuguese report also fails to match the images of the Tupi, for whereas the voiceover describes the godlessness of the "natives," the images show smiling Tupi women offering baskets of fruits and vegetables to the sailors. Dos Santos's film thus anticipates the critiques of official accounts in *The Ax Fight* and *Cannibal Holocaust*. The film also highlights that depictions of food behavior, such as the Tupi women's generous sharing of food with strangers, offer insights into "the beliefs, aesthetics, economics, and politics" of a social group (Long 144).

### "Laboring" the Food Film

Films like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman* reveal that cannibal films sometimes use food and food behavior to show that "civilized" people might be the real cannibals. Cannibal films also use foodways to convey and comment on social problems caused by uneven distribution of wealth. Characters' food choices illuminate their class, ethnic, regional, and national identities. The dynamics of identity, class, and power central to food films are at the heart of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, which established the franchise active from 1974 to 2013. Here the cannibals are not found in the

Amazon, but instead in the “uncivilized” world of rural America and its working class.

That vision of cannibalism has a venerable history that goes back to the writings of Herman Melville. Berglund points out that as early as the mid-nineteenth century, American writers “were interested in the subject of cannibalism as a way to meditate on perceived differences, even if readers, fans, or consumers were aware of the fabrication of such cannibal tendencies” (10). Cannibalism “became a way to critique not only systems enforcing racial inequality but also those enforcing inequalities of gender, sexuality, and class” (Berglund 10). When set within the United States, “the cannibal presence in cultural and literary fictions estranges familiar, homey national narratives” of a united country “by highlighting divisive historical and contemporary practices that preclude the many from becoming the one” (Berglund 24). That point is especially pertinent when one considers the role played by food in Hooper’s film, for “the figure of the cannibal disrupts the notion of a mythic national unity, highlighting the disunity that emerged with the nation’s founding and remains today as much a part of the fabric of U.S. identity as any sense of collective harmony” (Berglund 4).

Cannibal narratives consistently focus on questions surrounding identity. Berglund writes: “Defining the Other as a barbaric cannibal, one who may extinguish your life, clearly distinguishes the boundaries between good and evil, between me and you” (8). The historical usage of the term “cannibal” to demarcate lines between “civilized” people (who eat animals) and “uncivilized” people (who eat other people) was used to justify conquest of the New World; asserting that indigenous peoples “violated natural law by practicing such barbarous outrages as idolatry and cannibalism” allowed any act of European savagery to seem legitimate (Lepore 110).

However, despite cannibal narratives’ division between “civilized” and “uncivilized” peoples, they do not present stable identities. Instead, stories about cannibalism suggest that identities are actually quite fluid. Berglund proposes that “consumption by another collapses identity boundaries: in being consumed, You become Me, I become You-Me. Figuratively, cannibalism threatens one’s sense of integrity” (8). Cannibal narratives are thus paradoxical; they demonize a group and justify its subordination by labeling it as “cannibal,” but, at the same time, call into question the identity of those making the accusations. With

foodways as the narrative's foundation, the dilemmas of cannibalism, identity, and power are all at play in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

There is already an excellent body of scholarship that examines issues of class in Hooper's 1974 film. A look at the film's depiction of foodways contributes to that work. Foodways analysis reveals that the film conveys class differences through characters' food behavior. It shows how the film foregrounds the procurement and preparation of food. That approach reveals that Hooper's film carefully examines the food labor that commercial films and even other food films do not show. Looking at Hooper's film through the foodways lens also draws attention to the behavior and presentation that surround consumption of the human food product. Analysis of food consumption in this film indicates that *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* problematizes the boundaries between "normal" (the middle-class young people) and "abnormal" (the working class cannibal family), largely through its depiction of Franklin (Paul A. Partain), whose tastes run the gamut from acceptable to unacceptable.

Robin Wood has proposed that the 1970s were "the Golden Age of the American horror film" (*Hollywood* 63). For Wood, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* helped create that golden age and is a film that warrants thoughtful analysis because it "achieves the force of authentic art" (84). Wood is impressed by the film because it shows ways that the "proletariat" is "exploited and degraded" under capitalism (82). For Wood, the cannibal family members are not mere monsters but "victims, too—of the slaughter-house environment, of capitalism" (83). Hence, when the cannibal family kills and consumes the "affluent young" people, the film calls attention to class difference and problems of scarcity in America's capitalist society, even if it does not offer any solutions to these problems (Wood 82).

Others have continued Wood's analysis of class in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and the horror film in general (see Hutchings; Newitz). However, they have not explored ways that Hooper's film employs food to examine class issues, despite the fact that food activities and characters' food choices are central to the narrative. Early in the film, when the unsuspecting victims pick up the Hitchhiker (Edwin Neal), he informs the teenagers that several members of his (cannibal) family used to work at the slaughterhouse. He explains, however, that with the "new way" of killing cattle (a mechanized bolt gun), "people got

put out of jobs.” The film thus suggests at the outset that the cannibal family is in dire straits—overworked, living in a dilapidated house—because the food industry’s increased mechanization cost them their good middle-class jobs.

As the film continues, its articulation of class difference emerges from its depiction of the food labor elided by most films. Hooper’s film focuses on the labor behind food, explicitly exposing stages of food procurement, preparation, and preservation normally left out of film representations. That concern begins even before the appearance of the cannibal family. Driving along before they pick up the Hitchhiker, the teenagers notice a terrible stench. As they complain about the smell and roll up the windows, Franklin informs them that the smell is coming from “the old slaughterhouse” where his grandfather “used to sell his cattle.” As Franklin explains how cows used to be dispatched there, Hooper cuts away to a close-up shot of a panting, exhausted cow in a feedlot. The image disrupts Franklin’s description and the film’s narrative, for it makes visible the unseemly aspects of the food system.

People writing about food in film have noted that movies use food primarily in three ways: as a piece of the setting that allows characters to interact, as a transition device (to show the passing of time), and as a way to “symbolically or metaphorically” reveal information about characters (Zimmerman and Weiss 2). Thus, even dystopian food films will elide the decidedly unglamorous labor required to procure food, preserve food, and prepare daily meals. Moreover, with commercial cinema emphasizing the convenient consumption of food, films consistently leave out the slaughterhouse labor required to transform living creatures into “food.” They also mask out the questionable ingredients used in food preparation (to cut costs and increase profits) and the questionable practices that may take place during the food-making process (exploitation of laborers, faulty cleanup procedures, and so on).

By contrast, the laborious steps in the food-making process are brought to the forefront in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*. In fact, a good deal of the film’s narrative is concerned with procurement, preservation, and preparation. For most middle-class audiences, even at holiday time the procurement of food ingredients is limited to “placing a special order at a butcher shop or turkey farm, shopping at the local grocery, or perhaps visiting a pumpkin patch or apple orchard” (Long

145). However, for the impoverished cannibal clan, these luxuries are not available, so it is up to Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) to procure the family's food by killing Kirk (William Vail), Pam (Terri McMinn), Jerry (Allen Danziger), and Franklin when they wander close to the house.

In addition to procurement, the film makes other stages of food preparation visible as the teenagers are picked off one by one. Leatherface kills Kirk and takes him to the kitchen. He then captures Pam, carries her into the kitchen, and hangs her live, fresh body on a meat hook. As she hangs on the hook screaming, Leatherface turns to the task of chopping up Kirk's body, which has been laid out on the kitchen table. In this scene, the preparation stage, which includes "chopping, marinating, and otherwise readying food to be cooked," becomes visible in ways rarely seen outside of food films (Long 145). Later, when Jerry enters the kitchen looking for Kirk and Pam, he hears a noise coming from a large food freezer. He opens it and Pam's partially frozen body jumps from the freezer. In this harrowing moment, the preservation stage, which includes the "strategies used for keeping foods frozen or fresh and storing them until needed," is made visible (Long 145).

Borrowing a term coined by Michael Denning, one could say that Hooper's use of foodways to highlight class difference involves a "laboring" of the food film genre. As Denning notes when he discusses the "laboring of American culture," during the 1930s, members of the Popular Front, with their attention to class and labor issues, were able to transform mass and popular culture into a "contested terrain" in which issues of labor and class were visible (50, 47). In a similar way, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* "labors" the food film by focusing on food procurement and the early stages of food preparation and by making visible the labor involved in obtaining and preparing food. With the film industry's self-regulatory practices generally curtailing representations of labor and class difference, it makes sense that these issues would reappear, in an allegorical form, in Hooper's horror film.

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* provides a glimpse into unacceptable topics. It makes the labor that must be expended before a meal is consumed horrifically visible. The film also illuminates the starvation of America's working class. Fittingly, given the cannibal family's tough economic situation, very little consumption takes place onscreen. During its climatic dinner scene, Sally (Marilyn Burns), the sole survivor,

## CHAPTER 5

is tied to a chair at the dinner table and forced to endure the howls and taunts of her captors. Audiences see the Hitchhiker take a bite of the food. Yet like Leatherface and the Cook (Jim Siedow), he remains far more interested in the meal as an opportunity to bond with family members. For poor people, food consumption is not a time for relaxed enjoyment. Instead, as the scene illustrates, even during the meal the cannibal family is working, for once again they are engaged in food preparation. In this case, the process involves tormenting Sally, the fresh food product, until she is suitable for eating. Thus, as a component of the characters' meal system, human meat might sustain them physically, but work is what nourishes their family ties and defines their social identities.

Prior to the Hitchhiker eating during the "dinner" scene, Franklin is the only character shown eating. When the hapless teens stop by the gas station and barbeque stand operated by the Cook, affluent young Jerry, oblivious to its human ingredients, picks up some barbeque for the group. Franklin is the only one to eat it, and he tears into the meat with gusto. While his consumption of human flesh might seem incidental (he has no idea what he is eating), it becomes more



*During a snack at dawn, the family continues its exhaustive food preparation labor in Tobe Hooper's allegorical horror film *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (*Vortex*).*

significant when considered alongside Franklin's other distinguishing traits. For Wood, Franklin is a key figure in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* because he disrupts the clear boundaries between "normal" and "monstrous" (83). Wood proposes that Franklin is "as grotesque, and almost as psychotic, as his nemesis Leatherface" (83). Because of his food choices, Franklin also disrupts the boundaries between middle-class animal-meat consumer and working-class cannibal.

The insensitive way the other teenagers treat Franklin also suggests that the "monstrous cruelties of the slaughterhouse family have their more pallid reflection within normality" (Wood 83). Franklin, disabled and in a wheelchair, is physically distinct from the middle-class teens. He is also overweight, especially when compared to his slender, good-looking companions. While the "burden" that Franklin's disability creates for his friends might be the reason they are cruel to him, other incidents suggest that his body size is the cause. Kirk and Pam come across the dried-up ditch that had been the swimming hole that Franklin and his sister Sally had enjoyed as kids. Kirk asks, "How did Franklin ever get down here?" Pam answers, "Someone must have carried him when he was little." But Kirk scoffs and replies, "Franklin never was little." Later, when Franklin suggests that he and Sally go look for their missing friends, she replies in exasperation, "Franklin, I can't push you!" The implication is that he simply weighs too much.

Franklin's size sets him apart from the middle-class teenagers, but his food preferences put him in league with the working-class cannibals. A key example of that connection occurs early in the film when the teenagers pick up the Hitchhiker. Franklin and the Hitchhiker talk about the slaughterhouse, and the Hitchhiker describes, in gory detail, how headcheese is made. He concludes his story by asking Franklin, "You like it?" Franklin answers, "Oh yeah, sure I like it. It's good!" By comparison, the Hitchhiker's graphic description has made the others feel sick. When Pam asks, "Can't we talk about something else?" Franklin replies, "You'd probably like it if you didn't know what was in it." That remark prompts Kirk to yell at him for "makin' everybody sick." Thus, Franklin is "grotesque" at least in part because of his cannibalistic, underclass tastes. Here again, Hooper's film conveys class difference through food choice.

Franklin's character also reveals the slippage or collapse of identities that can take place in cannibal narratives. Even though cannibal fictions

construct an opposition between “civilized” and “uncivilized” people, the nature of cannibalism leads some stories to erase that “difference through the collapse of boundaries” (Berglund 9). Hooper’s film suggests that it is possible for almost anyone to slip into cannibalism. All it takes is a certain set of circumstances. Job loss and difficult economic times turn the Hitchhiker, the Cook, and Leatherface into cannibals. In Franklin’s case, an innocent bite of food from a roadside diner transforms him into a cannibal. However, the transformation may not be entirely negative: being willing to try the local food is just one more thing that sets Franklin apart from the other middle-class teenagers. Without figures like Franklin, who reveal the uncertain boundary between “civilized” and “uncivilized” behavior, the middle class remains cut off from the realities of the food system, which includes diners where meat comes from suspect sources and workers’ low wages make it impossible to buy normal, healthy food.

Like *Cannibal Holocaust* and *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* presents audiences with images that do not conform to conventional scenes of “civilized” dining. All three films suggest the need to reflect on “civilized” behavior and the larger implications of food consumption. There are, of course, salient differences between the three films. The sensationalized violence in *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* makes those films popular with contemporary audiences. Emblematic of cult cinema, the films move easily through the marketplace because they can sustain prejudice and channel lower-class anger. However, as films that prompt uncomfortable responses, the horror films can also offer insights into deep and generally unquestioned beliefs about food and food behavior.

Ideological analysis of cannibal films highlights that the films draw attention to social and cultural inequalities. Moreover, with cannibal films exploring the various ways that people devour one another, they make clear that food choices are “a key to the identities” of fictional characters, so that what they consume, literally and figuratively, is “expressive of their culture [and] their values” (Long 145). Looking at cannibal films—the limit case—from a foodways perspective shows what is at stake in food consumption and amplifies ideological readings of identity, class, and culture in other films’ representations of food. Analysis of cannibal films thus expands understanding of food in film and contributes to studies that examine cultural values and beliefs.