Cooked to Perfection: Cannibalism and Art in Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover*

**Entrée: Cannibalism and Power Relations**

We are what we eat: nowhere is this as true as in the case of cannibalism, where we literally eat what we are. Yet by eating what we are, we prove that we are not, in fact, what we claim to be, namely, human beings. “Eating human flesh succinctly signals an individual or group as non-human in a basic way,” William Arens notes in *The Man-Eating Myth*. [1] Cannibals appear to lack the acknowledgement of a shared humanity that in itself is fundamental to being human. This lack, in turn, authorised the inhumane treatment the purported cannibals were subjected to by European colonisers. [2] Despite the exoticising denunciation of the cannibal (and the lack of evidence for the historical occurrence of the practice), Thom Gunn avows in his ‘Epitaph for Anton Schmidt’ that the failure to recognise the subjectivity of other human beings as equivalent to one’s own is more than common:

*I know he had unusual eyes,  
Whose power no orders might determine,  
Not to mistake the men he saw,  
As others did, for gods or vermin.* [3]

The trope of cannibalism is therefore, from the beginning and across the disciplines, a trope closely linked to an exposure of the dehumanising effects of power, and it is by no means restricted to the representation of exotic peoples. Literary texts use images of devouring or
of vampirism to denounce abuses of power; alternatively, cannibalism may appear as the last resort of the oppressed fighting for survival. Such instances of the trope of cannibalism are ultimately optimistic: they present the dictum *homo homini lupus est* not as a revelation of human nature but as an exposition of historical relations which are potentially subject to change.

*Plat*: Cannibalism and the Literalisation of Metaphor in Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover*

Peter Greenaway’s film *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* [4] shares certain features with other representations of cannibalism in contemporary films. Thrillers like *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal* and *Sin City* use cannibalism as an image for the objectification of one human being by another: the other’s humanity is denied to the extent that they can be perceived as food. [5] The objectification of cannibalism is closely linked to objectification through the gaze, for instance in *Sin City*. The social worker captured by the cannibalistic serial killer tells her would-be rescuer: “He made me watch while he sucked the meat off my fingers”. The girl is not simply mutilated, she also faces complete psychological disintegration. Watching another eat part of one’s self is to participate in viewing the self as an object. If, as Lacan argues, having an image of one’s self as a coherent, integrated unity reflected back by a mirror or by another’s reaction is central to self-formation, [6] then, surely, witnessing the cannibalisation of one’s own body threatens to annihilate one’s psychological organisation as a subject.

Elsewhere, (quasi-) cannibalism is used as an ingenious means of revenge. In *Titus*, Julie
Taynor’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, Queen Tamora is forced to eat her sons; in *Theatre of Blood*, a seventies horror film starring Vincent Price, a theatre critic is forced to eat his beloved poodles by a disgruntled and murderous Shakespearean actor in a reworking of the same scene from *Titus Andronicus*. [7] Here, the realisation of not only the death of the beloved other, but of one’s own complicity with objectifying them generates horror in the unwitting cannibal. While *Sweeney Todd* differs from those instances in that the objects of the revenge are themselves killed and eaten, it shares with the other two films the mechanism of initially disguising the nature of the repast: persons are served up as pies. [8] Perhaps *Sweeney Todd*’s image of a pie shop that begins to thrive as soon as it starts to serve up human flesh captures anxieties about the nature and quality of mass-produced, processed food incipient in the Victorian era and much more prevalent today.

The instances of cannibalism portrayed in *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* are acts of both objectification and revenge. The thief, Albert Spica, systematically objectifies others and subjects them to inhuman tortures throughout the film. Metaphorically speaking, he is therefore a cannibal from the beginning. He is a Sadeian tyrant who controls eating and excretion as well as smoking and sex. [9] Power struggles centre around physical functions: his wife Georgie initially attempts to elude his control merely by taking smoking breaks in the bathroom and eating dishes from a separate menu; later, she begins a sexual affair with Michael. Nevertheless, and in spite of having threatened to kill and eat her lover, Albert Spica ultimately becomes a cannibal in the literal sense only under duress, when his wife turns tables on him. Forcing him to become a cannibal is part of Georgina’s revenge when Spica has her lover killed; Spica is clearly horrified by the act he is forced to commit.
Unlike the other instances of enforced cannibalism as a means of revenge, no bond of love or affection joined Spica to Michael, the person ingested. Neither does the thief seem capable of being deterred by the recognition that another’s subjectivity is equivalent to his own. The horror the cannibalistic act nevertheless causes him is puzzling; many of Spica’s pleasures are predicated on the violation of taboos - it is hinted that coprophagy is one of his fetishes, for instance – and it therefore seems unlikely that the existence of a taboo against cannibalism would provide sufficient explanation.

Physical integrity is, however, also an image – and, to a certain extent, a precondition – of subjective autonomy. The thief perceives himself as the autonomous subject while others exist only to pander to his whims. He is the watcher at the centre of the panopticon, who surveys all and punishes as he sees fit without himself being subjected to control or even interference until the film’s dénouement. By transgressing the physical boundaries between the self and another human subject, cannibalism, first of all, threatens Spica’s perception of himself as such an autonomous subject (of course, the fact the act is forced upon him contributes to this threat).

Above all, however, Spica’s cannibalism is the literalisation of a figure of speech, his threat to kill and eat the lover: his wife makes him eat his words. It is interesting, in this context, that the film’s other quasi-cannibalistic act is also predicated upon a literalisation of metaphor. The kitchen boy is tortured by Spica’s minions to reveal the lover’s location: first, he is force-fed the buttons off his clothes, then, he is forced to swallow his own, cut-out belly button by Spica’s associates. The murder of the lover, while not cannibalistic, also literalises a metaphor: Michael, who had previously devoured books only figuratively, is literally stuffed
with the pages of his favourite book. The literal, in this film, is also the lethal: “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Yet Georgina’s revenge differs from those other two acts of violence and murder. Ultimately, the literalisation of Spica’s figurative, cannibalistic objectification of others is reabsorbed into the domain of the symbolic. Spica is not forced to gorge himself to death on the corpse. He is induced to eat a token mouthful of the lover’s body, which is served up whole for him – recognisable as a human being, not disguised in a pie. The presentation of the whole, cooked body is central to the condensation of meanings which makes the act simultaneously a literalisation of Spica’s objectification of others and an acknowledgement of Michael’s essential integrity (his physical organisation is not destroyed during the cooking process), the act of cannibalism simultaneously becomes an act of communion.

Spica tucking in

Cooking Michael whole turns his body into a symbol; in partaking of this body, the thief is forced to leave the realm of crude physical violence and punishment and enter the symbolic realm where he can no longer avoid the self-knowledge that causes him to recoil in horror.

_Dessert: Cannibalism in the Thatcher Era_
Greenaway’s film was made at a time when Thatcher’s government had committed itself to ‘liberating’ market forces in all areas of public life. Public spending on the arts was reduced, and the arts were increasingly commercialised. In the *Guardian*, on 11 April 2009, both Hanif Kureishi and Richard Eyre went on record as suggesting that Thatcher’s enmity towards the arts may, in fact, have paradoxically revitalised them by spurring them to recall their critical function. [10] Peter Bradshaw, in the same article, explicitly mentions *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and her Lover* as a “scathing satirical assault on the greed of the age”, one of those expressions of critique that particularly flourished. Nevertheless, the cannibalistic dénouement of the film is hopeful in its assessment of the critical function and the potential capabilities of art, an ideal image of the effect the film itself strives for. Cooking becomes the image of an art that avoids objectification; the subject’s integrity is preserved and simultaneously transformed. The mirror that art holds up to nature exposes power relations; it does not flatter, it accuses. In doing so, it may move those inured to excess, violence and greed to know themselves and change. Though the fact that Georgina does, ultimately, shoot her husband may reveal some residual doubt on Greenaway’s part regarding the effectiveness of art.


