

Research Article

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Society Bites: Phenomenological Aesthetics of the Ordinary and the Ordinary Cannibal

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Abstract: Drawing on phenomenological aesthetics and on the haptic aesthetics of eating as a form of everyday aesthetics, I examine the phenomenon of eating our own as meaningful in three dimensions: vital/natural, somatic/individual, and cross-cultural. Usually conceived as a concrete, rare, and foreign practice, I show how cannibalism is present in our daily lives, both symbolically and as a liminal possibility towards which – as Freud noticed in 1913 – we all tended as children. Cannibalism is present not only in cinematic, literary, or visual art, and in anthropological research that situates it far from “us,” but through narratives and carnal dispositifs of differentiation/assimilation of the Same and the Other, fundamental for our subjective constitution. I conclude with a reflection on how the classical aesthetics of the sovereign subject develops towards alternative models like Pelluchon’s *gourmet ego* that re-establish the connexion and moral engagement lost by solipsism by means of alimentary metaphors, but also romanticizing them, failing to address the problem of voracity and overconsumption, both at a social and at an individual level. This is more suitably addressed by Viveiros de Castro’s idea of a cannibal cogito, but even better understood by Emmanuel Levinas’ enjoyment-contact model of subjectivity.

Keywords: carnal phenomenology, carnal aesthetics of the ordinary, neocannibalism, gourmet ego, gourmet cogito, cannibal cogito, generative cannibalism, phenomenological aesthetics

1 Introduction: Hanging Pictures of Oral Fixation

His father took him to the movies, to the plaza, to the circus, anywhere that was far from home, far from the photos of his smiling mother holding up her architecture diploma, the clothes still on their hangers, the Chagall print she’d picked out to place above the bed. *Paris Through the Window*: there’s a cat with a human face, a man flying with a triangular parachute, a colourful window, a dark couple, and a man with two faces and a heart in his hand. There’s something that speaks to the craziness of the world, a craziness at times cheerful.

Agustina Bazterrica¹

In *Cadáver exquisito* (2017), Agustina Bazterrica explores a dystopian society where cannibalism has been accepted, internalized, and legalized, revealing not only how fragile, malleable, and contingent the boundaries between sanity and insanity, between normal and abnormal are, but also how such seemingly extreme societal change do not truly transform social mandates and relations all that much: humanity is still segregated in classes, namely in the class of those who eat their fellow human and the class of those who are eaten by them.

¹ Bazterrica, *Tender is the Flesh*, 44.

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The body of the oppressed is still exploited, literally in its flesh and to the bone, mercantilism, consumerism, and profit still work in exactly the same way, the female body is still conceived as a reproductive machine to be controlled, optimized, and milked, and the objectivation and desubjectivation of who is eaten, as we do today with animals, is still needed in order to bear oneself, to be able to live with oneself, with one's actions. This critical use of the figure of the cannibal against our societal model is, as we will see through this essay, exceedingly frequent,² but it appears in stark contrast with another common use of cannibalism as a fitting metaphor for utterly desirable societal standards, for example hospitality.³ In this essay, I aim to explore not only how this ambiguity appears in philosophical and aesthetic reflections on cannibalism but its reasons, specifically, the entirely ordinary and vital dynamic of consumption at its core.

The cannibal critique of capitalism has been well documented by Richard King⁴ through a multitude of contemporary authors that interpret the figure of the Cannibal as *the essential metaphor for late capitalism*,⁵ for in neocannibalism⁶ *individuals and institutions absorb difference, feeding off alterity like phantasmagoric parasites to create identities, experiences, and communities*.⁷ Admiring this perspective in some regards, although disappointed because of its excessive use, King highlights that the strategic narrative of cannibalism has been employed not only in what he calls the *classical West* but cross-culturally, to symbolically elaborate difference and stigmatize *the Other*. In this context of generalized use, Western culture has particularly relied on the cannibal: *After 1492, cannibalism takes its place alongside incest, polygamy, infanticide and more recently female genital modification as a privileged, even central marker of cultural difference*.⁸ In such wise, *observations and assessments of cannibalism have prompted and legitimated Occidental intervention*.⁹

Focusing on three interpretations of the *anthropophagic Occident* that go as far as asserting that *we are all cannibals*, and *contemporary cannibalism is neocannibalism* (Dean MacCannell), that we are immersed on a Wético or cannibal *psychosocial condition or psychosis rooted in exploitation and consumption* (Jack Forbes), or that Western civilization as a whole is a *cannibal culture* (Deborah Root), King reads this plethora of intellectualizations as a rather useless, deceitfully seducing, self-serving spread of arguments, almost a mere trend, rooted in the lack of moral self-confidence rampant in the West. They *command attention, promising profound insights and revitalized engagements, precisely because they invoke the cannibal*.¹⁰ In the face of these false promises, King suggests that aesthetic analysis of cannibal representations in cultural products like cinema or literature is our best bet.¹¹

² A remarkable text in this regard is the satire *A modest proposal*, written in 1729 by Jonathan Swift, where the Irish, often depicted as cannibals by the English, are shown to be the devoured ones. As this satire highlights it, our organic, bodily constitution, calling for relatively constant feeding, and the organization of our societies, where we choose not to satisfy universal needs and rather use them to generate undistributed profit, and where resources in general, and food in particular, are allocated following monetary and political power dynamics, determine that lower classes are the first to be put into a desperate situation when famine strikes. This structural violence towards the lower classes that forces them to eat whatever they can or die is overlooked and ignored, to then criticize their desperation and use it in the construction of terrifying caricatures of unleashed savages, devourers of domestic animals or even humans, thus inflicting a more symbolic but also more subtle, difficult to point out and therefore permanent violence. Cf. Swift, "A Modest Proposal."

³ *Cannibalism is about physical communion with the other by oral fixation ... Derrida is wrong when he says that absolute hospitality is impossible or even 'inconceivable and incomprehensible'. It would be correct to say that absolute hospitality is very possible but inevitably leads to death. Just like the physical act of making love, the act of cannibalism is radical hospitality – total reception and admission of the other.* Welten, "On the Hospitality of Cannibals," 147.

⁴ King, "The (Mis)uses Of Cannibalism in Contemporary Critique."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶ That is, the subtilization of what we normally understand as cannibalism into a kind of cannibalism that is not necessarily symbolic, but that is less recognizable as such, like worker's exploitation, environmental pollution, organ harvesting or surrogacy/body renting in poor countries, and other deathly, often bloody practices typical of the West.

⁷ King, "The (Mis)uses Of Cannibalism in Contemporary Critique," 113.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

Here, I present a syncretic methodology that contextualizes both broad cultural interpretations of cannibalism and aesthetic analysis of cultural products inhabited by cannibal figures as belonging to a type or a dimension (the generative dimension) of phenomenological aesthetics, specifically of the haptic aesthetics of eating as a form of everyday aesthetics, along the lines of Richard Shusterman's recent work.¹² Cultural-aesthetic analysis of cannibalism has a particularly similar sibling field. The usage of cannibalism as a critical tool not only against capitalism, but against its metaphysical ground, namely physicalism, meaning in this context the reduction of consciousness, *ergo* the reduction of humans to bodily mechanical processes and physical states, is akin to the one made of zombies.¹³ But the issues, nuances, and implications of the cannibal symbol are specific, and its critical potential against capitalism is more radical than that of similar figures like the zombie or the vampire, most of all because cannibalism is not only a cultural symbol or a thought experiment as zombies are, but an actual practice, implying a higher degree of, let's call it, bodily involvement than vampirism.

Be it medicinal or ritualistic, mortuary or war-related, voluntary or imposed, pathological or for survival, of death or living bodies, mediating violence and killing or some sort of scavenging, collective or solitary, of raw or cooked tissues, as blood-drinking, flesh-eating, bone-chewing, oil-pressing or ashes mixing, cannibalism in all its possible forms exists and has existed for millennia and in every latitude. It is because of this tangibility that, unlike the zombie scenario, cannibalism awakens in us such shunning and repudiation, for we do not feel protected from it by impossibility and, moreover, because many of us consume flesh, organs, and various animal tissues on a regular basis. I advance the position, as shown in the next part of this essay, that from a phenomenological perspective, the figure of the cannibal highlights exactly the opposite polarity of our bodily existence that the zombie argument does. If the zombie emphasizes the meaningless automaticity of a mechanistic body (phenomenological *Körper*), the cannibal brings up the living body (phenomenological *Leib*). It represents the voraciously eating body, one that ends up consuming its own flesh, be it of its own species, of its own kind, or even of itself. In this sense, to the difference made by Clastres between endocannibalism, namely *the act of eating the body of one's own dead (and not that of the enemy)*,¹⁴ and exocannibalism, i.e. the cannibalism of enemies or *others* coming from outside one's community, I would add the distinction between self-cannibalism and simple or alter-cannibalism.

The more we think about cannibalism, the more common it appears to be. If we think about anorexia and other disorders of this type, that body, the starving body, appears to be eating itself, phagocytizing internally little by little. Must cannibalism be necessarily defined by an external gesture, a direct act, or can it be extended to these situations in which, for example, by stopping ingestion, the body is indirectly placed in a catabolic state of cannibalistic self-consumption? Taking these introductory interrogations in another direction, we can all remember how, as children, we used to bite or be bitten by other kids, and we understand as adults from those experiences how reliant on our mouth, specifically on our bite, our recognition of objects and of the world was especially when it came to the recognition of pain and of our own bodily limits, as well as of those of others, not to mention other forms of ordinary oral self-consumption that often complete automatisms like nail-biting, hair-pulling, or skin-picking.

In these preliminary thoughts, Freud's works are an obligatory reference. From *Totem and Taboo* (1913) to *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), the question of anthropophagy repeatedly occupied Freud's reflection, not only as a culturally situated practice but as a universal psychic dynamic: *as Freud suggests, born at infancy, the phenomenon of cannibalism should be considered as grounded in oral fixation. Only when socialization separates the self from the other can the drive of eating the other be reordered, albeit not completely.*¹⁵ This inherent cannibalistic structure would explain why well before the establishment of our physicalist scientific paradigm and of our economic model, cannibal figures populated mythology and art. We can even talk, from the psychoanalytical perspective, of a generalized cannibalism where not only child development begins with a cannibal-oral phase, but where everything is

¹² Shusterman, "Chopsticks and the Haptic Aesthetics of Eating."

¹³ Cf. Frankish, "The Anti-Zombie Argument."

¹⁴ Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, 61.

¹⁵ Kozin, "The Man and the Cannibal," 219.

interpreted as the eating or being eaten of the same familial flesh,¹⁶ and where subjectivity remains always and in all its stages fundamentally *dermal*,¹⁷ related to other subjectivities as to other tissular existences only in cannibalistic terms, through cannibalistic instincts of absorption and anti-cannibalistic taboos.

Along with this psychoanalytic interpretation of cannibalism – first third of the twentieth century – a romanticization of it starts in Brazil with Oswald de Andrade's *Anthropophagic Manifesto* (1928),¹⁸ where the figure of the cannibal is used to represent non-European ways of living and thinking. With this universalization and revendication, cannibalism decidedly becomes an intricate paradox, a constant trait, a *staple of racist stereotypes*,¹⁹ and a tool of segregation and domination, simultaneously transformable into a rhetoric of emancipation. Let's finish this introduction by remembering in this regard Franz Fanon's account of the biological racism that weaponized the idea of cannibalism,²⁰ and how someone like Maryse Condé, author of *The Story of the Cannibal Woman* (2003), can embrace it, not only with her conception of voracity as human's most profound nature but also realizing that cannibalizing the ways of the oppressor allows for a *avancer masqué* (a masked moving forward).²¹ In this landscape of possibilities for the cannibal rhetoric and in the understanding of its meaning, no discipline is unessential. Anthropological, philosophical, political, psychological, literary: every kind of cultural and aesthetic analysis is needed.²²

2 Phenomenological Aesthetics of the Ordinary: Embodiment, Lifeworld, and Generativity

What becomes well known through repeated experience ... has in all respects a peculiar horizon of open unfamiliarity This style of the experiential world ... within open, undetermined horizons, does not disturb the course of normal practical life, the everyday world which is that of normal men.

Edmund Husserl²³

If I have already touched upon how cannibalism is an important – even when subtle, spectral, often inaudible – aspect of *the ordinary*, of our cultural and individual spaces and identities, with the oral beginnings of subjective development that Freud calls *cannibalistic pregenital sexual organization*,²⁴ with Fanon's and Condé's characterizations of racism, and with the extended critiques of capitalism and the West as cannibalistic, in this part, I would like to reframe these in a phenomenological context. Phenomenology offers a well-

¹⁶ Here, everything is reduced to the opening or protecting to or from certain familial eating, for instance, little Hans, afraid of being bitten by a horse that Freud interprets as his father.

¹⁷ Cf. Anzieu, *The Skin-Ego*.

¹⁸ For the Andrade-Freud relation, mainly through Andrade's cannibal reinterpretation of the Oedipal dynamics, their affinities, but also their differences, *videre* Nunez, *Cannibal Democracy*, 33; Vergara Reynolds, *The Author as Cannibal*, 12; Hulme, "The Cannibal Scene," 28.

¹⁹ Conklin, *Consuming Grief. Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society*, 3.

²⁰ *My chromosomes were supposed to have a few thicker or thinner genes representing cannibalism. In addition to the sex-linked, the scholars had now discovered the racial-linked. What a shameful science!*, Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 120.

²¹ *I had been transformed into Joselita, the sister or cousin of my hero. It was the first time I had cannibalized a life. Something I would soon take a liking to. Today, I am convinced that what I later called somewhat pretentiously 'my political commitment' was born at that very moment, the moment I had been forced to identify with poor Jose. ... I had become bleached and whitewashed, and because of it, a poor imitation of the little French children I hung out with. I was a 'black skin, white mask' and Frantz Fanon was going to write his book with me in mind.* Condé, *Tales from the Heart*, 110–1.

²² Let's not forget the recent contributions in the fields of cultural studies and literature by Ali Kulez (Kulez, "Eating (by) Oneself: The Wasteful Pleasures of Self-Cannibalism in Virgilio Piñera's *La carne*") and in the field of philosophy by Valeria Campos (Campos, *Pensar/Comer. Una Aproximación Filosófica a la Alimentación*).

²³ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 343–4.

²⁴ Freud, "The Phases of Development of Sexual Organization," In *The Complete Psychological Works*, 1516.

founded systematization of these and other arguments in a carnal aesthetics of the ordinary, paramount and useful not only because of the role given to the bodily flesh of incarnated existence but because of its understanding of each and every object – from the most unassuming and trivial one to the world itself – as indeterminately infinite.

This infinity sprawls beneath every little thing both aesthetically and intersubjectively (i.e. both on the level of individual and on the level of transindividual constitution), for its perception can never be completed, the world itself being defined as a paradoxical synthetic unity of infinite horizons, and for its constitution is also paradoxically determined by a trans-generational, indeterminable, unfixable, and open community. In this sense, here I do not understand phenomenological aesthetics merely as the study of explicit aesthetic efforts made by phenomenologists, even less so as the illustrative usage phenomenologists have made of art. Certainly, these are also parts of it, but phenomenological aesthetics is the analysis that reveals the three-dimensional structural context in which we should understand and encompass the different cannibal narratives examined here.

Phenomenological aesthetics is a key part of phenomenology, existing implicitly since its beginnings, even if the first explicit phenomenology of aesthetic experience was not completed until 1953 by Mikel Louis Dufrenne²⁵ and the first attempt to structure the field as such has only recently been done.²⁶ Phenomenological aesthetics designates thus a tradition going from Husserl to Derrida, currently alive and prolific, concerned with topics customary to aesthetics and art history such as interpretative analyses of all art forms, of what art objects and aesthetic experiences are, of creativity and style, of sensation, imagination, enjoyment and empathy, of oneiricity, virtuality, and interculturality,²⁷ but from the non-dualist, non-representationalist, and anti-ontological perspective that phenomenology aims to develop. For phenomenology is, above all, not a doctrine but a methodological gesture: namely, the exercise of epoché. As the suspension of all belief, the bracketing of all ontological positing, but also of everything that appears as anything more than *appearing*, as anything more than *phenomena*,²⁸ the exercise of epoché allows us to distance ourselves from traditional hypostases such as the subject–object or the real–apparent divides.

In this sense, it begs the question of whether we are in front of phenomenological aesthetics when a given author does not practise epoché but constructs a particular ontology where art has its role and meaning according to its relation to Being, as is the case in Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty. The answer, at least in this methodological sense, would be negative. Hence, the simpler approach to phenomenological aesthetics is not methodological, but rather historical: the tradition starts with Husserl and includes those who, even heretically, followed – at least some of – his steps and worked on matters relating to art and aesthetic experience.

While it could be said that Husserl's own meditation on art does not amount to an aesthetic theory,²⁹ and that – as Husserl himself established the core of his philosophy to be the intentionality of consciousness –³⁰ his aesthetic analysis relates therefore mainly to the study of the mode of intentionality by which art objects appear, namely of image-consciousness (*Bild-bewusstsein*), here I refute both assertions. There are, indeed, important components of a well-rounded aesthetics throughout Husserl's works that do not refer exclusively to a specific form of intentionality, nor even to intentionality as such. The topic of the intentional form of image-consciousness is not the main one, even only in terms of pure consciousness analysis. It is certainly a crucial element of the reflection on art objects, creation, and imagination, but much more encompassing in this regard is the idea of *Einstellung*, attitude or consciousness disposition, in its three kinds: theoretical, axiological, and practical. These *Einstellungen* create respectively objects of judgement, value, and will,³¹ and are characterized as *positional spheres*,³² for in their respective forms each one produces objectivity as

²⁵ Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*.

²⁶ Embree and Sepp, *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetic*.

²⁷ Ibid., xvii.

²⁸ Husserl, *Ideas. First Book*, 219–20.

²⁹ Brough, "Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)," 151.

³⁰ Husserl, *Ideas. First Book*, 199–202.

³¹ Husserl, *Ideas. Second Book*, 13.

³² Husserl, *Ideas. First Book*, 335.

positions or theses: e.g. the theoretical object *nature* produced by a complex theoretical act, the axiological object *a beautiful symphony* produced by a complex axiological act, or the practical object *a useful book* produced by a complex practical act. Objectivities are constituted in their aspects, faces, and strata by the mingling of these attitudes, *as polythetic formations of the polythetically unified acts*.³³

In this context, the phenomenological *Einstellung*, the epoché is not genuinely an *Einstellung*, no positing act: *alteration* of the attitude (*Änderung der Einstellung*) and *disconnection* of the attitude (*Ausschaltung der Einstellung*), the epoché is something *like* the attitude able to depersonalize ourselves from any attitude, the only able to detach us from all positing, be it theoretical, axiological, or practical, rendering what seemed evident, unquestionable, familiar, ordinary, and habitual, merely *phenomenal*, i.e. susceptible of being contemplated in its moving constitution. Thus, phenomenological aesthetics is always *of the ordinary*, not only because, as mentioned, it gives a crucial role to the body we always inhabit and resignifies each trivial object and the world itself as a gaping infinity, but because it doesn't focus on the sublime. It focuses on all objectivities and each *Erlebnis* or each experience, be it perceiving, remembering, willing, hoping, judging, or dreaming, *as themselves appearing*.

Here, we can gather two aesthetically relevant assertions. First, phenomenology as such can be seen as an *aestheticization* for it is about putting distance between us and our experiences and about seeing them *appearing as appearing*, not as *being*. The idea of subjectivity as a *substratum* and overbearing commander of and in experience is thus surpassed by the idea of *witness*. Second, phenomena are *things themselves*, meaning they do not represent an otherworldly reality, no Kantian noumena. This translates to the work of art: *The artwork's radiating and thus emerging appearance is no representation and certainly no imitation of a living gaze that aims to deceive The appearance that it is does not stem from anything else to which it would owe its existence ... The artwork does not imitate life*.³⁴

More specifically, in the *Einstellung* schema, aesthetic perception, judging, and handling are eminently related to the axiological positing sphere, but is precisely using the example of art history that Husserl illustrates how all objectivities, thus also aesthetic ones, are *typically* theoretical, axiological, or practical, but actually constituted as heterogeneous composites of all these kinds, in various assortments and degrees:

This characteristic change of attitude belongs, as an ideal possibility, to all acts ... We can look at a picture 'with delight'. Then we are living in the performance of aesthetic pleasure ... then again, we can judge the picture, with the eyes of the art critic or art historian, as 'beautiful'. Now we are living in the performance of the theoretical or judgemental attitude and no longer in the appreciating or pleasure-taking.³⁵

Husserlian phenomenological aesthetics will hence be concerned not only with modes of intentionality more easily associated with aesthetic perception and creation like image-apprehension, but also with the encompassing, multimodal, and polythetic structures of constituting consciousness as such. Moreover, I claim that its main concern needs to be, as stated, the conjoint analysis of the three carnal aspects of embodiment, lifeworld, and generativity that, following Levinas, I interpret as preceding the emergence of intentional consciousness:

The subject called incarnate does not result from a materialization, an entry into space and into relations of contact and money which would have been realized by a consciousness, that is, a self-consciousness ... It is because subjectivity is sensibility – an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of the others, the-one-for-the-other, that is, signification – and because matter is the very locus of the for-the-other, the way that signification signifies before showing itself as a said in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system, that a subject is of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin.³⁶

³³ Husserl, *Ideas. Second Book*, 9.

³⁴ Figal, *Aesthetics as Phenomenology*, 215–6.

³⁵ Husserl, *Ideas. Second Book*, 10. Although Husserl differentiates between the theoretical sphere and the axiological and practical spheres for theoretical objectivities are characterized as not sensibly intuitive, as not being *in the body* as axiological and practical are, here I radicalize the Husserlian idea of the possibility of alteration of subjective attitudes to all three spheres among them, for Husserl himself shows the intuitive and carnal emergence of ideal constructs (e.g. *mathesis universalis* being rooted in the art of measuring land, Cf. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 28, or numbers and counting being rooted in bodily object perception).

Here, Levinas not only shows how phenomenology as a whole becomes radically carnal, focusing no longer only on the *living body* (*Leib*) in terms of movement, external object perception, and orientation, but on its entrails, its mouth, its skin, its hunger. He also shows how this carnality can no longer be understood as a mode of consciousness. Our pre-intentional living together and carnal coexistence are the basis of consciousness, experience, time, and language, but not because of that reason excluded or exempt of significance and meaning. Quite the contrary: Levinas rightly evacuates the debate about *the access* to the flesh and to carnal pseudo-experiences (*pseudo-* for they are not the *experiences* of *consciousness*, but *encounters* of *sensibility*), especially highlighted by a Heideggerian and Merleau–Pontian tradition that tends to ontologize phenomenology.³⁷

The Levinasian solution to the debate between Sartrean transparency and the Merleau–Pontian opacity of consciousness³⁸ is simple. The more radical and intimate form of understanding is the understanding of our flesh, utterly meaningful, and susceptible of being the object of philosophical discourse, as his writings prove it. Even if the rigid meanings of synchronic consciousness remain essentially heterogeneous to this carnal understanding, they are rooted in it. This carnal phenomenology is not incompatible but rather complementary with, the deepening of Husserlian phenomenology. Husserl analysed the underpinnings of constitutive consciousness in terms of embodiment, the stated familiar unfamiliarity of the lifeworld, and generativity³⁹ or historicity, this is, *in fine*, in terms of empathizing sensibility. Phenomenology does not end, nor give its best results as a theory of pure consciousness. It needs to arrive at the communal constituting experience of our *shared* world made of encounters, ethical concerns, and things that become meaningful in the context of language, institutions, and heritage. And this step was already drafted in the early phenomenology of Husserl and Edith Stein:

[...] man has a consciousness of himself and of his fellows and of the rest of the surrounding real actuality ... This 'surrounding world' is comprised not of mere things but of use-Objects (clothes, utensils, guns, tools), works of art, literary products, instruments for religious and judicial activities (seals, official ornaments, coronation insignia, ecclesiastical symbols, etc.). And it is comprised not only of individual persons, but the persons are instead members of communities, members of personal unities of a higher order, which, as totalities, have their own lives, preserve themselves by lasting through time despite the joining or leaving of individuals.⁴⁰

As a result, phenomenological aesthetics appears to be particularly suitable for the study of cannibalism. In his recent essay on the haptic aesthetics of eating as a form of everyday aesthetics,⁴¹ Richard Shusterman gives an example of how this kind of analysis can be practised in one of the most ordinary fields of the ordinary, the field of eating, where cannibalism is found as an extreme or liminal case. Shusterman addresses the generative-cultural dimension and some aspects of the somatic dimension of *Leib*, with fleeting considerations about the temporality of eating⁴² and its performative character.⁴³ For the generative dimension, he explores how *dominant Western philosophical tradition* has long excluded culinary arts and pleasures from the realm of

36 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 77.

37 Cf. Kearney and Treanor, eds. *Carnal Hermeneutics*; Cf. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*. Is this tradition that has defined *carnal phenomenology* (Merleau–Ponty, Levinas, and Lingis) as radically different from Husserlian phenomenology (for it reduces Husserl only to intentional analysis), renewing an ontological and apophantic reading of phenomenology recentred in Being and *lóyos*, that re-revitalizes the dogmatic metaphysical dualism phenomenology overcomes (Cf. Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 77). Here, I understand and show phenomenology as such and as a whole as being a *carnal phenomenology*, from its beginnings to its later developments as post-phenomenology or phenomenology of somatic and pre-conscious processes.

38 Cf. Depraz, *Lucidité du Corps*, Chapter 1. B. 2. *Les sensations hylétiques: une corporéité immanente*.

39 In the sense, this term acquires in the phenomenological tradition. No longer referring only to divine or earthly creation, nor to the co-generation of world and consciousness or the emergence of life from materiality, nor any other generativity philosophy has theorized, but literally to *the generations*, generativity refers in phenomenology to the trans-generational intersubjective constitution of meaning, a meaning carnal through and through for it is founded on empathy. Cf. Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Phenomenology After Husserl*; Ascarate and Gailhac, *Generative Worlds*, 7.

40 Husserl, *Ideas. Second Book*, 191.

41 Shusterman, "Chopsticks and the Haptic Aesthetics of Eating," 139.

42 Ibid., 141.

43 Ibid., 142.

beauty and therefore from aesthetic examination,⁴⁴ and asserts that the art of eating is not mere ingestion of food, but a critical process of *selection, reflection, and sequencing*, implying *aesthetic values* and *cultural knowledge*,⁴⁵ that he illustrates with the assessment of cultural culinary differences.⁴⁶ While for the somatic dimension, he notices how the enjoyment of eating implies not only sight, smell, and taste, but crucially other less evident haptic sensations traditionally studied by Husserlian phenomenology, like proprioception, interoception, kinaesthesia, and visceroreception.⁴⁷

3 Generative Cannibalism: Phenomenological Aesthetics of the Ordinary Cannibal

If the three carnal dimensions of phenomenological aesthetics have been defined as embodiment, lifeworld, and generative intersubjectivity, I would like to formulate them in slightly different phrasing, aiming for simpler understanding and more flexibility in our meditation: the corporeal/individual, the vital/natural, and the cross-cultural/generative dimensions. I would like to come back with this plainer nomenclature to the generalized cannibalism of psychoanalysis to show how the Freudian ideas on instinctual consumption resonate with Levinas and his very specific critique of Western cannibalism. In *Instincts and their vicissitudes* (1915), Freud invites us to think about the grounds of subjectivity in biological terms or rather about the blurry fringes of organic and psychic life. If we imagine a very basic organism, we will see how it relates to stimuli either fleeing or realizing that it cannot escape from them, finding *in the efficacy of its muscular activity a basis for distinguishing between an “outside” and an “inside.”*⁴⁸ It will find thus as a consequence of kinaesthetic movement and its instinctual reactions, long-lasting impressions that in time will develop into conceptual categories of self and other, sameness and alterity. This thought experience shows how fundamental hate, rejection, and repudiation are for Freud: first relation to the other, to the environment, more basic than love and attraction. We need to point out nonetheless that hate and love are still extremely similar correlative phenomena, for both tendencies emerge from self-preservation, which is the ultimate essence of life in this paradigm.

This self-preservation of life is the source of the *conatus*, a term by which Levinas designates the Western ontological model of subjectivity that reduces, absorbs, and digests alterity, to which he opposes his own model of subjectivity, namely, a pre-intentional sensibility that is both non-digesting enjoyment and non-grasping contact: *is like an inversion of the conatus of esse, a having been offered without any holding back, a not finding any protection in any consistency or identity.*⁴⁹ Subjectivity is therefore defined not by its power, not by its capacity of incorporation and solidity, but as an *opening up, like a reverse conatus.*⁵⁰

Here, Levinas embodies, however, the ambiguity inherent to the cannibal symbolism: characterizing it by both what needs to be left behind, i.e. the digestion of alterity, and also his version of subjectivity. For, to grasp this pre-intentional, sensible self we need to refocus, if not on our flesh, on how we carnally carry others. We need to refocus on the *gravity of the body extirpated from its conatus.*⁵¹ Thus, Levinasian subjectivity is depicted as a *“biting into...,”* not into others, but into ourselves: *This self is out of phase with itself, forgetful of itself, forgetful in biting in upon itself, in the reference to itself which is the gnawing away at oneself of remorse.*⁵²

⁴⁴ Ibid., 140.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 143–51.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁸ Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” In *The Complete Psychological Works*, 2959.

⁴⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 75.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁵¹ Ibid., 72.

⁵² Ibid., 115.

Even if from a phenomenological perspective discussing nature, biology, or even vitality as more than cultural constructs is complex, here I want us to reflect in very simple terms on this idea of how, as Freud and a broadly accepted thesis about the essence of life suggest, organicity depends on a self-preservation that justifies rejection, aggression, and consumption. In this straightforward perspective, life needs nourishment to continue living and needs therefore, very concretely, to take hold, introduce in itself, digest, absorb, and assimilate the elements among which it is immersed, i.e. alterity. Life supposes thus alterity's vanishing into the self: consumption. Even if in a broader sense we could say, certainly, that nothing disappears because of the processes of incorporation, excretion, and transformation and that the self is not much more than a conceptual abstraction because of the principle of ever-growing entropy by which it also will decompose and die, becoming the alterity of other living creatures, life can be defined as constant consumption, as a chain of alterity absorptions.

It would be hard to refute this understanding of the vital cycle or to conceive it as voracious or cannibalistic. Still, the critique of our cannibalistic culture as a permanent war that turns self-protection into self-destruction⁵³ or a capitalism that radicalizes consumption into overconsumption, self-preservation into self-interest, reasonable foresight into unleashed resources cumulation, and bodily activity into a kind of exhaustion bordering extinction, seems to call into question this vital dynamic. I consider this to be one of the fundamental insights one might deduce from cannibalistic symbols in cultural products: make us realize and wonder about the grounds and limits of our somewhat voracious vitality. How does this vital dynamic, this seeming necessity of our consuming relationship with alterity, our environment, others, and all the nourishments around us, becomes unbridled? This reflection on the embodied dimensions of our existence cannot go further.

We must now turn, as Shusterman and any other phenomenologist would, to the cross-cultural, inter-subjective, or generative dimension. To study generative cannibalism, i.e. the cultural narrations that we inherit, into which we unknowingly delve, and that we feed with ever-renewed formulations of the cannibal symbology, is almost exclusively what is left to do, for the same reason that philosophy is now historical philosophy and that aesthetics is historical and philosophical aesthetics: because there is no unitary ontology beyond the self-preservation of life and its mysterious nexus with the ever-changing matter that we might question or develop, as was the case in previous times. In other words, aesthetic phenomenology's plan of action could hardly be any different, for speculation on the material-vital dimension cannot be any more than that: speculations, always inevitably permeated by ontological positions, be they materialistic, spiritualistic, dualistic, monistic, or otherwise.

The somatic dimension, on the other hand, especially with how little attention we are culturally used to giving it, particularly to its haptic, most basic strata, is too deep and personal, too close, too pressed and oppressed, too umbrous and shaded, too difficult to analyse. Is only the trans-generational, generative dimension that we can read through aesthetic, historical, and social comparative disciplines that allow not only for the distance and the relative clarity needed, but also for the ambiguity, the mistiness, and the indefiniteness (as opposed to the certainty of ontology and the exactness of science) requested by the unfixed process that research needs to be. Here, I will content myself with pointing out how phenomenological discourse participates in the evolution of the trans-generational cannibal narrative: the evolution from being a rhetorical dispositif for self-constitution of the ideological structure of Western culture⁵⁴ (attribution of this, the worst possible trait, to *the other* and to those who are not part of the community), towards being part of the rhetoric of emancipation.

From Husserlian Eurocentrism to the Levinasian critique of the otherness-assimilating *conatus*, phenomenological discourse finds itself, understandably, amid this trans-generational narrative, replicating it at its own level, caught up in a discussion well prepared by the Judaeo-Christian anthropocentric perspective on Good and Evil, angels and demons. From the multiple cannibals in Greek mythology, those who had it on their nature like the Laestrygonians, those who were forced to become eaters of their own like Thyestes who

⁵³ Not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them. It establishes an order from which no one can keep his distance; nothing henceforth is exterior. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other ... The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

⁵⁴ According to Federici, the cannibal/savage narrative is one of three key aspects of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, namely, the constitution of the proletarian body into a work-machine, the persecution of women as witches, and the creation of "savages" and "cannibals." Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 115.

unknowingly ate his sons, or those like Cronus who ate his to preserve himself from a child that would be and act like him, through Montaigne's essay *Des Cannibales* in the sixteenth century and Kant's anthropology in the eighteenth century, to the current developments that we present now to finish this article, the cannibal narrative is an on-going, culturally structural one. This is the main component of what I call *the ordinary cannibal* that we may also call *the atmospheric cannibal*: namely, how the cannibal narrative extends quietly through mediatic, artistic, and intellectual spheres, full of images and accounts of cannibalism.

The last landmark in this context, in the intellectual sphere, is the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who develops a *metaphysics of predation* derived from Levy-Strauss and the Deleuzian ideas of Other-structure and Geo-philosophy through a conceptual triad: *Interspecific perspectivism, ontological multinaturalism and cannibal alterity form the three aspects of an indigenous alter-anthropology that is the symmetrical and reverse transformation of Occidental anthropology*.⁵⁵ Resignifying old elements of the cannibal narrative and Levi-Strauss's work, as well as introducing or highlighting recently introduced ones like Oswald de Andrade's manifesto, Viveiros de Castro reinvigorates the emancipatory turn of the cannibal narrative. His work thus ensures its metamorphosis into a critical, multiculturalist dispositif, importantly through his writings on indigenous cosmologies. Indigenous cosmologies are, as Western cosmology is, populated by different kinds of cannibalism, among which Viveiros evokes, for example, the mystico-funerary Araweté cannibalism, and the bellico-sociological one of the Tupinambá. Embracing, like Maryse Condé, the insulting, segregating idea of the cannibal to transvalue it into a strength of those racialized and marginalized by it, the idea of the cannibal in this thematization is – to say it rather figuratively – an arrow that behaves like a boomerang and comes back to cannibalize those who tried to weaponize it, a bomb of *reverse cannibalism*.⁵⁶

What is most interesting in this context is that cannibalism here is also more than a rhetorical tool, more than a symbol, and even more than a concrete action: is one of the multiple trans-actions by which cosmological forces constantly decompensate and re-equilibrate, *a power of alliance that would be something like the fundamental state of indigenous metaphysics*.⁵⁷ Beyond Viveiros de Castro's interpretation of the diverse meanings of the cannibalistic practices he studied,⁵⁸ the impact of his work has to do with the stark contrast it highlights between this indigenous cannibalism, utterly positive and structuring, cosmologically essential (supporting in some groups societal bonds, in others the grieving process or self-constitution through the assimilation of the enemy, and even sometimes allowing for a kind of immortality) and Western neocannibalism and the voracity of overconsumption that simply destroys, annihilating not only the bodies at work but all the bodies participating – most unwillingly – of the capitalistic loop. This recent turn of the cannibal narrative will certainly guarantee the expansion of a symbol that was already culturally successful, for as Maggie Kilgour emphasizes: *the cannibal is a perfect demon for a culture based on geographic and scientific expansion and progress, which yet fears its own imperialist appetites. It is a fitting double too for the modern insular ego produced by such a cultural dream*.⁵⁹

4 Conclusive Remarks. Minor, Passive, Carnal, Cannibal: Transvaluation and the Digestive Models of Subjectivity

All this expanding, this incorporation and growth, is a search for resistance ... Let us transvalue the values ... Life is only a means to something: it is the expression of the forms of growth in power.

Friedrich Nietzsche⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 49–50.

⁵⁶ Latour, "Perspectivism 'Type' or 'Bomb'?", 2.

⁵⁷ Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 181–2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 140–4.

⁵⁹ Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism*, 244.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 174–5.

Starting with the critical use of cannibal narratives in literature and social sciences to highlight harmful aspects of Western culture, as well as with its Freudian universalization and its political revendication, I have explored the choral tale of cannibalism, not only in its explicit levels, as an insult thrown by the West to its others, or from those others to the West, or as praise and an emancipatory tool, but also in the implicit, inaudible, almost ungraspable levels of the flesh we are, of our bodies, directly touched by the cannibal allusion. For the evolving symbol cannibalism is, evokes, as shown in Bazterrica's novel and a long tradition of carnal phenomenologists, a kind of madness, a fleshiness of the human condition that overwhelms and overcomes reason and language. A senselessness that, more importantly, we cannot reject as insane. We cannot throw this cannibal in the places we use to enclose that category, for its senselessness belongs to the bodies we all are, and thus belongs to us for the mere fact of being living bodies of flesh.

Rather than stack one more interpretation of cannibal literature, paintings, or films, I have tried to search the narrative of which these are instances, that deploys and infuses, influences and alters our collective and individual sensibilities. This is what I have called *the ordinary cannibal*: a symbol that overflows philosophical and anthropological writings and permeates all kinds of cultural products, from art to media, and thus becomes more and more massively a part of ourselves; of us, who are – probably, from a Freudian perspective it is the case – already dealing with the cannibalistic relations carved on our flesh. Consequently, the cannibal goes from the remoteness of a tale and theoretical analysis, from being a distancing rhetoric dispositif to *the ordinary cannibal* that we integrate inadvertently, that we embody.

I have studied how cannibalism appears in different bibliographies not only because, as shown, among the three levels of aesthetic phenomenological analysis (vital, somatic, and cross-cultural), the level of cultural heritage is the one that better allows research to be carried out, but because I want to point also towards the vital/somatic reasoning behind these polysemic cultural narrations. In other words, I want us to try to think about the vital and the somatic levels, even if they do not invite aesthetic research as easily as cultural, symbolic, or traditional analysis does. I think that philosophical research about these two dimensions is harder not only because they inherently have a different, more complicated relationship to language than the cross-cultural dimension does (the cultural dimension being constituted mainly by oral, written, and visual narratives, i.e. linguistic phenomena), but because, in time, we have left the thematization of matter, life, and the living body to science. Humanities seem to be only authorized to reflect, again, on the cultural *meaning* of such dimensions, but cosmological and ontological discussion is not valued as a serious debate about what these *are*.

The Husserlian critique of *transcendental naïveté*,⁶¹ of the way physicalist objectivisms have to impose themselves as dogmas, as sole ontological and cosmological *truths*, is still relevant. From a phenomenological point of view, cannibalism is not only about being embodied, being a *Leib* as opposed to only a *Körper*. It is not only about being sensible and vulnerable, exposed to the elements and the other, not only about being situated historically and geographically, nor only about being always in a community, depending on a generative intersubjectivity, on our mutual bonds of care, or even on an ecological or cosmological interdependence. All these aspects are addressed with the Husserlian discussion of *Leib*, of flesh or living body, and are, certainly, better theorized with contemporary reflections on eating and by models of subjectivity such as *the gourmet ego* or *the gourmet cogito*⁶² that stress the importance of our reliance on each other, other living beings, and our environment. But the cannibal says something more: it brings us back to *our* voraciousness.

Dasein in Heidegger is never hungry,⁶³ Levinas correctly says, and the critique of the solipsistic, intellectualized or spiritualized, even ontologized models of subjectivity is categorically necessary, for, as Corine Pelluchon explains, upon them relies *the representation of subjects in competition with one another in their mastery or domination of the ambient world, which becomes the base from which contractual obligations are defined*.⁶⁴ The idea of cannibalism talks about something else, not only about how we need to understand that

⁶¹ Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 193.

⁶² Pelluchon, *Nourishment*, 34.

⁶³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74.

⁶⁴ Pelluchon, *Nourishment*, 35.

we are not alone in the world and that we cannot abuse it indefinitely: that is the lesson one would give to a child. Cannibalism points towards a lesson for adults, precisely to the correlative aspect of this hunger and this nourishment, an aspect that we feel and that we know in our bodies every day or very often: the excess, the deathly face of self-preserving, self-perpetuating life. An aspect that we also need to listen to and that Levinas tried so frantically to show, always in its connection to ethical concerns.

The Levinasian subject is defined as *sensibility*, certainly, but sensibility is not only represented by eating, not only by nourishment or enjoyment, it is also referred to as contact, and contact always implies distance, a respect that allows the other to exist. If we have no contact in the mix, we eliminate alterity. Without alterity, there is no contact possible. Touching implies, even when we touch ourselves, that there is a distance between what touches and what is touched. This is the haptic direction phenomenological aesthetics must take, and this is the reason why Levinasian subjectivity is always not only enjoyment but also contact. There is no point in which enjoyment is enjoyment alone. Enjoyment is always frustrated enjoyment, and sensibility can be described thus as an alteration of enjoyment by contact:

The immediacy of the sensible is the immediacy of enjoyment and its frustration. It is the gift painfully torn up, and in the tearing up, immediately spoiling this very enjoyment. It is not a gift of the heart, but of the bread from one's mouth, of one's own mouthful of bread. ... sensibility is the for-the-other of one's own materiality; it is the immediacy or the proximity of the other. The proximity of the other is the immediate opening up for the other of the immediacy of enjoyment, the immediacy of taste ... altered by the immediacy of contact.⁶⁵

Generalizing what Clastres says of endocannibalism and considering Foucault's reflection on the meaning of the places where the deceased are put,⁶⁶ I would say that the reason why the cannibal figure is so fitting to express the idea that being a body of flesh demands for a conception of subjectivity that cannot be only alimentary or digestive but needs to be, first of all, ethical, dermal, respectful of the skin, the limits of others, is because, beyond any subtle, elevated interpretation we can give to it, the fact is that the cannibal makes alterity in its flesh – *bones and all* – disappear: *endocannibalism pushes the separation of the living and the dead to its extreme in that the former, by eating the latter, deprives them of this final anchorage in the space that the grave would constitute. There is no longer any possibility for contact between them.*⁶⁷ The importance of a *cannibal cogito*,⁶⁸ a cannibalistic model of subjectivity, is no longer only how it enriches the critique of Western culture, but how it can give us a chance to interrogate our self-reproducing and self-protective existence, beyond the question of which culture we were born in. Cannibalism captures the delicate dynamic of flesh, what we might even consider one of the most basic facts of life: the flesh needs to be nourished. It needs to consume, assimilate, and grow to keep on living, or at least to sustain itself as best as possible until inevitable death comes. But whatever forces or mechanisms keep consumption and growth at bay – highlights cannibalism – are fragile.

Innocent living can easily become voracious destruction that, ultimately, when every resource and every alterity has been ingested, when there is nothing else to extract, inevitably will turn into self-destruction, autophagy, demise, and rapid death. Cannibalism poses this seemingly odd question in a concrete existential light: How distant is the act of eating from the act of killing? How distant is consumption from self-consumption? The very moment Western culture calls for a transvaluation of traditional values, a transvaluation that is still meaningful as a foundation for the visibilization of neglected categories like the passive, the carnal, and even the ordinary, i.e. the Nietzschean moment, was precisely tributary of a reflection on growth, its driving forces, its antagonists, i.e. a reflection on power.

Because of how naturalism and essentialism have legitimized violence, the phenomenon of life itself, and thus the phenomenon of our living bodies as traversed by these forces, has been left to be thought by positivistic disciplines unable to elaborate on meaning, all the way incessantly producing it and expanding

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 74.

⁶⁶ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

⁶⁷ Clastres, *Archaeology of Violence*, 62.

⁶⁸ Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 185.

the use of the essentialist categories they create and maintain. The aesthetic reflection on the ordinary cannibal is one of the ways this topic can be recovered by the arts and the humanities.

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