

Depictions of Human Cannibalism and the Challenge They Pose to the Understanding of Animal Rights

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Abstract : Discourses about animal rights usually assume an ontological abyss between human and animal. This supposition of non-animality allows us to utilise and exploit non-humans, particularly those with commercial value, with little regard for their rights or interests. We can and do confine them, inflict painful treatments such as castration and branding, and slaughter them at an age determined only by financial considerations. This paper explores the way images and texts depicting human cannibalism reflect this deprivation of rights back onto our species and examines how this offers new perspectives on our granting or withholding of rights to farmed animals. The animals we eat – sheep, pigs, cows, chickens and a small handful of other species – are during processing de-animalised, turned into commodities, and made unrecognisable as formerly living beings. To do the same to a human requires the cannibal to enact another step – humans must first be considered as animals before they can be commodified or de-animalised. Different iterations of cannibalism in a selection of fiction and non-fiction texts will be considered: survivalism (necessitated by catastrophe or dystopian social collapse), the primitive savage of colonial discourses, and the inhuman psychopath. Each type of cannibalism shows alternative ways humans can be animalised and thereby dispossessed of both their human and animal rights. Human rights, summarised in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights as ‘life, liberty, and security of person’ are stubbornly denied to many humans, and are refused to virtually all farmed non-humans. How might this paradigm be transformed by seeing the animal victim replaced by an animalised human? People are fascinated as well as repulsed by cannibalism, as demonstrated by the upsurge of films on the subject in the last few decades. Cannibalism is, at its most basic, about envisaging and treating humans as objects: meat. It is on the dinner plate that the abyss between human and ‘animal’ is most challenged. We grasp at a conscious level that we are a species of animal and may become, if in the wrong place (e.g., shark-infested water), ‘just food’. Culturally, however, strong traditions insist that humans are much more than ‘just meat’ and deserve a better fate than torment and death. The billions of animals on death row awaiting human consumption would ask the same if they could. Depictions of cannibalism demonstrate in graphic ways that humans are animals, made of meat and that we can also be butchered and eaten. These depictions of us as having the same fleshiness as non-human animals reminds us that they have the same capacities for pain and pleasure as we do. Depictions of cannibalism, therefore, unconsciously aid in deconstructing the human/animal binary and give a unique glimpse into the often unnoticed repudiation of animal rights.

Keywords : animal rights, cannibalism, human/animal binary, objectification

Conference Title : ICAWR 2019 : International Conference on Animal Welfare and Rights

Conference Location : Paris, France

Conference Dates : April 18-19, 2019