

Man-Eating Monsters: Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture

Dina Khapaeva (Editor)

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Dina Khapaeva's edited collection on cannibalism, monsters that eat people and anthropocentrism in popular culture is fascinating if, like many edited collections, somewhat prohibitively priced at £60. The book is the final instalment of a trilogy of texts by Khapaeva on the shifting place of nightmares, monsters and humans in the popular imagination, the first two of which were monographs. *Nightmare: From Literary Experiments to Cultural Projects* (2012) examined the role of the nightmare in a range of established classic literary texts by authors including Fyodor Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann and H.P. Lovecraft and considered the increasing prevalence in popular culture of novels, films and video games that include the experience of 'being in a nightmare'. The second in the trilogy, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (2017), sees Khapaeva set out the notion of a 'cult of death' in contemporary Western culture (a moniker under which, for Khapaeva, Russia is included, challenging a range of established notions about the construction of 'the west'). *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (2017) sets out an argument developed here in *Man-Eating Monsters: Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture* (2019): that what many cultural texts and practices, from the popularity of Halloween, dark tourism and the rise of death studies in academia, to visual and literary texts in which the sympathetic protagonist is a serial killer or in some other way monstrous, all indicate is a disillusionment with being human.

Man-Eating Monsters: Anthropocentrism and Popular Culture (2019) was 'envisioned as a critical contribution to the rapidly developing field of food studies' (18). Its insights will also be relevant to scholars of literature, film, television, gaming, death studies, theory and more. As the foreword by Jacque Lynn Foltyn explains, 'presenting humans as food is yet another way to "consume" dying, death, and the dead in the information-entertainment-industrial complex' (xiii) and, as such, the analysis offered in this collection will have widespread relevance. One of the text's central arguments, emphasised in particular

in the introduction and Khapaeva's own chapter 'Eaten in Jurassic World: Antihumanism and Popular Culture', focuses on the ways in which 'popular culture is eroding the borders between monsters, humans, and animals', exploring 'how this affects our basic food taboo on eating humans' (2). Examining the context in which mass culture representations of humans as food have become so popular, she sets out a trend referred to as the 'multidimensional cultural movement thanatopathia' (9), a movement that has been central to redefining through popular culture and social practices the 'place of humans in the spectrum of species', essentially redefining understandings of 'humanism and humanity in the secular value system' (9). In particular, she connects a rejection of human exceptionalism with French theory and with the animal rights movement, both of which she positions as having led to a 'commodified antihumanism' (9). A rejection of human exceptionalism is identified as grounded in a philosophical critique of humanism, in particular the notion of 'the death of the subject'. Khapaeva argues that this critique has been diluted, commodified and stripped of critical potential in popular culture, resulting in a fascination with ghosts, vampires, cannibals and serial killers in popular entertainment. A rejection of the human, she argues, has led to the veneration of monsters and the undead in the popular imagination, to a contempt for what it is to be human, and to the normalisation of representations of humans as consumable. Kelly Doyle's chapter, entitled 'Edible Humans: Undermining the Human in *The Walking Dead* and Other Zombie Television', also offers thought-provoking engagement with the idea that rather than reifying the human, zombie television suggests a 'culture awakening to the frailty of the human figure, and thus a rethinking anthropocentrism, nonhuman subjectivity, and the nuances of eating/being eaten once the boundary between animals, zombies, and humans are shown to be permeable' (98).

The collections also offers a study of Andrey Platonov's short story *Rubbish Wind* by Svetlana Teareva, addressing the trope of cannibalism in Soviet literature in the 1930s and exploring the cannibal as metaphor. A chapter by Sami Pihlström extends a philosophical discussion of what it might mean when monsters eat people. He examines the category of the monster and argues, using Levinas, that any engagement with liminal monsters in fiction is tied to the 'very possibility of an ethical response to otherness' (32). Paul Freedman's chapter, in a fascinating study of the human consumptions of Terrapin, argues that in the history of culture, monsters and food have often gone together, revealing how 'what is a delicacy in one period can be forgotten or regarded as monstrous in a later one' (51). He emphasises that it is not only man-eating monsters that can be positioned as monstrous, but that humans can be understood as monstrous for what they eat. In her chapter, recognised

Bram Stoker expert Carol Senf takes the opportunity to look at *Dracula* afresh through the lens of food. She raises challenging questions about the ways in which Dracula's treatment of humans as cattle complicates human consumption of animals and emphasises the ways in which accusations of cannibalism have been used in colonial contexts to justify persecution. Throughout this collection, the reader is encouraged to reflect on what it means to be a monster. Whether they are the ones doing the eating, or they are being eaten, humans certainly are not exempt from the category of monstrous.

References

- Khapaeva, D. (2012) *Nightmare: From literary experiments to cultural project*. Leiden: Brill.
- Khaphaeva, D. (2017) *The celebration of death in contemporary culture*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.