

Writing the *Fleischgeist*

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Abstract: *This essay has two primary aims: 1) to provide an introductory definition of the concept of the fleischgeist and 2) outline what it means for novelists to ‘write the fleischgeist’. This essay emerges from my own desire, as a writer of fiction, to consider how, practically, I can expose and explore interconnections between carnist and misogynistic violence without lapsing into a conceptual perpetuation of such violence. Coupled with this practical desire is the recognition that there is a rich body of modern and contemporary fiction that makes visible some ways in which the logic of carnivorous patriarchy (or, carnophallogocentrism) plays across histories, cultures, literatures and in everyday life. It is my view that some novels write the fleischgeist. In the following essay I consider what this phrase, writing the fleischgeist, means. Then I sketch out what the fleischgeist is, and offer examples of the way it manifests in everyday life and works of art. Finally, I turn to Deborah Levy’s experimental novel, *Diary of a Steak* (1997), as an example of a contemporary work of avant-garde fiction that writes the fleischgeist. I advocate for Levy’s use of the avant-garde narrative strategy of collage as a particularly powerful technique that illuminates multivalent perspectives on shared human-animal suffering that conventional tools of representation (and their governing logics of linear thought) elide. This essay concludes by suggesting that being aware of the fleischgeist as a complex and nuanced cultural phenomenon can allow writers to expose and explore knots of violence that bind humans to other species, and each other, in relations of suffering.*

Keywords: *Fleischgeist, the art of carnism, Deborah Levy, *Diary of a Steak**

To speak of the *fleischgeist* is to speak of a social and cultural phenomenon wherein humans are haunted by the violence of intensive animal agriculture. What goes on in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and abattoirs ghost people with a deep philosophical disturbance and so they struggle between acknowledgement of the violence that produces meat and a refusal to look at the conditions in which ‘food’ animals are born, raised and killed. Coined by Amy Standen and Sasha Wizansky, editors of short-lived magazine *meatpaper*, the term *fleischgeist* also acknowledges that there is a frenzied spirit in the air and in our collective consciousness – a meat mania. With articles that examine meat art, the rise of meat glue, whole-animal butchery challenges, rock star butchers, and the way globalised meat markets identify nations as either ‘dark meat’ or ‘light meat’ countries, *meatpaper* stands as testament to the fact that the flesh of other species is used as a metaphor for violence between humans, as art objects, food source, and symbol of national, sexual and gender identities. To read the magazine’s twenty issues is to come face-to-face with the world as a meatscape. Riffing off Hegel’s concept of the *zeitgeist*, Standen and Wizansky define the term *fleischgeist* as the dominant spirit of our times, characterised by a ‘meat consciousness’ fuelled simultaneously by ethical considerations and instrumental logic.

Novels that write the *fleischgeist* illuminate these contradictions and complexities without trying to resolve or dissolve them. Such novels contain a number of interconnected narrative trends or traits. It would be a mistake to suggest that the following provides a definitive list of all of them, but it is a start for now. The first is that they expose and explore carnist violence in complex and nuanced ways. The second is that they illuminate means by which such violence intersects with, and reinforces, other kinds of institutionalised oppression and exploitation. The third is their insistence that species other than humans are beings who share in, and co-constitute, the stories of our lives. Four, they identify and explore multivalent ways in which the bodies of animals and humans come to stand as metaphors for one another in practices of oppression. Finally, they recognise and insist upon other species as communicative subjects. Importantly, some novels that write the *fleischgeist* acknowledge meat as a communicative subject. With all this in mind, it is important to be clear that to write the *fleischgeist* is to refuse to perpetuate the structure of the ‘absent referent’ as defined by Carol J. Adams (1990). While not every novel needs to fulfil all of the above to be considered as writing the *fleischgeist*, they do, at least to my mind, need to address one or two of these traits so that

the lines of species difference and commonality are offered up to readers as narrative pathways, not boundaries.

Levy's novel *Diary of a Steak* is an exemplary instance of this because it engages in a number of the above strategies. In that book we meet a steak called Buttercup who has been carved off a calf infected with mad cow disease (a lethal neurological disease otherwise known as BSE). As she sits in the window of a butcher shop, waiting to be bought (she will eventually be turned into minced meat), she gives an account of the public and political fear and outrage that ensued when Britons came to learn that BSE was not only horrendous and deadly to cows but also to humans. Employing the trope of the speaking meat, first theorised by Australian ecophilosopher Val Plumwood (2014), Levy grafts this twentieth-century story of neurological disease onto a narrative that recalls the lives of women in nineteenth century asylums in Britain and France. In this way Levy presents a creaturely re-writing of a history of hysteria. Now, despite the fact that hysteria has a four thousand year old history as a mental disorder attributable to women (Tasca et al.), Levy reframes hysteria so that it reads more like a psycho-social condition that is the preserve of anxious virility and paranoid nationalism. Meat, she reveals, functions as remedy to soothe and restore unstable identities in times of crisis. And she does all this in a darkly humorous, forty-nine page novel.

Published directly after the British BSE outbreak, *Diary of a Steak* fragments and juxtaposes the authorised political, moral, medical, sexual and journalistic discourses that responded to the outbreak, through the avant-garde strategy of collage. In doing so, Levy connects the metaphor of hysteria, which was deployed by politicians and journalists in Britain to describe public responses to the BSE outbreak, to the medical history of 'feminine hysteria'.

As has already been said, the *fleischgeist* is wracked with ambivalence. On the one hand it dictates meat-eating practices as expressions of power, crucial to the development and maintenance of individual and community identities. On the other hand, it is comprised of counter-hegemonic practices (such as veganism) that interrupt and challenge patterns of carnivorous dominance and subordination. The *fleischgeist* is, therefore, made up of embodied acts and cultural artefacts that perform and chart the complexities and contours of carnophallogocentrism, as defined by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, and carnism as defined by psychologist Melanie Joy.

This two-way movement can be illustrated in a number of different ways. For example, television programs such as the BBC's *Kill it, Cook it, Eat it* play into Western culture's renewed nostalgia for pastoral ideals. It does so by promoting itself as a show that traces the journey of farm animals from pasture to plate. Here, pastoral lands are not recalled as once being colonial frontiers brought about in contexts of ethical and ecological liquidation, nor are they shown to be the kind of apocalypse sheds governed by a complex politics of sight that Timothy Pachirat describes in *Every Twelve Seconds*. Rather, the abattoirs on display here are marketed as small family-run 'idylls'.

Yet, pushing against this desire to meet one's meat (or to purchase grass-fed, free range and hormone-free meat) is the acknowledgement of humanity's 'being toward meat'. As is now familiar to many, this concept, espoused by philosopher Matthew Calarco in his essay 'Being toward meat: anthropocentrism, indistinction, and veganism', describes the reality that the flesh of humans is always potentially meat for others. Rather than seek identification between humans and other species according to some 'proper attribute that belongs to the human', Calarco says, 'the notions of indistinction and meat ... allows us to see both human and animals as being caught up beyond their control in a shared space of exposed embodiment' (423). Throughout this essay, Calarco traces the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose work 'naturalises' and challenges the ranking of human intellect – including linguistic and cognitive 'abilities', 'by demonstrating their ultimate origins in human *inferiority* to other animals species' (421). Calarco argues that the anthropocentric perspective that *falsely* places the human at the centre of and above all other life on earth provides a limited perspective through which humans have tended to view the world. Challenging this anthropocentric frame offers new potentialities for understanding the possibilities for relationships between species, but it also offers profound prospects for the production of new kinds of art. This displacement offers de-anthropomorphised, de-deified human beings an infinite number of 'other-than-human' perspectives.

Going deeper into this idea, Calarco looks to the work of Francis Bacon via French philosopher Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, Bacon's paintings present a vision of human flesh caught in a zone of 'indistinction'. As such, Calarco writes, they are imbued with the power to develop and create a new concept of *meat*. This new concept understands meat as a 'zone of shared, exposed embodiment' (423). As Calarco points out, he had elsewhere developed this

view into a kind of advocacy for the way veganism can be cultivated as a practice of ‘being toward meat’. To elaborate this point, he turns to the work of Val Plumwood. In essays like ‘Being-Prey’ (2000) and ‘Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death’ (2008), Plumwood reflects on the way personal encounters with death pose radical challenges to human exceptionalism. Frameworks of subjectivity, she argues in ‘Being Prey’, are revealed to us in the instant we are confronted with death in literal and personal ways. In this essay she recounts her experience of being taken for three death rolls by a crocodile while canoeing in Kakadu’s paperbark wetlands. When she finally escaped from the jaws of the crocodile, by clawing her way up the river’s embankment, she came to see parts of her own fat, muscle and sinew erupting from her left thigh. After recounting this story to herself and others for almost a decade, she came to realise that in these moments her ‘narrative self’ had been radically inverted. While previously she had almost entirely framed her view of the world from the ‘inside out’, she now came to see herself from the point of view of the crocodile – she had always, potentially, been a piece of meat.

Of course, there is a rich history of writers who artistically engage in these kinds of radical subjective inversions. Often such writers are characterised as obscene, avant-garde or revolutionary. Poet and essayist, Anne Le Brun (2000) identifies the Marquis de Sade, Alfred Jarry and Apollinaire as chief among those who have, historically, demonstrated exceptional talents in jolting readers to see ‘with a single glance the immense plains of crime’ that humans commit in order to preserve the falsehoods of ‘those partial world views’ (62) (such as hierarchies of moral importance) to which humans habitually cling. She defines these instances as a kind of ‘poetic outrageousness’, a narrative technique imbued with the power of rupture. In other words, it challenges humanisms’ horizons of importance by tearing apart the ‘mesh of our customary ways of seeing’ (63). It is fascinating to me that Le Brun suggests that within the history of bellicose avant-gardism one can find something distinctly (if distantly) akin to certain kinds of animal activism.

In her book *Women, Destruction and the Avant-Garde: A Paradigm for Animal Liberation*, critical animal studies scholar Kim Socha argues that avant-garde artistic practices connect with, and can even lead to, animal liberationist aims. What strikes me as interesting is that historic avant-gardes, such as surrealism, overflow with carnist and misogynistic observations. Nevertheless, Socha points out that surrealism’s critique of rationalist

philosophies, the atrocities of war, and their founding cries for ‘freedom’ intersect with the aims of animal activists.

For Socha, contemporary radical animal liberationist performance protests draw on some of the ‘shock and awe’ tactics (as well as some of the more absurd elements) of surrealism’s strategies. She also writes that surrealism utilised visions of animals as metaphors for the human imagination and cites Breton’s reference to the human imagination caged by the logic of rationalist philosophers. Of course, animal liberationists echo this figurative critique in a factual way. But I am not sure why Socha does not acknowledge Breton’s metaphor as bearing a more intimate relationship to figurative instrumentalism. In the introduction to her book she points out that surrealists often used images of animal slaughter as metaphors for violence against human animals.

For example, in issue 6 of *DOCUMENTS*, an ethnographic and arts journal published for a short time by Georges Bataille, there appears an image by surrealist photographer Eli Lotar. The picture, taken at La Villette Abattoirs on the outskirts of Paris, shows a considerable number of severed cow legs leaning against a wall. In *DOCUMENTS* these severed legs are said to resemble regimented soldiers standing in line. In her assessment, Socha provides an alternate reading: female prostitutes standing in a dark alley, their hourglass figures perched above high-heeled shoes or unnaturally high arches. But, no matter what metaphoric meaning a viewer derives from this image, Socha concludes, what is contained here is now, and will always be, severed cows legs. To foreground metaphors for human sacrifice and commodification in this very literal sign of cow death is to cut cows off from the reality of their bodies and the violence of their dismemberment. In this way, she shows that historic avant-garde artists had a tendency to erase animals ‘as animals’ from their political and aesthetic critiques of the horrors of the twentieth-century. To further this point it is worth considering this loose lineage of photographic works: from the abattoir photographs of Eli Lotar (1929) to the fashion photography of Guy Bourdain (1955) of models dressed in the hats of a famous French milliner posing in front of decapitated cows and disembowelled rabbits; and, more recently the fashion photography of Steven Klein who has filled the pages of *L’Uomo Vogue* with glossy images of vampiric models standing around in Calvin Klein underwear looking glum beside animal flanks hanging in slaughterhouse cool rooms.

I believe these images raise questions about human violence, the meaning of meat, sacrifice and commodification. But they do so while remaining firmly committed to what Adams calls ‘the texts of meat’ (1990) – narratives that perpetuate the structure of the absent referent. Given that ‘corpse chic’ (see Kelly Oliver’s *Hunting Girls*) appears to be governing the twenty-first century as the latest fashion trend, Klein’s images cannot be viewed only as works of avant-garde photography. Rather, they illustrate just how mainstream historic avant-garde’s carnist aesthetics and worldviews have become.

For Socha, images such as Lotar’s cannot erase the ‘lingering back-story of animal slaughter’ (1). And so, she argues, there is a direct link between historic avant-gardes and the animal liberation movement (ALM): both challenge others to look at the world differently. As the ALM is at the forefront of questioning social and cultural assumptions regarding the treatment of animals, she argues that it is a form of avant-garde — a complex and perhaps unexpected form, but a form nonetheless.

Is it enough to have animal slaughter remain a backstory? I do not think so. Nor do I want to pursue the erroneous idea that Socha thinks so either. Rather, she argues for the avant-garde as a paradigm for the animal liberation movement to take up. Although her primary focus is on human animals, she acknowledges those points (and there are many) when violence towards humans is either prefigured by, or is supported by, violence towards other species. When she turns to consider the work of several women avant-gardists – Mina Loy, Valerie Solanas, Kate Millet and Katherine Dunn – she identifies the way women have subverted avant-garde aesthetics in order to question misogynistic assumptions contained within the history of avant-garde art. Theatre and performance studies scholar, James M. Harding, joins Socha in a chorus of contemporary voices who rightly claim that vanguard arts have, historically, erased women ‘as women’. Rather they were treated as symbolic laboratories: dreams, erotic muses, dark abysses, portals to nature, nature *itself*, and even slabs of meat. Similarly, the body-made-meat was used as a kind of metaphor factory to churn out narratives of human suffering. However, as Harding argues, avant-garde practices that pave feminist lines of enquiry level important challenges to the misogynist histories of avant-garde art and everyday life.

In *Diary of a Steak*, Deborah Levy raises questions of sacrifice and commodification while refusing to remain committed to the old codes of the texts of meat. In what might be

termed an ecofeminist critique, Levy shines a light on the fact that animals, in avant-garde art and everyday life, are often erased ‘as animals’.

As writer and cultural critic, Maggie Nelson, points out in her collection of essays, *The Art of Cruelty*, humans are captivated by the vision of ‘our eventual “becoming object” – of our (live) flesh one day turning into (dead) meat’ (175). This, she says, is a ‘shadow’ that follows us throughout our lives. Nelson’s argument remains focused on the ‘meatification’ of humans in pornography, splatter films, the stories of Franz Kafka, as well as the paintings of Francis Bacon. But for Nelson the work of German artist Otto Dix, whose violent paintings dramatise the body-made-meat in war, gives her the sense that we are all in the ‘situation of meat’, together. Clearly, for Nelson, it is the spectre of *humans* becoming meat that throws its shadow over us, not, the endless procession of becoming meat that gives shape to the long shadow cast by the animal-industrial complex.

The concept of *fleischgeist* intersects with Nelson’s critique in the fleeting and flickering moments she acknowledges that the cruelties with which humans are so transfixed are nurtured (and surpassed) by the intensity of bloodshed that takes place in slaughterhouses all around the world, every day. Literally meaning ‘flesh ghost’ or ‘meat spirit’, *fleischgeist* describes a ghosting, a haunting, that perturbs meat-eaters by lingering as the backstory in their conscience. The shadow Nelson talks of is as much a haunting darkness as it is a shadow of denial. At least, this is the proposition offered by Sue Coe in her illustration *Modern Man Followed by the Ghosts of His Meat* (1990). This image depicts a man with a look of chill-panic on his face gripping a McDonalds bag while a spectral flow of pigs, chickens, cows and goats follow behind him. These are the spectres of those who are routinely defaced, made absent referents to their own bodies in the animal-industrial complex – that network of slaughter now so routinised as to seem, to most, to be necessary.

The ambivalence that defines the *fleischgeist* needs to be more widely viewed from this kind of quotidian perspective. A 2010 Newspoll phone survey commissioned by the Vegetarian & Vegan Society of Queensland reveals that the tension between knowing and refusing to look at what goes on in slaughterhouses is pervasive. The survey found that while 99% of Australians interviewed were against animal cruelty, 98% ate animals and fish that came from intensive farming practices. Similarly, while Australia’s Sustainable Table website recognises that people

living in countries like Australia eat roughly their own weight in meat each year, statistics recently released by market research company, Roy Morgan (2016), reveal a slow but steady escalation of people adopting meat-free or meat-minimal diets.

Of course, pastoralism has played a significant part of Australia's colonial history, which also means it plays a significant part in the maintenance of Australia's national identities. The rhetoric of 'lamb nationalism' – patriotism centred around the idea that diverse peoples can come together over a favoured meat – is applauded, in often disturbing ways, in the Meat & Livestock Australia's 'Australia Day Lamb' advertisements. The 'Operation Boomerang' campaign (2016) shows soldiers travelling across the world to bring Australians (mostly men) home so they can enjoy a 'proper' barbeque. Despite the fact that it shows military men setting fire to the house of one Australian man who outed himself as a vegan, this ad received the prestigious 'TV Ad of the Year' award. And this follows on from a decade of Sam Kekovich's warnings of 'unAustralianism', urging all Australians to eat lamb.

As vegan scholar Laura Wright identifies in her 2015 analysis of veganism in post-9/11 United States, in an era where nations are strengthening border protection and bidding for greater social and cultural hegemony, there is a renewed strengthening of discourses espousing masculinity, virility and meat-eating as core values. In her Foreword to Wright's study, Adams drives this point home when she says:

After 9/11 the media hyped John Wayne-like masculinity, Superman-like powers, and the hypervirility of rescuers and politicians. Thus we learned that, after the World Trade Centre towers fell, the first meal Mayor Rudy Giuliani wolfed down was a sandwich made of 'meats that sweat' (Faludi 49). (xii).

The collapse of the World Trade Centre towers and George W. Bush's 'us or them speech' – 'Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.' (Bush, cited in Wright, 36) – that proclaimed his so-called war on terror stand as culturally significant moments which sparked a backlash against all identities that did not fit into certain stereotypical American values. 'In the post-9/11 moment,' Wright observes, 'the choice to be a vegan meant to step outside of the confines of what constituted an agreed-upon 'American' identity' (31).

I read Wright's work as acknowledging that the culinary zeitgeist as *fleischgeist* is foundational to the way cultures remember (re-member) themselves as a nation in times of crisis. Levy's novel exposes and parodies this kind of paranoid nationalism as it erupted in response to Britain's BSE outbreak.

As Buttercup, *Diary's* eponymous steak, sits on a bed of plastic parsley in the window of Borkowski's Elite Meats, she recounts a British Minister's national address:

Wednesday. am. (birds singing in Elite Meats deep freeze)

The Minister from Whitebait has promised
 Europa he will do everything in his power to
 Avoid lunacy in the English herd –

He made a speech

Tell the Greeks.

Tell Luxembourg

Tell the Portuguese they're

Tell the French

Tell the Italians their gnocci has a mental
 disorder

And the Danish they've lost the plot

The Neverlands

The Germans and their bratwurst holograms

Tell the Spanish about their poppies salamis

Tell Belgium they're silly

[...]

Tell Poland they're homosexual

Don't cry, please don't cry

[...]

Tell the world we're proud of our hotels and
 bovine vertebral columns (12-13)

Political action is staged here as a kind of pathological, nationalistic and carnist discoursing – a mad listing of butchered thoughts. Each line, as an individual unit of meaning, satirises ‘rational’ political rhetoric. This accumulation of half-thoughts maps the Minister’s unconscious association of meat as symbol and embodiment of nationalism, virile masculinity and heterosexual identity. Exposing these associations, Levy ironises the Minister’s speech so it becomes a kind of ecological agitprop.

Since the 1980s, anxieties over mad cow disease *had* nibbled away at the consciousness of the British beef-eating population until, in 1996, the British government conceded that whatever was making cows sick could infect other species, including humans. Recounting the events of these years, cultural historian Harriet Ritvo writes that socially and politically Britons were wracked with uncertainty and indecision over what to do about the outbreak. While in 1990 the Minister of Agriculture was broadcast feeding his four-year-old daughter a hamburger (a product which had attracted particular suspicion as it was filled with British beef products of ‘varied derivation’ (Ritvo, 115)), governments around the world were taking decisive stands and banning the importation of British beef. If, initially, consumers ‘expressed their concern with their feet, leaving steaks and joints to languish on the shelves of supermarkets and butcher shops’ (Ritvo 113), they not only quickly resumed consumption but, as animal studies scholar Robert McKay writes, some even found humour in images of ‘deranged cows stumbling and thudding into the ground in a muddy farmyard’ (145). But, as McKay goes on to point out, with the announcement that there was a likely link between BSE and a new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), a human disease exhibiting the same shocking symptoms as BSE, feelings of surety suddenly collapsed into a fear of contagion. This produced what is now commonly described as a kind of hysteria.

In his article, ‘BSE, Hysteria, and the Representation of Animal Death: Deborah Levy’s *Diary of a Steak*’ McKay argues that Levy’s novel exposes the absent referent in the British narratives of BSE and hysteria. He rightly points out that the already-diseased sheep and cows fed into the stock feed chain, which produced the BSE outbreak, were cut off from the media and journalistic narratives which, rather, focused on public health scares, major economic disasters and political scandals. Following on from this, he draws parallels between the experience of women during the height of psychoanalysis’s explorations of hysteria during the mid-nineteenth century and the experience of cows infected with BSE. For McKay, Levy’s work

demands her readers take note of a creaturely protest and poetics. And this, he argues, brings the reader into an attentive dialogue with Levy's ethical imagination. While McKay focuses on Levy's use of intertextual citation and parodic mimicry, I want to consider Levy's use of the avant-garde strategy of collage. It is my reading that Levy deploys textual collage so as to challenge the sexual politics of meat, the hystericised politics of mad cow disease, the animalising politics of the nineteenth century asylums, and the misogynistic and carnist politics of much historic avant-garde art.

Collage is an avant-garde aesthetic practice that brings together multiple 'items' and meanings into radical juxtaposition. Its trick is to refuse to suppress the alterity of the elements united in juxtaposition. In this way, every element in a collage maintains a kind of double function. As Marjorie Perloff writes, collage functions through coordination rather than subordination, likeness and difference rather than logic or sequence. In this way, collage avoids what McKay calls that 'age-old patriarchal gesture' (153) of equating women and animals.

In the following passage Levy exercises the subversive potential of textual fragmentation and collage by fictionalising and intertextually-citing the speech of famous hysterics such as Dora, Anna O. and Augustine. She embeds them into Buttercup's heteroglossic barrage. Through this tactic, Buttercup's inheritance of the 'hystories' of Britain's Colney Hatch lunatic asylum and the famous Sâlpêtrière in France becomes visible. The 'hystories' in *Diary of a Steak* are presented as first-person accounts often written in a visibly smaller font-size. They incessantly undermine the blazing pronouncements of nineteenth and twentieth century's grand psychological narratives:

Thursday (again)

DARWINIAN PSYCHIATRY

why immoral behaviour is linked to the shape of my head

I am Darwin. take that nana out of the fruit bowl

I am not nuts.

The Darwinian model for female mad immoral

behaviour suggested a link to hereditary causes (19)

As a parodic re-writing of a case study in the analysis of hysteria, Levy juxtaposes highly satirical political dispatches regarding the BSE outbreak with psychiatric discourses:

Fax the minister from Whitebait. Urgent.

A directive To the Europa Union.

From: Buttercup O.

‘The English herd is suffering from repressed emotion emotion. The herd will from now now have the intellectual companionship of of leading English vets

Dr Bolognese

who will explore the phenomenon of analytic transference transference with the heritage.

Each member of the herd will be encouraged to take the English talking Cure (36)

These montages simultaneously merge and stratify discourses, but refuse hierarchical delineation. Across the novel, Levy’s performative embodiment of the intersection of patriarchal and carnivorous practices becomes more overt. In the following passage, Levy’s pastiche speaks of a kind of compensation offered to male farmers affected by the BSE outbreak that relies on the commodification, spectacularisation, exploitation and oppressive representation of women and animals,

The Minister is proud to tell the world press

That the newly furnished Farmer’s Bar ‘The Hare

Lip Lip Lip Lip Girls Girls Girls sexy’ in Somerset has been guest visited by an internationally renowned stand up comic (40)

As if the reader, along with Buttercup, has suddenly slipped into the new Farmer's Bar/peepshow, we hear a rapid fire routine of sexist and speciest one liners delivered by the comedian 'to rally the depressed [...] /gentlemen farmers out of/defeat and defiance' (40),

'How do you know
when a woman really loves you? She rubs her
head on your gatepost every morning!' 'What's
the difference between BSE and PMT? At least
you can incinerate BSE!!' (40)

Levy mobilises the farmer's gatepost as a phallic signifier while aligning female biological functions with BSE, a degenerative disease. This comic routine extrapolates the etymological history of the word hysteria with its roots in the Greek, *hysteria*, the word for womb, and points to Western culture's history of pathologising female corporeality. Giving another chilling edge to the documentary nature of *Diary of a Steak* is the final line quoted above. It points to the real-life referent of the mass slaughters undertaken in response to BSE.

As Buttercup re-members historic, multi-species brutalities as part of a 'cathartic method' the text unfolds across an experimental literary space that is both silenced and outlawed within carnophallogocentric culture. In a subversion of the instrumental logic that produces the conditions of her reduction – from lively being to a piece of meat – Buttercup's heteroglossic speech reveals an expanded (and expansive) trans-species, multi-temporal point of view. The spectacularisation of cows infected with BSE foaming at the mouth, staggering and falling over are, in Levy's text, inter-illuminated by the psychiatric practices of French psychologist Jean-Martin Charcot who famously exhibited his swooning patients for amphitheatres filled with authors, journalists, actors and actresses. At these sessions the finale would be the presentation of a woman's full hysterical seizure.

By producing clashing juxtapositions, the above passages illuminate that which conventional tools of representation (and their governing logics of linear thought) elide. This leads me to recognise a difference between the literal and conceptual cutting that produces the

absent referent (and which Adams rails against in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*) and the aesthetic mincing Levy takes up in *Diary of a Steak*.

Like other contemporary vegan scholars and ecofeminists, my understanding of the sexual politics of meat has been founded on Adams' work. However, when it comes to thinking about the carnist politics of novels my position deviates from much of what Adams lays out in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. In that germinal work Adams puts forward a number of suggestions for how writers can, and do, counteract the on-going literal and figurative dismemberment of women and animals. She argues that refusal to engage in politics and aesthetics of dismemberment lies at the heart of feminist-vegetarian acts of writing. Rather, she calls for writers to re-member the words and bodies of feminism, vegetarianism, women and animals. For Adams, texts that re-member are part of on-going work to break the old codes of 'the texts of meat' (170). Desire to maintain these old codes lead to producing texts and reading practices of dismemberment.

Texts are dismembered, she writes, when they are cut off from their cultural context; refused a place in the literary canon; and, when the meanings of vegetarianism or vegetarian characters are ignored. To further this point, Adams draws on feminist critics who argue that 'violation' has occurred in texts 'through the use of violent imagery.' (84) Making a series of connections between the way feminists analyse the 'fate of women's texts' and the way vegetarians or vegans see 'the fate of the animal' she concludes that there is, therefore, 'a parallel in wanting to preserve the integrity of an original text and being a vegetarian.' (85)

Distinct to this, the aesthetic cut required to produce textual collage is not an end in itself – it is a destabilising technique that contributes to the larger aesthetic task of challenging systems of representation as well as the biases that seek to maintain cultural hegemony. Aesthetics has the potential to make us sensitive to that which we were not previously aware of. In *Diary of a Steak* the hegemony undercut is carnivorous patriarchy. The purpose of textual collage in Levy's novel is to assemble so-called neutral or uncontested words, phrases or speech patterns in such a way as to reveal the underlying biases or meanings that afford them their cultural value.

Collage calls to attention what often remains unacknowledged and unaccounted for in conventional representations and logic (and this includes what remains unacknowledged in the

history of male avant-garde artistic practice). Levy has demonstrated how collage functions to recuperate the absent referent from obscurity. My departure from Adams' argument against certain kinds of cutting can be summarised like this: without cuts there is no collage. But, it is equally important to acknowledge that my argument here is offered as an addition to Adams' work, not as a substitute. So, while I do not disagree with her logic, I find that it omits an important part of the history of feminist writing practices: their vanguard use of textual fragmentation and even the deployment of aesthetic cutting in order to produce radical juxtapositions. Levy's novel *Diary of a Steak* deploys aesthetic textual fragmentation and juxtaposition in ways that make complex critiques of literal and figurative violence done to women and animals. Moreover, Levy's novel does this by exploring and exposing acts of figurative and literal violence that take real life events as their referents.

I return finally to Maggie Nelson, for whom there is a power in the way certain works of art express the violence that marks human interactions with others. She puts forward the idea that the 'art of cruelty' offers unpredictable insights into the ways humans imprison themselves and others in relations of suffering. Focusing on humanity's relations of suffering to other species, writing the *fleischgeist* moves towards a similar end. But, why, when the world is so overfull with literal and figurative acts of violence against our animal others should a vegan scholar contemplate the art of carnism? Is it possible (or even worthwhile) considering these questions on a broader literary scale? For example, can it be argued that Brett Easton Ellis' novel *American Psycho* (1991) – wherein the raw intensity of virile masculinity meets unfettered capitalism in a 399-page inventory of bodies-made-meat – perpetuates ontologies of dismemberment? While Angela Carter's picaresque novel, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) – which is filled with intertextually-driven scenes of rape and cannibalism, which stand as testimony to the overflowing archives of figurative violence done to women and animals in some of Western culture's 'greatest' literary works – counters such violence? Is this question obnoxious? Is it redundant? Is it both? Probably. But I am drawn to it nonetheless because, like Nelson, I think some writers have the capacity to illuminate ways human identities are rooted in, and maintained by, practices of suffering. Looking to novels like Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2014) or Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* (2007), I find some writers use violence to effectively draw attention to violence that has been (and remains) inadequately attended to. But that is not to say these novels offer clarity of thought to the violence subtending

everyday life. For anyone who has read Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* will know Carter is not interested in moralising or making violence meaningful. The end of this book threw me back into the world feeling bloated by violence; it was as if I had eaten poisonous mushrooms. I had a similar response to Levy's novel. I exited that book knowing much had been illuminated, nothing simplified.

Suffering caused by humans to other species is not the main focus of the majority of novels, even as the arts are increasingly addressing issues of climate crisis, *and*, despite the fact that the unending file of animals being shoved into abattoirs all over the world could be contemplated *endlessly*. Sadly there are many examples of home-made representations of carnist violence that could, and must be, critically contemplated: Youtube videos of men hacking the velvety antlers off a live and alert stag in front of his friends, for instance. Undoubtedly, such acts form a crucial part of the *fleischgeist* and cannot go unacknowledged. But such acts also belong to a particular species of violence that, for me, carries such an intensity of destruction as to render thought impossible. Instead, I turn to novels that expose and explore the violence of carnivorous patriarchy. I have characterised novels that drive me to think more deeply about violence (and the knots of violence that maintain relations of suffering) as novels that write the *fleischgeist*. By identifying such a phenomenon I hope to have introduced writers to a concept that might help them address carnist and misogynistic violence in works of fiction.

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