

## Vegan Cinema

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In Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), Charlie's bumbling factory worker is harnessed to the experimental Billows Feeding Machine, "a practical device which automatically feeds your men while at work."<sup>1</sup> The machine, the film's "mechanical salesman" (a record player) announces, "will eliminate the lunch hour, increase your production, and decrease your overhead" by automating the activity of eating. Surrounded by suited executives, Charlie, in dungarees, is fed by the machine. Soon enough, however, the device short circuits, speeds up and spatters, causing culinary mayhem. The scene rails against the automation of the intimate act of eating. If automation transforms vital acts of nourishment into fuelling exercises by assimilating the individual into the assembly line of production and consumption, the same could be said of the cinema as a system whose heavily processed product is served up for mass consumption for maximum efficiency and profit. *Modern Times* is, then, partly a critique of film, most notably, perhaps, in its ambivalence towards sound technology, which, nearly a decade after the introduction of the talkies, Chaplin selectively and begrudgingly adopts.

### I. Cinema and devouring

The cinema utilizes the world as its raw material, framing, editing, and polishing it in post-production for audience consumption. The camera is no dispassionate observer. The objects it holds in its sights are baited, elicited, and entered into the world within the frame. Cinematic objects become vehicles of meaning, conductors of feeling, reflective surfaces onto which viewers project their own desires, caught up in the collective urges and aches of the time. Strapped to the machine, Chaplin's hapless employee becomes a proxy for the cinemagoer,

who, like the fictional Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick, 1971) or Joe Frady in *The Parallax View* (Pakula, 1974), is placed in front of the screen and fed images and sounds.

But the viewer is no passive victim. As psychoanalytical and feminist film theorists have shown, looking in the cinema is inextricably linked to acts of powered consumption. The objects of sight are consumed in what Sartre described as “the double meaning of an appropriative destruction and an alimentary enjoyment.” In her classic essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey famously argued that this structure of looking confirms a “male gaze” that marginalizes and objectifies women on screen, a gaze whose payoff is scopophilic pleasure.<sup>2</sup>

The male gaze is made literal (and parodic) in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), in which motel owner Norman Bates first spies on Marion Crane through a hole in the wall, then proceeds to knife her to death.<sup>3</sup> Before the fateful shower scene, the two share an evening meal. They face each other in the motel parlour, tightly framed by the camera and by Norman’s mounted stuffed birds. Norman remarks that Marion eats like one. Eating, consuming, and killing (snuffing out and stuffing birds) are strung together via the optics of voyeurism. The voyeur is the consummate consumer: he wants to devour—to possess in full—the object of sight, to make her his own; which is why, true to cinematic convention, voyeurism, facilitated by the male-identified camera, leads to murder.<sup>4</sup>

But the dominance of voyeurism in theories of the gaze can be overstated. For objects gazed at in film can also be resistant, opaque, closed off to the machinations of the voracious observer. The transfer from world into film-world may even enhance objects’ impenetrability, rendering them solid, autonomous, more pronounced. Something of this recalcitrance of the cinematic object is, I think, captured by the effect early film theory called *photogénie*: “any aspect of things, beings or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction.”<sup>5</sup> When objects resist appropriation, they appear as if from a distance,

fortified by unavailability, as what exists but cannot be fully possessed. In this case, the reality of the cinematic object is the measure of its resistance to appropriation by the observer-voyeur. Qualifying our approach, objects affirm their reality as something we witness without consuming. Instead of looking-as-devouring, gathering the world into our private sphere, looking consents to the being of objects as external to us, persisting beyond our grasp.

The cinema, then, is a system of rampant consumption *and* preservation that lends itself to the analogy between looking and eating. Eating consumes and destroys the object. To look like we eat means to ingest and digest the object until it is no more. To look but not eat is to accept the existence of things beyond our own satiation. The analogy between looking and eating connects culinary with visual habits. Can we eat without destroying? Look without appropriating? Enjoy without acquiring? Veganism and film share some common problems. What I am calling “vegan cinema” conjoins looking and eating by construing the notion of the *non-devouring gaze* to respond positively to the above questions.

## II. Looking and eating

The looking/eating analogy recurs throughout the writings of philosopher and mystic Simone Weil (1909-1943). For Weil, eating and looking are closely related yet fundamentally different activities. “The great sorrow of human life,” wrote Weil in *Waiting for God*, “is knowing that to look and to eat are two different operations. Only on the other side of heaven, where God lives, are they one and the same [...] Maybe the vices, depravities and crimes are nearly always or even always in their essence attempts to eat beauty, to eat what one can only look at.”<sup>6</sup> Eating is violent since it ingests and assimilates the other into the self, and destroys it. Once the objects of the world have been thoroughly incorporated and digested, they are

lost to the world and to the observer. This loss is both aesthetic and ethical, and its implications for film are far-reaching.

The beautiful, for Weil, resists assimilation by the devouring I/eye. The beautiful is neither necessarily pretty nor visually pleasing. For Weil, the beautiful affords access to the real, precisely because it is immune to the overtures of the individual imagination. Immunity is reality, and thus also beauty. As an experience, beauty is the disinterested recognition of the existence of something beyond ourselves.<sup>7</sup> “We want to eat all the other objects of desire. The beautiful is that which we desire without wishing to eat it. We desire that it should be.” The beautiful is, like food, “a carnal attraction” that, unlike food, “keeps us at a distance and implies a renunciation.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, beauty involves a “letting be” of the object before us. In place of the hungry gaze, Weil makes possible a non-devouring mode of looking, a “vegan gaze” cast by the camera, viewer, or critic. While the devouring look yields pleasure, looking without devouring is akin to love.

Vegan cinema, therefore, does not refer to films about or in favour of veganism.<sup>9</sup> Its rhetorical mode is not one of agitation or advocacy. There are plenty of films of this kind, but they more readily fall into the category Tom Tyler calls “vegan apologetics,” works that promote and defend veganism against repeated attacks by the dominant culture of eating animals.<sup>10</sup> Though an essential component of the pro-animal toolkit, “outright vegan evangelism and apologetics cannot be adequate when confronted by carnism, the long-established and largely normalized ideology and practice of everyday meat eating.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, animal rights films, including those that explicitly support veganism, are often anthropocentric in their mode of address. They engage in persuasion and emotional identification (often supported by mind-boggling statistics, and factual exposés). There are various problems with these methodologies, not least their assumption that human behaviour

is governed by reason, and that individual responses are sufficient for long-term societal change.

Veganism as I am using it here functions differently, as neither argument nor as a personal choice. Instead, it indicates the ways in which films, or moments in films, call attention to the complicity between the desire to look and to eat, and in so doing invoke a vegan way of being in the world. This kind of veganism is complicated, incomplete, and not strictly limited to a vegan diet, though it encompasses that too. Nor is it quite the stealthy veganism that Tyler ingeniously names (after the Trojan horse) “vejan” practice. Its indirectness is in the spirit of disinterest and detachment it cultivates with respect to the objects of the world. Weil expresses this logic clearly in her *Notebooks*: “To draw back before the object we are pursuing. Only what is indirect is effective. We do not accomplish anything if we have not first drawn back.”<sup>12</sup> More than anything, veganism is an orientation towards reality: an approach which is also a kind of retreat, reticence before the other when confronted by the other’s sovereign existence. As a realist medium, film has always shared such orientation.

Realism in film has an esteemed critical pedigree. Vegan cinema as an articulation of realism looks back to the tradition of realist film theory, from André Bazin to Siegfried Kracauer.<sup>13</sup> But in focusing on the parallels between looking and eating, I stay closest to Weil, for whom reality was a bulwark against the seductions of the imagination—not a substance or a content but a process that continually refuses the psychological rewards of wishful thinking. To see reality is to perceive attentively and without consolation. An adequate perception of the real is, for Weil, the ultimate yardstick of value since the real alone can lead one to the good, that rare state of grace that redeems without deluding. Weil’s realism is not, then, a naïve faith in the ability to perceive the thing-in-itself. Reality is what we most likely recoil from: “A test of what is real is that it is hard and rough.”<sup>14</sup> And still,

“We must prefer real hell to an imaginary paradise.”<sup>15</sup> The logic is simple: real hell is preferable because it is real.

How might the cinema, and in particular animal cinema, exercise this preference? How does film register the real, whether hellish or benign, while eschewing the distortions of the imagination? Is the link to the real a matter of format, affected by the shift from photographic to digital filmmaking? Does CGI, for example, retain something of the materiality of animals, materiality that for Bazin and Kracauer was rooted in the photographic nature of the medium? The recent turn to CGI animals in films like *Life of Pi* (Lee, 2012), the revived *Planet of the Apes* franchise (2011-2017), or the vegetarian-themed *Noah* (2014), allows productions to largely do away with on-camera use of live animals while achieving a high degree of verisimilitude.<sup>16</sup> But whether or not such films are “vegan” in the sense explored here, and whether they comply with Weil’s definition of realism, depends on the degree to which the films unfold what Weil calls “*necessary* connections” among their various elements.<sup>17</sup> Realism demands that the relations depicted in the film appear as necessary, empty of subjective projection that invests the film-world with extraneous values.

What rings true in *Noah* is not its dietary didacticism, but its honest reckoning with the aversion Noah feels towards his fellow humans. Animal liberation advocates are quick to reject accusations of misanthropy, both psychologically (the common counter-claim that animal rights people do not hate humans), and analytically (intersectionality has become a catchall term for structurally linking the oppression of humans and animals). But confronting the animal calamity can be wounding in ways that are not easily expressible because they cut across life’s various domains. Neither simply traumatizing, nor enraging or animating, bearing witness to animals exiles one to a world—our world—whose coordinates are unfamiliar; how is one to navigate such a place?<sup>18</sup> *Noah*’s realism resides in connecting the

no longer repressible knowledge of humanity's capacity for evil with the unmooring of subjectivity that such knowledge brings.<sup>19</sup>

Realism, then, does not appeal to art's indexical power to show things "as they are," since art is inescapably about mediation. For Weil, realism primarily means surpassing a certain kind of romanticism that views the world as a reflection of one's mental state: "[a] work of art which is inspired by sensual or psychological phenomena cannot be of the very first order."<sup>20</sup> Looking and eating are metaphors for the two creative dispositions: romanticism for which the world is but the vessel of the outpouring of self, and realism that attends to the world impersonally. The latter comports itself towards the mechanism that governs all worldly phenomena, which Weil called "necessity."

### III. Eating out

Not only is Louis Lumière's *Le Repas de bébé/ Baby's Lunch* (1895) arguably the earliest depiction of eating in film, it illustrates the divergence in cinema of two orders of looking: looking-as-eating, and looking-without-devouring.<sup>21</sup> *Repas de bébé* features Auguste and Marguerite Lumière feeding their baby Andrée in the garden of their Lyon home. It is said that audiences were attracted not by the culinary drama at the centre of the frame, but by the motion of leaves in the background.



Fig. 6.1 *Repas de bébé*

It is no coincidence, I think, that one of cinema's pioneering examples places the act of eating centre frame. As an image of consumption, the bourgeois dining ritual at the heart of *Repas de bébé* stands in for other domestic pursuits that film would reflect back at its growing middle-class audience, and more decisively, for the ways in which cinema itself would become an object of mass consumption, with eating and drinking integral to the commercial movie-going experience.

Memorable examples of films about eating include Marco Ferreri's gross-out satire *La Grande Bouffe* (1973), and Gabriel Axel's quiet and mannered *Babette's Feast* (1987). Ferreri's exposes the bottomless pit of consumption of the bodies of animals and women, while *Babette's Feast* proceeds in the opposite direction, from ascetic self-denial to the rekindling of the sensual pleasures of food. But the role of eating in film is more fundamental still: eating mimics the ways in which cinema appropriates—captures, records, and projects—its objects of sight.<sup>22</sup> It is no coincidence either that *Repas de bébé* foregrounds an image of (food) consumption while occasioning a form of (image) consumption that eschews the devouring we see in the film. The Lumière film illustrates a basic division in cinema between looking and eating as two modes of engagement and approach, which signal different economies of desire with regard to the objects of sight. In placing side by side the central image of the feeding baby and the peripheral image of the moving leaves the film intimates the devouring gaze as the mainstay of filmic appropriation, and its non-voracious alternative that attends to objects at a distance, and lets them be.

What was it about the peripheral movement of leaves that so charmed viewers over and above the principal human drama of *Repas de bébé*? In an essay on the Lumières' early films, Dai Vaughan suggested that "what most impressed the early audiences were what would now be considered the *incidentals of scenes*: smoke from a forge, steam from a locomotive, brick dust from a demolished wall [...] the rustling of leaves in the



background.”<sup>23</sup> Incidentals for Vaughan demonstrate cinema’s aptitude at capturing, not any kind of movement, but spontaneous, contingent movement.<sup>24</sup> The Lumières’ “harnessing of spontaneity” was revolutionary because it captured anew the impersonal mechanisms of life.<sup>25</sup> The beauty of the fluttering leaves made visible the operation of natural forces, undirected by human hands, to which the cinema is witness. Pleasure in this and other Lumière actualities that feature staged or semi-staged human action alongside the display of natural phenomena like the motion of waves or the gust of wind derives from the gesture of “letting be”: the manifestation of necessity as the mechanism of the world.

The conception of beauty as the thing we let be is reminiscent for Weil of God’s original abandonment of the world, his giving up power and retreating in order for beings and things to exist. Veganism is similarly a practice of creative renunciation that seeks a way of eating, of nourishment and survival, that lets others be, others whom we refuse to reduce to disposable, consumable things. At the moment of cinema’s inception, the Lumière film already provides an alternative genealogy of the natural world on screen, since the leaves in the wind are literally *useless*. Their function is purely revelatory: they affirm the world as extrinsic to human intentions, and are all the more beautiful for it.

The looking/eating analogy hinges on the experience of beauty that “promises but never gives anything; it stimulates hunger but has no nourishment for the part of the soul that looks in this world for sustenance. It feeds only the part of the soul that gazes.”<sup>26</sup> As Lissa McCullough explains:

Beauty feeds the part of the soul that gazes [...] the pure part that receives and consents to the real, to *what is*. Whereas the will desires to *feed* on the world, purified desire or supernatural love utters its “eternal yes” to the world across a distance, a space of resignation, through gaze alone. *Feasting on the world through gazing alone is what Weil calls eternal beatitude, a state where to look is to eat.*<sup>27</sup>

The strictness of Weil’s conception of the feasting/fasting gaze is likely to arouse some resistance, not unlike the opposition to veganism that labels the practice as absolutist or purist.<sup>28</sup> It is not uncommon for veganism to be associated with eating disorders, including

anorexia, a condition that Weil is sometimes assumed to have suffered from.<sup>29</sup> As Laura Wright notes, some media reports and pseudo-scientific studies “link plant-based diets with female disordered consumption.”<sup>30</sup> Whether or not Weil suffered from anorexia, and whether certain vegans do, seems like the less interesting question. Nevertheless, in Weil’s conception, looking-without-devouring does deeply affect the subject who looks, and veganism, too, I would argue, entails a recalibration of subjectivity.

But why frame the discussion of looking in film in terms of veganism? I have already explained that Weil links looking and eating in ways that invite questions on power, representation, and ethics. The normative resonance of “vegan” is no less important. New ways of thinking are emerging that theorize veganism’s place in the cultural conversation, describe it as a Foucauldian “counter conduct,” and as a “form of life.”<sup>31</sup> These approaches exceed the notion of veganism as a dietary proscription or a lifestyle choice.<sup>32</sup>

For Dinesh Wadiwel, the relentless violence that animals suffer warrants the title of “war.” War is the deep substructure underpinning humans’ treatment of animals, and minor reforms to the conditions in which animals live and die can do little to change it. To be meaningful, resistance must confront the “set of violences that are deeply embedded into almost every conceivable facet of human organisation, life, and knowledge,” seeking ways in which to “*disrupt* and enact a sphere of peace within the war on animals, not only in intervening in the institutional reproduction of violence, but also in etching a new set of truths that might enable recognition of animal sovereignties.”<sup>33</sup>

While it is impossible to extract oneself completely from the “set of violences” against animals that saturates and sustains daily life, whether one is vegan or not, veganism is a symbolic and concrete refusal to bear arms in the war on animals. Vegan practice

is distinctive in so far as it is not merely reflective of a set of political beliefs, but works across different levels of conduct; vegan practitioners typically modify their ways of living and consumption substantially against prevailing norms. [...] I would suggest that veganism—in so far as it seeks to disrupt an institutional system and a system of truth—would figure as a perfect example of a contemporary model of counter-conduct.<sup>34</sup>

Since the subjection of animals is pervasive, it necessarily pertains also to the production of and knowledge about art.<sup>35</sup> Modes of nonviolent looking in the realm of art reflect the practice of veganism in the culinary realm. Both embody an impossible but valiant attempt to engage with the world without consuming it. As a counter-conduct within the discipline of film studies, moreover, vegan cinema disrupts the humanism that continues to inform the understanding and teaching of film. In practical, pedagogical terms, this means taking animals for granted as fully-fledged cinematic subjects: beings whose existence cinematically *matters* (in the sense of being physically and significantly present).<sup>36</sup> Approaching animals in this way helps to produce an alternative body of knowledge on film, which recognizes, and potentially reframes, the violence done to animals within the representational logic and apparatus of cinema.<sup>37</sup>

#### IV. Looking and eating in *Wendy and Lucy*

Animals are present throughout Kelly Reichardt's films, from *River of Grass* (1995) to *Certain Women* (2016). *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), the first in the so-called Michelle Williams trilogy (followed by *Meek's Cutoff* [2010] and *Certain Women*) is a clear articulation of a vegan cinematic sensibility.<sup>38</sup>

In *Wendy and Lucy*, the proximity and abundance of food is proportionate to its unavailability. But what is an absolute necessity in life—to eat—is anathema in Reichardt's cinema. Here, the opposite logic prevails: retreat and restraint grant solidity to what we see. Characters are left, painfully and inconclusively, to the whims of circumstance. Narratives refrain from doing too much or speaking too loudly.<sup>39</sup> The films are slow and sparse, with a preference for the long or medium long-shot, few musical cues and little by way of background information or psychological insight.<sup>40</sup>

In a long sequence at the grocery store, the themes of consumption, looking, and eating resurface. The sequence opens with images of shiny produce. A stack of green apples tempts Wendy, but she can only look (and touch), not eat.



Fig. 6.2 *Wendy and Lucy*

In desperation, Wendy slips a can of dogfood into her bag. But on leaving the store, she is stopped by Andy, the zealous shop assistant (undoubtedly on minimum wage) who insists on alerting the manager. “If a person can’t afford dog food, they shouldn’t have a dog,” he admonishes her. The rest of film revolves around Wendy’s attempts to find Lucy, missing after Wendy’s arrest for shoplifting.

Not only do Wendy and Lucy share the film’s title, both risk devouring by a brutal system of economic exchange. The grocery store scene richly illustrates the relationship between the eaters and the eaten. In a film where pets end up in the dog pound, farmed animals end up as dog food, and the poor maintain the system of production of cheap goods, vulnerability is a matter of degree, not of species.

The can of Iams dog food that Wendy steals contains animal “derivatives.”<sup>41</sup> In 2002, Iams, then a subsidiary of Procter & Gamble, faced legal action by animal rights organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals for its cruel practices of animal testing.<sup>42</sup> And while Wendy is on her way to Alaska to produce seafood items she herself is unlikely to be able to afford, Andy is only too keen to enforce the law on behalf of the owners of the means of production. Wendy, Lucy, Andy, and countless, nameless, farmed animals are all

positioned somewhere along the axis of power in a system intent on dissolving solidarity and companionship, not least between humans and animals.



Fig. 6.3 *Wendy and Lucy*

Sophie Mayer claims that the film’s “affective relationships,” such as the one between Wendy and Lucy, “run counter to heteropatriarchal capitalism, and even act as a form of resistance to, or way out of, its narrow confines.”<sup>43</sup> But there is nothing to suggest that Wendy is sensitive to the plight of animals in general; after all, she is on her way to seek work in one of Alaska’s fisheries. I am unsure about the disruptive potential of the film’s “affective relationships.” It is rather in the confluence of gazes the film makes possible, in the obscurity and opacity of its characters, and in the moments of divergence from conventional narrative and framing that an end to violence can be glimpsed.

In a scene at a bottle returning facility, Lucy wanders off-screen. Wendy (or Williams) calls her back, and Lucy casually re-enters the frame.



Fig. 6.4 & 6.5, Lucy out of frame

The frame does not enclose or control. Its openness mirrors Lucy's autonomy. Where dogs in film are often valued for their ability to cleverly follow orders, Lucy's role is more akin to a cameo. The credits list Lucy "as herself." No gimmick, Lucy's presence is a stamp of the film's (neo-neo) realism.<sup>44</sup> We need only recall the shameful antics of Uggie the impeccably trained Jack Russell in the hit film *The Artist* (Hazanavicius, 2011) to appreciate the difference. Whereas in *The Artist*, animal motion is tightly controlled, Reichardt (like Lumière) is interested in the incidentals of motion. Through either training or editing, performing animals yield visual pleasure as the mark of control. Instead of training the animal to perform for the camera, Reichardt's camera trains its gaze on the untrained animal.

In an interview Reichardt said that Williams "loved the way she was so invisible as Wendy, how she slipped into this landscape; I don't remember anybody recognizing her during shooting."<sup>45</sup> Anonymity is a feature of the parity between human and nonhuman life, an attribute of their shared exposure to hunger, isolation, or force which, in turn, heightens their interdependence. The vitality of screen animals derives from their flesh and blood vulnerability, a mark of authenticity that some filmmakers exploit.<sup>46</sup> And although Reichardt stops short of questioning the contexts of domestication and farming that recur in her films, *Wendy and Lucy* does not wreak violence on its vulnerable protagonists. Instead, it abandons them to the lugubrious blankness of the Walgreen car park, the gas station, and the suburban backyard where Lucy is finally left.

## V. On being-devoured (in film)

The beauty of the world is the mouth of a labyrinth. The unwary individual who on entering takes a few steps is soon unable to find the opening. Worn out, with nothing to eat or drink, in the dark, separated from his dear ones, and from everything he loves and is accustomed to, he walks on without knowing anything or hoping anything, incapable even of discovering whether he is really going forward or merely turning around on the same spot. But this affliction is as nothing compared with the danger threatening him. For if he does not lose courage, if he goes on walking, it is absolutely certain that he will finally arrive at the center of the labyrinth. *And there God is waiting to eat him. Later he will go out again, but he will be changed, he will have become*

*different, after being eaten and digested by God. Afterward he will stay near the entrance so that he can gently push all those who come near into the opening.*<sup>47</sup>

In this curious tale, earthly beauty leads one to God the devourer. The devoured person re-enters the world utterly transformed. For Weil, an appreciation of the beauty of reality calls for a radical contraction of self: “May I disappear in order that those things that I see may become perfect in their beauty from the very fact that they are no longer things that I see.”<sup>48</sup> The self is a barrier between God and creation, and must be eroded. The self is eaten, but survives, barely, so that it might perceive the world in its own absence.

So far, I have discussed veganism as the non-devouring stance of looking rather than eating. But, “with nothing to eat or drink,” subjectivity itself is reduced to the point of annihilation. From the position of eater, the self becomes the eaten. If the vegan gaze approaches the object without devouring it, “might we say that each step or movement in the ‘approach without devouring’ is also an instance of a vegan becoming *herself* devourable?”<sup>49</sup> How might cinema reflect this undoing of human subjectivity by embracing the human-as-edible?

The cinema is replete with examples of humans being eaten. But only a handful of films wander the labyrinth to ponder the meaning of human edibility. In Steven Spielberg’s blockbuster *Jaws* (1975), an oversized shark consumes the bland beachgoers of Amity Island.<sup>50</sup> Horror in *Jaws* and its increasingly ludicrous sequels ensues from the tantalizing outrage of humans as food. Yet as a genre film in which eating people is depicted as transgressing the laws of nature, *Jaws* carefully controls the irreverence of its proposition, foreclosing deeper questions about what Matthew Calarco has called humans’ “being-toward-meat.”<sup>51</sup>

Val Plumwood’s essay “Being Prey” (1995), in which the ecofeminist philosopher recalls her near fatal encounter with a crocodile in Australia’s Kakadu National Park, challenges the “monster myth” of films like *Jaws* or *Crocodile Dundee* (1986). The

encounter leads Plumwood to reposition herself alongside other animals by considering herself as food. This is no intellectual exercise, but a new knowledge borne out by experience. While canoeing, Plumwood is attacked by a crocodile and seriously wounded. As she struggles to free herself from the crocodile's grip, Plumwood experiences something like Weil's obliteration of self: "I glimpsed the world for the first time, 'from the outside,' as a world no longer my own, an unrecognizable bleak landscape composed of raw necessity."<sup>52</sup> "I had survived the crocodile attack," Plumwood continues, "but still had to survive the contest with the cultural drive to represent such experiences in terms of the masculinist monster myth: the master narrative"<sup>53</sup> that denies "the brute fact of being prey,"<sup>54</sup> our being "part of the food chain, eaten as well as eater."<sup>55</sup> The master narrative remains intact in *Jaws* and most other horror films, but is exploded in Werner Herzog's remarkable *Grizzly Man* (2005).<sup>56</sup>

*Grizzly Man* is often read as a cautionary tale about Timothy Treadwell's deadly desire to become a bear. But *Grizzly Man*'s real achievement is not the Deleuzian adventure of "becoming-animal," but the "becoming-edible" of the human—a more far-reaching transformation. It is by making legible and visible the possibility of perceiving oneself as food that human exceptionalism, voiced by Herzog and most of the film's interviewees, is most profoundly dislodged. Like Weil's sojourner, Treadwell is devoured at the centre of a labyrinth, a remote area dubbed the "Grizzly Maze." *Grizzly Man* brilliantly completes the meaning of veganism by entertaining the full extent of human vulnerability.<sup>57</sup>

## VI. Conclusion: raw necessity

The human as simultaneously devouring and devoured is the subject of Julia Ducournau's debut feature, *Raw* (2017).<sup>58</sup> Ducournau understands that for the human to become-edible in film, restrictions of genre and the monster myth must be transcended. Indeed, *Raw*'s



strongest moments are not those that graphically depict cannibalism. Cannibalism as a challenge to common conceptions of humanness is most compelling in the film's more contemplative scenes. *Raw* is at its weakest when half-heartedly toying with questions of animal rights and positing vegetarianism in opposition to cannibalism. This resorts to precisely the sort of ontological simplifications about humanity that the film is otherwise eager to subvert.

To shift the ontological goalposts, *Raw* sets itself apart from supernatural horror in the ordinariness of its culinary aberrations. Cannibalism does not rupture the natural order but darkly illuminates it. Twice, the film invokes a vegan cinematic sensibility by harking back to Lumière's historic trope of the fluttering leaves. *Raw* opens with a shot of a tree-lined road, still but for the leaves gently swaying in the wind.



Fig. 6.6 *Raw*

The road is empty, but we soon notice a female figure walking towards the camera by the side of the road. When a car approaches, the road becomes the site of an orchestrated crash, a feeding ground of human flesh. Later on, sisters Justine (Garance Marillier) and Alexia (Ella Rumpf) return to the road, hidden amidst the vegetation, waiting to eat.<sup>59</sup>



Fig. 6.7 *Raw*

The light breeze in the trees, we might presume, signals the quiet before the storm. But its proper function is, I believe, more like the leaves in the wind in *Repas de bébé*: no mere backdrop to an al fresco meal but the purveyor of necessity. The leaves, the wind, and the young women are absorbed into the natural order, equally subject to the mechanisms of earthly life. In interviews, Ducournau has insisted that cannibals are unlike vampires or werewolves because they actually exist. Neither monsters nor supernatural beings, cannibals are, and remain, human. Their very existence calls for a reconsideration, not of what it means to be human, but of what we mean when we fall back on the term to understand our own existence. “In the beauty of the world,” says Weil, “brute necessity becomes an object of love.”<sup>60</sup> If the necessity, or reality, of cannibalism is, as it were, written on the wind, the rustling leaves remind us of cinema’s exquisite power of acquiescing to what is.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Charlie Chaplin, *Modern Times* (USA, United Artists), 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, (London, 1989), pp. 14-26.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho* (USA, Paramount), 1960.

<sup>4</sup> *Psycho* makes formal, not psychological, use of voyeurism, as does Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). In Powell's film, the cinematic apparatus (in the shape of a blade concealed in the leg of a tripod) becomes the (phallic) instrument of murder. Neither of these films purports to explore the mental depths of their characters. They function as intellectual exercises in cinematic construction, exploring the formal possibilities of their psychologically blunt instruments.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Epstein, "On Certain Characteristics of Photogénie," in *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Abel, (Princeton, 1988), pp. 314-18, p. 314. On the origins of photogénie, see *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, eds. Philip Simpson, Andrew Utterson, and Karen J. Shepherdson (London, 2004), pp. 49-51. The term is closely identified with the writings of Epstein. See in particular Epstein's *La Photogénie de l'impondérable* (Paris, 1935).

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (1951), trans. Emma Crawford, (New York, 2001), p. 105.

<sup>7</sup> In *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York, 2011), I explored the correlation of vulnerability, reality, and beauty in Weil's philosophy, grounded in the statement that "the vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is the mark of existence" (*Gravity and Grace*, p. 108). Here, I return to the same topic by a different route, exploring Weil's contribution to a realist conception of art.

<sup>8</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, (London, 2002), p. 149.

<sup>9</sup> A selection of activist vegan documentaries includes *Vegucated* (Marisa Miller Wolfson, 2011), *Forks Over Knives* (Lee Fulkerson, 2011), and *One Angry Vegan* (Gil Golan, 2017), among many others. In 2015, the blog Troiscouleurs published a post by Camille Brunel entitled, "Le Cinéma vegan," which points to a recent shift in the representation of animals, and meat, onscreen. Brunel claims that the more animals there are on the screen, the less meat there is on characters' plates (« plus il y a de faune à l'écran... moins il y a de viande dans l'assiette des personnages »). As animals cease to be mere symbols for human affairs, they assume the role of an "idea in images" (« une idée en images »), a vegetarianism that purports to be ethical. Vegan cinema replaces food in the belly with the notion of food of the heart (« un 'cinéma vegan' qui remplace simplement la nourriture en son cœur plus encore qu'en son ventre »), <http://www.troiscouleurs.fr/cinema/le-cinema-vegan/>, accessed on 22 July 2017.

<sup>10</sup> See Tom Tyler's essay in this collection.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Simone Weil, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, (New York, 2004), p. 169.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, André Bazin, *What is Cinema?* vol. 1 & 2., trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, 2005); Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford, 1960).

<sup>14</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>16</sup> On the convoluted relationship between real, animated, and composite animals in film see Michael Lawrence, "'Practically infinite manipulability': domestic dogs, canine performance and digital cinema," *Screen* 56.1 Spring (2015), pp. 115-120.

<sup>17</sup> Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks* (1970), trans. Richard Rees, (Eugene, OR, 2015), p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> Witnessing the animal calamity is the subject of Sara Salih's essay, "'Remnants. The Witness and the Animal,'" in this volume.

<sup>19</sup> Darren Aronofsky uses the biblical story of the flood to explore humanity's original sin (the eating of the apple, which, in *Noah*, is significantly pulsating and fleshy). J. M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello is another example of a person isolated and bereft of human connections as a result of witnessing the animal catastrophe. Neither character is particularly likeable or upbeat, which seems to compromise their efficacy as animal advocates. Both *Noah* and *The Lives of Animals* are about the state of being compromised.

<sup>20</sup> Simone Weil, *Intimations of Christianity Among the Ancient Greeks* [1957], trans. Elizabeth Chase Geissbuhler, (London, 1987), pp. 89-90.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Lumière, *Le Repas de bébé* (France, 1895). This 30 second "actuality" was part of the historic Lumière screening on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1895 at the Grand Café in Paris, which marked the inauguration of the cinema.

<sup>22</sup> James Williamson's 1901 short *The Big Swallow* reverses this notion in a tale of cinematic revenge: a man, angered by being filmed, approaches the camera, opens his mouth, and swallows the camera and cameraman whole.

<sup>23</sup> Dai Vaughan, "Let There be Lumière," in *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*, (Berkeley, 1999), pp. 63-67, 64-5 (my emphasis).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Weil qtd. in Lissa McCullough, *The Religious Philosophy of Simone Weil: An Introduction*, (London, 2014), p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>28</sup> See Ben Westwood's essay in this collection, which looks more closely at the idea of the vegan as ascetic, and the notion of absolute refusal/renunciation.

<sup>29</sup> See for example, Francine du Plessix Gray, *Simone Weil* (New York, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Laura Wright, *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals, and Gender in the Age of Terror* (Athens, 2015), p. 89.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, *Vegan Studies Project*; Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War Against Animals*, (Leiden, 2015); Robert McKay's essay in this collection.

<sup>32</sup> In addition to Wright, Wadiwel, and McKay, see Annie Potts and Jovian Parry's "Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex," *Feminism & Psychology* 20 (2010), pp. 53-72, Sara Salih's "Vegans on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown," in *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies*, eds. Nik Taylor and Richard Twine. New York: Routledge, 2014, pp. 52-68; Anat Pick, "Turning to Animals Between Love and Law," *New Formations* 76 (2012), pp. 68-85, and Annie Potts, "Vegan," in *Critical Terms in Animals Studies*, ed. Lori Gruen (Chicago, forthcoming in 2018).

<sup>33</sup> Wadiwel, *War Against Animals*, p. 277.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 278.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed survey of the uses and abuses of animals in art, see Elliot Sperber, "Art World? More Like SeaWorld: The Use of Live Animals as Objects of Art," *Counterpunch* 16 May, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/05/16/art-world-more-like-seaworld-the-use-of-live-animals-as-objects-of-art/>, accessed on 30 July 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Here, I am alluding to the theorization of the visual animal as "absent," a notion introduced in John Berger's seminal essay "Why Look at Animals?" and developed by Akira Mizuta Lippit. For critique of the spectral view of the cinematic animal see Jonathan Burt, "John Berger's 'Why Look at Animals?' A Close Reading," *Worldviews* 9.2 (2005), pp. 203-218, and Anat Pick, "Why Not Look at Animals?" *NECSUS* (Spring 2015), <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/why-not-look-at-animals/>. The cinematic animal is not a spectral loop. Its onscreen power derives from the tension between its status as modern simulacra and the persistence of its physical import.

<sup>37</sup> Salih's essay in this collection movingly recounts some of the difficulties of taking animals seriously in a non-vegan classroom. It is difficult to pinpoint the combination of factors required to overcome resistance to witnessing the catastrophe befalling animals, but such moments do arise. Whether or not they lead to an immediate change in behaviour, something meaningful happens when the conversation shifts beyond "vegan apologetics." New ways of speaking, seeing, and knowing allow for violence against animals to be perceived as violence.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly Reichardt, *Wendy and Lucy* (USA, Oscilloscope), 2008. The Williams trilogy overlaps with what we might call the Lucy trilogy, from *Old Joy* (2007) to *Wendy and Lucy* and *Certain Women*, in which Lucy is present in the form of dedication alone, a reminder of the relatively short lives of dogs.

<sup>39</sup> In *Certain Women*, for example, shy farmhand Jamie (Lily Gladstone) is romantically snubbed by the lawyer Beth (Kristen Stewart). When Jamie falls asleep at the wheel on the long drive back to her ranch after seeing Beth, we fear an accident. Instead, the car lazily rolls into an empty field where it draws to a halt. Captured in long-shot, the stranded vehicle accentuates the character's loneliness. Reichardt ends the scene there, and we never see Jamie's reaction.

<sup>40</sup> "Reichardt has described her movie as a post-Katrina story: Although it's never made obvious, Wendy apparently lost everything except Lucy in some previous catastrophe." J. Hoberman, "Wendy and Lucy," *The Village Voice*, 10 December 2008, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2008/12/10/wendy-and-lucy/>

<sup>41</sup> On the hopelessly knotted ethics of pet food, see Sara Salih's essay in this collection.

<sup>42</sup> Iams was founded in 1946, the period after the Second World War that saw a boom in pet ownership. In 2014, Mars purchased Iams from Procter & Gamble for the sum of \$2.9bn (£1.7bn).

<sup>43</sup> Sophie Mayer, *Political Animals: The New Feminist Cinema* (London, 2015), p. 31.

<sup>44</sup> A loose homage to Vittorio de Sica's neorealist *Umberto D.* (1952), *Wendy and Lucy* has been identified with the "neo-neo realist" turn in American cinema. See, for example, A. O. Scott, "Neo-Neo Realism," *New York Times Magazine*. 17 March 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/magazine/22neorealism-t.html?pagewanted=all&mcubz=1>.

<sup>45</sup> "Adrift in America: The Films of Kelly Reichardt," the Museum of the Moving Image, 1-3 April 2011, [http://www.movingimage.us/files/calendar/notes/WENDY\\_AND\\_LUCY\\_program\\_note.doc](http://www.movingimage.us/files/calendar/notes/WENDY_AND_LUCY_program_note.doc)

<sup>46</sup> The list of films in which real animals are harmed or killed is a long one. The function of unsimulated violence is the administering of the shock of authenticity. See for example, the of winner the 1978 Cannes

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Palme D'Or, Ermanno Olmi's *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, in which the documentary-like realism of peasant life is propped up by the killing of a goose and a long, graphic sequence of the slaughtering of a pig.

<sup>47</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 103 (my emphasis).

<sup>48</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p. 42.

<sup>49</sup> Robert McKay, in an email correspondence with the author on 5 September 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Steven Spielberg, *Jaws* (USA, Universal), 1975.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew Calarco, "Being Toward Meat: Anthropocentrism, Indistinction, and Veganism," *Dialectical Anthropology* 38.4 (2014), pp. 415-429.

<sup>52</sup> Val Plumwood, "Being Prey," in *The Ultimate Journey: Inspiring Stories of Living and Dying*, eds. James O'Reilly, Sean O'Reilly, and Richard Sterling (San Francisco, 2000), pp. 128-146.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-9.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>56</sup> Werner Herzog, *Grizzly Man* (USA, Lions Gate), 2005.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed reading of the workings of vulnerability in *Grizzly Man*, see the chapter on Herzog in *Creaturely Poetics: On Treadwell's becoming-animal*, see for, example, Dominic Pettman, "Bear Life: Tracing an opening in *Grizzly Man*," in *Human Error: Species Being and Media Machines*, (Minneapolis, 2011), pp. 37-58.

<sup>58</sup> Julia Ducournau, *Raw* (France/Belgium, Wild Bunch), 2017.

<sup>59</sup> *Raw*'s roadside carnage and cannibalism are reminiscent of Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967), the surreally cruel road movie which, alongside cartoonish human violence, features detailed eating scenes and the slaughtering of a real pig and goose. I am grateful to Robert McKay for reminding me of the affinity between these two genre-defying cannibal films.

<sup>60</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, p. 76.