Are you ready to be pooped? --Metamorphosis begins with being eaten

Various stories have been told about eating and killing for food. A certain amount of research has also been accumulated on feces, the final form of food, in fields such as anthropology, cultural history and psychohistory. However, people have probably not thought much about the idea of being eaten and becoming feces.

In the first half of this year, I happened to come into contact with a number of exhibitions, presentations and books in rapid succession, and I began to think somewhat about ‘eating and being eaten’ and ‘the cycle of digestion and excretion.’ My first encounter was when I suddenly picked up a copy of Futoshi Hoshino's ‘Shokugaku-ron’ (The Theory of the Eater). The questions discussed in the book made me want to think about relationships with others regarding eating, especially from a different perspective than the conventional ‘philosophical consideration of food.’

Around the same time, in July this year (2024), I participated in Verb Fes #2 in Fukuoka. This was a gathering where each participant chose a verb and presented it in a way they liked. Among them was a presentation on the verb ‘to poop’ by Fumiya, a.k.a. ‘poop connoisseur.’ What particularly impressed me was his idea of not objectifying his own feces, and his comment brought about by the audience to the effect that he regarded the passage of food, the source of feces, through his body as a gift (a given grace, as I recall).

A month later, I visited the “Tomoko Konoike: Medicine Infrastructure” Exhibition (13 July - 29 September 2024) at the Aomori Museum of Art. The works on display were richly decorated with animal fur, including that of wolves and bears. (In the world of high fashion, for example, declaring the absence of real fur is regarded as an ethical attitude, and has become a ‘fashion’ in itself). The floor of the exhibition space is littered with the droppings of various beasts, which one seems to almost step on (although they are not real but in fact models).

One exhibition room was devoted to hunting episodes. Hunters, it was said, trace and imitate the behaviour and preferences of their prey in order to trap them. For example, to lure a stag, the hunter would imitate it and make a sound, but then the hunter would ‘become’ the very stag he was about to kill. What we see here is not a binary opposition between hunter and hunted, or to kill and be killed, but rather a process of ‘transforming oneself into the other, and the human turning into the beast, and becoming one,’ as if to nullify such a separation of subject and object. I felt something tapping me on the forehead, and then I felt a line connecting together my thoughts from the past month or so. It is an asymmetry that modern humans are thoroughly exempted from; the process of being eaten, digested, absorbed and discharged as feces by something else.

Discussions around animal ethics and animal rights often focus on the normative imperative ‘don't kill animals’ or ‘don't eat animals.’ The assumption is that the subject of killing/eating is exclusively human and the object to be killed/eaten is non-human animals. But what if we accept that ‘humans can also be killed and eaten by other animals?’

For example, consider the recent media coverage of bears appearing in residential areas. In many cases, the bears are shot dead. Animal rights activists plea ‘don't kill the bears.’ To such claims, the opposing response goes, ‘Would you allow yourself to be killed by a bear?’ But what if we accept and acknowledge that humans can be killed and eaten by bears in the same way that humans kill bears, and even more so that humans take and eat other life to sustain their own lives? The human body will eventually die, decompose and return to nature as compost (although in modern Japan, the body is immediately cremated and the remains placed in a cemetery, so there is no return to nature unless the remains are scattered). How much difference is there between that and, say, being eaten by a rabid animal and being discharged as feces?

There has been a lot of discourse on food, much of it concentrating on (our) eating and very little on (ourselves) being eaten. One of the reasons for this may be the natural reality in the first place: living

people practice ‘eating’ on a daily basis, but those who have experienced ‘being eaten’ have already been deprived of the space to talk about it. It is similar to the difficulty of talking about ‘that I will die.’*1 Against this backdrop, anthropologist Toshiaki Ishikura, in his essay ‘Eating in a multi-species world,’ points out that eating others is inextricably linked to the dimension of ‘We are eaten,’ which is its inverse form.*2 He then confirms that eating is an activity of taking in the ‘other,’ transforming it and absorbing it into the self.

The eater and the eaten are identified through chewing, swallowing and digestion, and nutrients merge with each other as they become body tissue and energy. Philosopher Tetsuya Kono says that, particularly in hunting, the integration of man and prey takes place in two ways. One is in the sense that the hunter imitates the prey in order to catch it, and the other is the ‘integration’ that occurs when the hunter eats the prey. Kono then goes on to explain that the hunter also has complete knowledge of how to ‘be eaten’ by their prey.

> Hunters who eat the flesh of their prey know that the roles can be reversed at any time. In the Wilderness [unspoilt nature where people do not settle, where hunting is the sole means of food procurement], you can find yourself being the prey of predators, and if you die accidentally, foxes and rats will eat you, birds will peck you out, and even your hair will be used as material for root holes and nests. Flies swarm, maggots spring out, other insects eat them up, and then they rot and melt back into the soil*3.

Kono also says: ‘Hunters have lived off their prey and know that their turn will eventually come.*4 I have already been given meat. I have no choice but to pay for it with my own flesh. And it is this cycle of life and death that brings comfort to the hunter in the face of death.’*5 In other words, hunters know and accept that not only do they kill and eat, but they are also killed and eaten, and that they are not limited to being predators, but can be eaten by any ecosystem that makes up part nature.

Concurrently with the reversibility of eating and being eaten, there is also the reversibility of being the eater and eaten, or the struggle between mutual warfare/conflict and fusion/assimilation. The eaters break down the eaten into pieces through mastication, digestion and try to assimilate the eaten into themselves, while the eaten sometimes resist digestion (via indigestion, vomiting, diarrhoea…) and circulate within their bodies while also assimilating with the eaters. Akinobu Kuroda refers to the relationship between the eaters and the eaten as ‘communion’ - the Christian sacrament of partaking of bread and wine, the flesh and blood of Christ.

> Put briefly, eating is communion with what is eaten. And when two or more people eat the same food together, that act is also a communion between the eaters, using the eatables as a medium. At the same time, by taking the eatables into their bodies and being kept alive by them, they are given the opportunity to become aware of where they have come from and where they are going back to.*6

If I were to add my personal observation to this passage it would be that for the ‘eaten’ it is also a ‘communion,’ a mutuality that we have also identified above.

The process of encountering, struggling and the fusion of self and other, or rather, of ‘eating and be eaten,’ is not always literal. The Italian philosopher Emanuele Coccia says that life is in a state of mutual cannibalism.

> The existence of other organisms is essential for the survival of almost all living organisms. (…) The higher organisms cannot survive without exchanging life with each other through the process of the food chain. Life is fundamentally about living the life of others. It is living in and through the life created or found by other organisms. There are certain inherent parasitic or cannibalistic relationships in the realm of living organisms. *7

Cannibalism here does not only refer to eating the flesh (body) of others. Respiration, for example, is also a ‘primordial form of cannibalism’ according to Coccia, in that it incorporates into itself the activities of other life forms, i.e. the expulsion of gases by plants. Organisms can only survive by depending on other life forms. On the flip side, every organism makes other life possible by being taken in by others.

The peculiarity of Coccia's thought seems to lie in his view of life as a whole being continuous and therefore metamorphosing from one being to another, and not only in the individual. He even seems to think that all living beings are one and the same body, one and the same life, one and the same self, continuously migrating from form to form, subject to subject, existence to existence.*8

What is eaten is internalised by the eater. In other words, eating/being eaten brings about fusion and identification with the Other. After this process, what is dissimilated or objectified again is the disembodied feces. In nature, this is where further metamorphosis into otherness begins. It is a process of decomposition, becoming soil or compost, being taken up as nutrients by plants and fused into their tissue. Coincidentally, as of this writing in autumn 2024, at 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT an exhibition entitled ‘pooploop’ is being held (2024 seems to be the year that forces us to think about poop, at least for me). The exhibition also focuses on the cyclical nature of ‘poo (stuff).’

> The world is cyclical. It does not stay in one form over time, but stays in motion, influencing each other in diverse ways and circulating in complex ways. As a result, in the so-called natural world, very little of the waste and poo just remains as it is.*9

Yes, even after becoming feces, beings continue to transform themselves (or, as a passive state, are ‘transformed’) as they move through the natural world.

As for ‘being with’ feces, and various other actors, the idea of ‘compost’ by the technologist Dana Haraway is perhaps an important corollary. I do not have the knowledge to elaborate on the concept precisely, so I will quote from existing texts that might give some hints.

> And it is in the compost that we are together at the table, isn't it? And it includes those who return us to the soil in the process of our death. I like the term ‘composting body’ because it includes the process of death as well as life. If we are in the compost, the questions of finitude and mortality cannot be ignored. But it is not something to be depressed or sad about. Those who will return our bodies to the earth in the future are in the process of producing compost.*10

So far, I have ended up with a text that looks like a pile of undigested feces, a patchwork of what ‘someone else in a position of authority’ has written. However, what I felt at the ‘Medicine Infrastructure’ Exhibition was a sense of lightness and liberation, as if my body was floating softly, when I suddenly realised that instead of shouting ‘don't kill, don't eat,’ we humans should accept the fact that we too can be eaten and become feces. I felt a similar sense of liberation at the ‘Omnipresence, Immortality and Metamorphosis’ Exhibition I visited in May this year. It was a quiet, pleasant sensation, as if the contours of the ‘self’ had melted away and bled into the outside world; as if the ‘self’ had been freed from being an entity that had to remain identical, defined by solid boundaries, and therefore had also escaped the conflict and hostility of the ‘other’ against the ‘self.’

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Notes

*1 Philosopher Akinobu Kuroda explains the impossibility of talking about and considering the experience of 'I was eaten'. 'Relearning how to see the world from those who are eaten - from an individualist worldview to a pluralistic cosmology', Contemporary Thought, June 2022 (special issue = Considering Carnivorism - Veganism, Veganism and cultured meat, animal rights... rethinking human-animal relations), p. 127.
*2 Toshiaki Ishikura, 'Eating in a multi-species world - we have never been a single species', Tagui (Special Issue 1: Eating and being eaten), No. 1, Aki Shobo, 2019, pp. 46-54.
*3 Tetsuya Kono, 'The Philosophy of Eating Together and Being Eaten', Journal of Cultural Nursing, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2013, pp. 39-43, p. 41.
*4 Kono, 'Philosophy of eating and being eaten together', p. 41.
*5 Kono, 'Philosophy of eating and being eaten together', p. 41.
*6 Kuroda, 'Relearning how to see the world from those who are eaten', p. 131.
*7 Emanuele Coccia, The Life of Plant: A Metaphysics of Mixture, translated by Masaki Shimazaki, Keiso Shobo, 2019, p. 9.
*8 See Coccia, The Life of Plant, p. 67.
*9 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT exhibition 'pooploop' (27 Sept 2024 - 16 Feb 2025), available at: https://www.2121designsight.jp/program/pooploop/ [viewed 11 Nov 2024].
*10 Interview with Dana Haraway, 'Make kin not babies - cyborgs, companion species, compost bodies and the Cthuluocene' (interviewed by Sarah Franklin, translated by Shitone Sakamaki), DOZINE, 24 May 2019: https://hagamag.com/uncategory/ 4293 [accessed 11 Nov 2024].