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**abstract:**

Contemporary theory of cinema of discomfort shows that unbearable images make us feel and think about le dispositif and our gaze itself, its sensual and engaged features. With an example of *Caniba*, an experimental documentary about a cannibalistic murderer, I point out its self-reflexivity and relations between cannibalism and cinematic masochism. Reflecting on Freud's, Lacan's, Deleuze's work as well as and McCormack's concept of 'cinemasochism', I extract the latter's sensual dimension of iconophagy – the process of devouring images and letting to be devoured.

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## **On Cinematic Voracity: Cannibalism, Masochism, and Unbearable Images**

The image of the elderly man's strained, flaky skin, his face contorted with a morbid grimace, becomes most acute when eating and drinking, or rather while attempting those actions, which clearly pose difficulties and are made possible only by the ongoing help of his brother and a nurse. Still, the partially immobilized man demonstrates an insatiable appetite: he demands larger portions several times and does not inhibit the sounds that accompany eating; he even seems to engage in them with his whole trembling body, as if to compensate for his inability to move without assistance. With childish stubbornness he repeats a number of times: "not enough!," "more!," although his pleasure is probably accompanied by pain and a sense of impotence. Meanwhile, the camera persistently records almost nothing but his face, removed from the context of the body as a whole; a face like an entire landscape of affects, even though it is unable to change expression, unable to control the muscles, inscrutable and monolithic. Even an eye, barely visible beneath an epicanthic fold, fails to offer deeper insight, in a double sense: it seems to stare blindly, while preventing the viewer from penetrating the person; not only is there nothing to understand in this eye, but above all there is not even any depth potentially inhabited by meaning. Falling out of focus at times, the face stands in amorphous contrast to other figures that appear in the frame, but it is always the man who remains closest to the camera – so close that fragments of his disintegrating body in the image can hardly be recognized; closer than the viewer would like to find themselves; far beyond the border of corporeal inviolability. The burden and pressure of the shapeless face are acutely experienced – a face whose most intensive contact with the world appears to consist in eating,

even in devouring, since there is something more at stake in terms of meaning than the mere consumption of food.

The man is Issei Sagawa, a Japanese who, during his doctoral scholarship in Paris, killed and partly ate his fellow student, Renée Hartevelt, on June 11, 1981. Having consumed her breasts, most of her face, and fragments of her buttocks – photographing the corpse and himself at subsequent stages of the cannibalistic act – Sagawa was caught while attempting to dispose of the remnants of Hartevelt's body in the Bois de Boulogne. He spent the following two years in custody awaiting trial. Eventually extradited to Japan, he was never imprisoned, but instead gained a peculiar celebrity status: he appeared on Japanese television, published his own manga, acted in films, and – in a particularly bitter twist of fate – became a culinary reviewer for *Spa* magazine. Today, at 71 and immobilized after a stroke, Sagawa is dependent on his brother's help, regular medical consultations, and nursing care. His decrepitude, subordination to others and, above all, eating as the primary means of maintaining contact with the world, provide the topic of the film *Caniba*, shot in 2017 by director duo Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel. Heads of the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, a unit devoted to the experimental use of film as both material and method of ethnographic research, the filmmakers constantly develop their distinctive cinematic language, which radically expands the borders of documentary cinema. This can be seen particularly clearly in *Caniba*, which is an attempt to reflect on form and medium while posing questions about the ethical dimension of consuming filmic images and engagement in a story based on actual cruelty. Almost throughout the entire 90 minutes, the frame is tightly filled with Sagawa's face, mumbling more or less comprehensibly, sometimes indifferently recounting his crime, sometimes sliding into oneiric associations, but above all – eating. These images sit dangerously close to Sagawa's cannibalistic desire, which – as he

claims – he has never managed to satisfy. The greatest doubts are stirred exactly by this inconvenient proximity, which extracts the memory of cannibalism inscribed in the protagonist's body, failing to offer a credible narrative that could mitigate the cruel senselessness of Hartevelt's death and explain the sense behind constructing such a gruesome image.<sup>1</sup>

However, the problem of the viewer's ethical engagement requires the adoption of a different perspective on relations between Sagawa's story and the viewer's position in the face of uncomfortable images. The



reception of *Caniba* thus far – obviously very limited – has not revealed the complex structure of kinship between the dominant visual feature – Sagawa's fatigued and yet expressionless face – the topic of voracity, and the viewer's position projected by the film. That is why, rather than begin by considering the ethical challenge posed by *Caniba*, I would like to finish on that note, following a meandering, albeit not circuitous path through the implications of the cinematic image itself and the film's fundamental formal solution: radical close-up. It seems radical to me not only because of its magnitude and overwhelming scale, but also because – as I will show – it sets a different relationship with the viewer. Unwavering close-up transforms the experience of the film, which no longer concentrates on sight, but corresponds to the sense of taste and metaphors of consumption triggered by *Caniba*. Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's film is not easily palatable; it sticks in one's throat, causing resistance to the extremely close image of Sagawa, revolving around the attempt to visualize the desire to eat a human body. Although an image that breaks its own discursive sense and escapes meaning turns out to pose an important question, there

is still something that is successfully represented here, and this something provides the focus of this essay.

I have already mentioned some of the film's formal characteristics. These primarily include the most striking mode of camerawork – shooting in extreme close-up, whereby the camera's proximity to Sagawa's body makes itself felt. Cuts are rare, and the protagonists are free to step outside the frame while the camera position remains unchanged. The poorly lit faces – especially one face – sometimes fall out of focus, as if in protest against such intrusive close-up. Dialogues between men are accompanied by extended silences, during which the camera stares incessantly. However, other images also appear, each time very telling. Aside from archival materials from the 1950s (film and photographs of the brothers playing as children), we also see videos of Sagawa's self-mutilating younger sibling, Jun, shared among the BDSM community, and an unbearably long, ten-minute-plus scene in which a doctor who looks after Sagawa reads a manga drawn by him illustrating the events that happened on the night of June 11, 1981. It is striking that both the manga and the footage of Jun cutting himself with a knife convey something very similar to the protagonist's stiffened image: they thematize the experience of unpleasant, painful images and problematize the presence of the body that watches them. Even the seemingly innocent footage from the brothers' childhood is contrasted by a voiceover about the gradual discovery of the sexual role of pain, the development of masochism, and the growing desire to eat human meat – a desire which, according to Sagawa, is inextricably linked with a perhaps even stronger desire to be eaten yourself, which seems to be the most important thing in the context of this essay.

The unhurried pace of the film's narrative, the vagueness of the dialogues (at least to the European ear, unfamiliar with Japanese conversational culture and the importance attached to what is implicitly expressed), and the obsessive

concentration on a single visual motif make the film difficult to bear at the most fundamental level. The traditional 90-minute format is felt here in all its acuteness and the stubbornness of slowly passing time. Silence and muted background sounds lend greater power to the confrontation with the image; tension builds which fails to be released even by the scenes of live conversation. The sensory discomfort caused by *Caniba* serves as the starting point of my reflection on the film as an attempt to generate new and different empathic relations with images – precisely with images, and not with Issei or Jun Sagawa, because the subtle work performed by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel demonstrates that the ethics of their documentary cinema is founded on developing conscious reactions to visual representations as an indispensable element of the subject's relation to the world. The auto-thematic dimension of the cinema of displeasure has been frequently highlighted – for example, Asbjørn Grønstad asks in his texts what the viewer is looking at when turning their eyes away from the screen in disgust or fear. Concentrating on films such as *Antichrist* (dir. Lars von Trier, 2009) and *Irréversible* (dir. Gaspar Noé, 2002), he states that unbearable images draw attention to the *dispositif* of the medium – they become films about watching, films about cinema, representations of the active, engaged labor of looking.<sup>2</sup> In cinema, the act of averting the eyes is represented by the simple image of the viewer directing their gaze beyond the screen, toward the light of the projector, the filmic underpinning covered with stitches of filmic matter, a layer brought to the surface through sadistic strategies of inflicting metaphorical or real pain (who cannot help feeling bodily contortion when seeing Jun's arm girdled with barbed wire to the point of bleeding?). However, images of displeasure do not merely raise awareness of the medial background, as the consequences of transferring the gaze reach much further. Jacques Rancière remarked that the problem of intolerable images – massacres, death, war, violence

– cannot be reduced to doubt concerning the fairness of lending certain phenomena a visual representation, but rather concerns the “dispositif of visibility”<sup>3</sup> : that which can be thought and imagined, which fits the dominant model of representation. The unpredictability and liveliness of images that cannot be tamed opens up a space for new categories at the political level, and expands the field of possible interaction.<sup>4</sup> Seen from this perspective, the cinema of displeasure is by its very principle a project of affectively marked ethical relations.

Here is where another layer of this self-reflexivity reveals itself, since the cinema of displeasure evokes a necessarily embodied viewer, who no longer merely registers a story, but also struggles with acute images, reining back – or not<sup>5</sup> – their own reactions to representations of monstrosity, and responding in bodily terms to interpellation by unpleasant images. This observation is important insofar as I treat *Caniba* not only as a story that exploits the corporeality of filmic reception, but also as a body in itself – Castaing-Taylor and Paravel thus create a film about film, in the original sense of film as a biological layer, a thin protective covering which functions as a porous border between different orders that nevertheless maintain close relations with each other.

But the body that feels discomfort – the viewer’s body, the bodies of the Sagawa brothers, the tormented body of the film – is not the main (or at least not the sole) object of my interest. For what makes me engage with *Caniba* is what Sagawa himself expresses, emphasizing the complementary dimensions of the willingness to eat and be eaten, of pain and pleasure. These are not polar opposites or even two sides of the same coin, but something more – actually one and the same thing, albeit articulated in different ways. I concentrate here on this very indistinguishability and simultaneity, aptly highlighted by the formlessness of the images in the film, by radical close-up that blurs the stable difference between the sides of the screen.

Referring to the concept of “cinemasochism” proposed by Patricia MacCormack, I concentrate particularly on its sensory, *iconophagic* dimension, which consists in devouring the image while also allowing oneself to be devoured by it.

Against appearances, attaching such close attention to eating does not result solely from the film’s topic – an attempt at visual reconstruction of cannibalistic desire – but above all from the ambiguous (yet obvious) relations formed by cannibalism and the desire to devour with questions of masochism and sadism, which are crucial here. The tight connections between them are made visible by the visual structure of the film itself and the viewer’s activity it compels: Castaing-Taylor and Paravel operate with images that refer to taste through shots as close as the food seen during eating, but at the same time these images turn out to be impossible to consume – they cause resistance and nausea; they cannot be swallowed.

The theoretical foundations of these relations were laid by psychoanalysis in the writings of Sigmund Freud, who called attention to the kinship between cannibalism and sadomasochism in *Three*



*Contributions to the Sexual Theory*, originally published in 1905.<sup>6</sup>

Even though their relations are reconceptualized in his later works, the belief in this ambiguous convergence retains its importance.<sup>7</sup> The use of psychoanalysis as a tool may stir doubts after the announcement of reflection on the sensory dimension of the cinemasochistic experience – as rightly remarked by scholars developing contemporary sensory film theory, the powerful impact of psychoanalysis on thinking about cinema in the second half of the 20th century effectively repressed reflection on the bodily dimension of film reception, relegating it to the margins.<sup>8</sup> Interested primarily in the ideological consequences of the

viewer's immersion in pleasant hypnosis, and particularly suspicious of the fetishistic power of the cinematic image, psychoanalysis – above all scholars such as Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey – pursued a somewhat iconoclastic reckoning with the falseness of succumbing to the *mimesis* principle, rather than a reconstruction of bodily reactions to image, seen as secondary to mental processes. Still, the film by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel may build a bridge between the sensorial and corporeal tropes offered by psychoanalysis. This is made possible by the meta-filmic status of *Caniba*, which I do not perceive as an isolated cinematic curiosity or the pretext for a case study. I would like to show that the duo's work comments on the culture of experiencing film in general, showcasing something fundamentally inscribed in the economy of film reception – the same thing that compelled Roland Barthes to write: "In front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes; otherwise, opening them again, I would not discover the same image; I am constrained to a continuous voracity."<sup>9</sup> I treat this insatiable absorption as a model of encounter with filmic images which I refer to as *masochistic iconophagia*.

Evoking the relations and dependencies between sadism, masochism, and cannibalism should be preceded – perhaps somewhat artificially – by a separation of these questions, and by tracing the way Freud framed the origins of what he called in his early writings "the most frequent [...] of all perversions"<sup>10</sup> – sadomasochism. I am using the singular form because the founder of psychoanalysis argued that sadism and masochism were the same phenomenon, expressed actively or passively<sup>11</sup>; he therefore embraced sadomasochism not as a sexological problem, but as an apt representation of an individual's mental life, determined by the paired, opposing notions of activity and passivity. Freud regarded the propensity for cruelty and aggression as an obvious atavism of the sexual drive – especially in men – easier to explain than masochism, which seems to be

“still more remote from the normal sexual life by forming a contrast to it.”<sup>12</sup> It posed such difficulties that Freud initially assumed autonomous masochism simply did not exist, being instead a reformulation of the innate sadism in which the sadistic subject itself becomes the object of cruelty. As an inborn impulse, the willingness to inflict pain must manifest itself early, according to Freud in the pre-genital phase – the phase in which a child’s sexual activity is not yet expressed through the functions of the genitals. The connection between undeveloped sexuality and cruelty is so far-reaching that it is difficult to distinguish one element from the other. According to Freud, this can be proved by the example of children tormenting animals in order to channel premature sexual arousal.<sup>13</sup> Testament to the immense attention attached by Freud to the role of sadomasochism in the development of subjectivity is the fact that this perversion gave its name to one of the stages of pre-genital sexual development. Between the second and fourth years of life, during the sadistic-anal phase (which follows the oral phase, notably also called “cannibalistic”<sup>14</sup>), the child derives pleasure from learning to control his or her body, particularly through the training in cleanliness imposed by parents. Controlling inhibition and excretion not only strengthens the borders of the body and the ego, but also combines with the clashing desires resulting from the instinct of mastery.<sup>15</sup> For what becomes activated during training in control over excretion is the particular desire to both preserve an object through control and to destroy it. For Freud, holding back feces is therefore an image of learning sadistic domination, seizing an object by force and, at the same time, associating pleasure with thereby self-inflicted discomfort. Although Freud does not emphasize it, sadomasochistic inclinations, significantly and not accidentally, are expressed through the rhythmic movement of absorption-excretion,

negotiation of the boundary of the body, and the porousness of membranes – this will prove significant for situating cannibalism within the sadomasochistic regime.

The essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” (1920) complicates the issues of sadomasochism, although they remain rather marginal in the text. Freud’s starting point involves replacing the pleasure principle – the pursuit of pleasure, which organizes the psyche – with the reality principle – trained tolerance<sup>16</sup> for temporary unpleasure and the postponement of pleasure. It is interesting, however, that the pursuit of pleasure does not involve multiplying impulses, but rather limiting and silencing them: pleasure results from a return to the state of stability,<sup>17</sup> restoration of the disturbed homeostasis of stimuli reception. This remark offers Freud the possibility of conceiving drives that are akin to the libido but pursue a return to the idealized state of primary inanimateness which, according to him, characterizes the biology of inanimate matter.<sup>18</sup> Dangerously close to self-annihilation, the desire to “remove internal tension due to stimuli,”<sup>19</sup> sometimes referred to as “the Nirvana principle” after Barbara Low and expressed by the pleasure principle, offered Freud proof that the death instinct exists, which complements the libido. In a slightly later text, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Freud provides a combined perspective on the problem: “The *Nirvana* principle expresses the trend of the death instinct; the *pleasure* principle represents the demands of the libido; and the modification of the latter principle, the *reality* principle, represents the influence of the external world.”<sup>20</sup> This new conception of the death instinct corresponded with the perspective, emerging at the time, of the possibility of the existence of primary masochism, hitherto – as remarked – regarded by Freud as a secondary modification of sadism. With the advent of the concept of the death instinct in psychoanalysis, it became clear to Freud that masochism also constituted an indispensable mechanism of subjectivity, which

had not yet learned to orient the drive outward and therefore made an object of itself.<sup>21</sup> According to Freud, the sadomasochistic regime as a whole is actually closely linked to the new concept of drives, and sadism, which characterizes every libidinal relation with an object, becomes the realization of the death instinct transferred beyond the ego.<sup>22</sup> The inextricable connection between sadism and masochism, the libido and the death instinct, is emphasized by Freud's commentators Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, describing sadistically characterized *jouissance* – utopian, excessive, and transgressive pleasure – in a direct way as ominous and hostile, because such a type of pleasure turns against the subject and poses the threat of its disintegration, which constitutes the horizon of the unexpressed desires of the sadomasochistic subject.<sup>23</sup>

This regime is well characterized by Freud's division into three understandings of masochism, which retain different, albeit stable, relations with sadism. The first is feminine masochism, which entails the pursuit of adopting a passive position in relations with the object – primarily (although not solely) sexual relations. The subject desires to be dominated, humiliated, punished, and beaten, which Freud associated with a regression to the childhood stage of total dependence on the surrounding environment.<sup>24</sup> The second type is erotogenic masochism, perhaps most fundamentally related to sadism as its particular articulation. Freud wrote:

In [...] organisms the libido meets the instinct of death, or destruction, [...] which seeks to disintegrate the cellular organism [...] into a state of inorganic stability [...]. The libido has the task of making the destroying instinct innocuous, and it fulfils the task by diverting that instinct to a great extent outwards – soon with the help of a special organic system, the muscular apparatus – towards objects in the external world. [...] A portion of the instinct is placed directly in the service of the sexual function, where it has an important part to play.

This is sadism proper. Another portion does not share in this transposition outwards; it remains inside the organism and, with the help of the accompanying sexual excitation described above, becomes libidinally bound there. It is in this portion that we have to recognize the original, erotogenic masochism.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, in Freud's view, moral masochism is the most complex emanation of the problem, as it concerns to the greatest extent the general structure of identity. It is related to the particularly merciless power of the super-ego, manifesting a sadistic inclination, and to the masochistic submission of the ego.<sup>26</sup> The first instance expresses the internalized influence of all figures that symbolize strong authority, whereas the second – the child-like subject that demands punishment. Freud sees the need for punishment as an expression of the death instinct and, as such, it bears relation to the situation in which the "satisfaction is tied to the suffering,"<sup>27</sup> once again highlighting the strong link between the sadomasochistic regime of subjectivity, the desire for death and its infliction, and the resulting pleasure.

It is not a matter of chance that in the story – which illustrates the sadomasochistic regime – of the child who acted out situations in which his beloved mother left him, Freud evoked the fact that the woman fed her son without outside help as an argument for the intimacy between mother and child<sup>28</sup> – and not only cultural reasons are at play here. After all, it is the oral or cannibalistic phase, characterized by the indistinguishability of sexual activity and the consumption of food, which marks the development of the foundations of the sadomasochistic regime and its association with cannibalism. The union with the mother in a single organism, the unstable boundaries of the subject, and the importance of sucking bear testimony, in Freud's view, to the desire to incorporate the object, which is dominant in this phase<sup>29</sup> and which can easily be understood as a symptom of primary sadism toward the object and masochism toward the ego

that depends on it. Gradual teething only strengthens the cruelty of the phantasy, and once again reveals its two-way course: “the activity of biting and devouring implies a destruction of the object; as a corollary of this we find the presence of the phantasy of being eaten or destroyed by the mother.”<sup>30</sup>

The convergence between sadomasochism and cannibalism culminates with Freud’s concept of the “totem feast.” Tracing the origins of animistic faith in the totem and the ritual character of the consumption of certain kinds of nourishment – particularly some types of meat – Freud refers to a legend about brothers who joined forces to kill and devour their father, thus putting an end to what he called, after Darwin, “the patriarchal horde.”<sup>31</sup> The sadistic dimension of patricide is unquestionable – the sons not only eliminate the father figure by force, but also ultimately humiliate him by consuming and magically appropriating his strength, which henceforth remains in their hands.<sup>32</sup> However, Freud calls attention to the consequences: it is impossible to derive pleasure from transgressing paternal authority without inflicting serious wounds on oneself and cultivating a sense of guilt:

They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too. After they had got rid of him, had satisfied their hatred and had put into effect their wish to identify themselves with him, the affection which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. It did so in the form of remorse. A sense of guilt made its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group. The dead father became stronger than the living one had been [...]. What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward

prohibited by the sons themselves, in accordance with the psychological procedure [...] under the name of 'deferred obedience'.<sup>33</sup>

Significantly, cannibalistic transgression not only combines with the partial indistinguishability of pleasure and suffering, but above all becomes – not only in psychoanalysis – an important model of relationship with the object.<sup>34</sup> In the abovementioned example, eating the father reflects the magical belief, known in classical anthropology, that consumption of an object is tantamount to the appropriation of its properties,<sup>35</sup> which becomes the matrix of what psychoanalysis calls "incorporation," whereby the subject, more or less on the level of phantasy, allows the object to penetrate the body, and where love for the object and the desire to destroy it co-exist. The sadistic impulse of devouring is obviously accompanied by the masochistic loosening of the borders of the body.<sup>36</sup> Incorporation is graphically commented on by Andrzej Marzec:

the second consumption strategy, which is also a compensation strategy, called incorporation by Abraham and Torok, also involves absorption, the devouring of the deceased, which leads to reclaiming him or her – a reunion and attainment of lost, desired intimacy. In this case, however, the object is swallowed in one chunk, it is not digested, because the goal of devouring is not gradual destruction – as it is in introjection – but rather saving from it destruction, preserving it intact, conservation, or even mummification of the deceased. The experience of loss proves so traumatic and unimaginable for the subject that they are unable to let it happen, and therefore they cannot chew and digest the dead. The one who refuses mourning is thereby doomed to endless indigestion as they hold within them an inedible foreign body, with which they will have to constantly arrange their, although not entirely their own, life.<sup>37</sup>

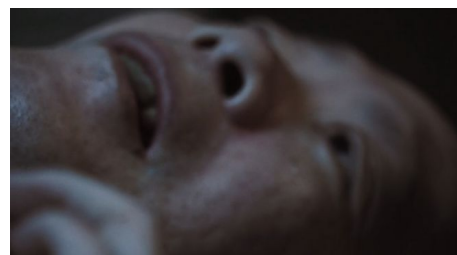
Sadomasochistic cannibalism therefore comes close to the strategy of overcoming otherness, which Michał Paweł Markowski defines as mystical or, more adequately in this case, erotic, and which is characterized by the desire to plunge oneself in the Other and abolish any and all differences between separated subjects.<sup>38</sup> The relationship between the pleasure of self-annihilation, the sadistic destruction of the object, and eating was consistently addressed by thinkers associated with the Collège de Sociologie founded by Georges Bataille, among others – particularly Roger Caillois, who analyzed the phenomenon of mimicry, widespread in the animal world. Biologists usually regard this as a tactic of defense and masking, but according to Caillois it has not been sufficiently described. The dominant interpretation fails to explain the fairly frequent cases in which insects that rely on mimicry fall victim to their own strategy, for instance when one *Phyllium* devours another, mistaking it for a genuine tree leaf.<sup>39</sup> According to Caillois, this behavior becomes understandable if mimicry is considered not as a defense mechanism, but as a principle of crossing the border between the object and space, the background against which it is situated. The scholar argues that mimicry results from a voracity for space, “which chases, entraps and digests them [organisms] in a huge process of phagocytosis.”<sup>40</sup> From Caillois’s perspective, the depersonalization that accompanies dispersal in space is closely linked to metaphors of nourishment and absorption. However, the process also involves a double binding in this case; blurring the borders of the subject in a formless distortion of reality is as traumatic as it is ecstatic. Bearing testimony to this is an excerpt from Gustave Flaubert’s novel *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874), as interpreted by Caillois. In the concluding part, the mad hermit experiences spiritual elation, a universal and boundless mimicry in which everything becomes one, and Anthony himself is a material part of the cosmic metabolism.<sup>41</sup>

In the light of the psychoanalytical theory of the sadistic-masochistic-cannibalistic nexus, it becomes clear that Sagawa's desire to devour Renée Hartevelt co-existed with his desire to be devoured by her.<sup>42</sup> If cannibalism appears as the fulfilment of the erotic phantasy of transgressing the borders of individuality, the ecstasy of domination is tantamount to the pleasure of absolute submission and self-annihilation in the Other. This finds confirmation in the motionlessness of the film's protagonist, highlighted through lengthy shots, whose literal confinement in his own body is also an element of the cannibalistic phantasy of relinquishing control to the surrounding environment and resigning from one's own agency, which Freud associated with masochism to an even greater extent than the experience of pain. However, what proves much more interesting than a psychoanalytical reconstruction of Sagawa's desire is the abundance of meaning in the visual layer of *Caniba* and the position of the viewer's body toward it, because it is on this level – and not necessarily in the proximity between Sagawa and the camera – that the ambitious and difficult ethical project unfolds of creating masochistic cinema depicting a cannibalistic relation with others as a relation close to that established by the viewer with the film image. The genealogy of this thought can be traced back to the very advent of cinema – after all, in 1901 the British film pioneer James Williamson shot the minute-long film *The Big Swallow*, about a defiant man who happily swallows the camera operator and his camera, while also threatening to devour the audience. Yet the best foundations for that matter were laid by Gilles Deleuze. The French philosopher's observations seem significant here insofar as part of his work is devoted to the close-up, particularly the close-up of the face, which is an almost



constitutive image for *Caniba*. Deleuze considers the close-up of the face an erroneous term, since it is impossible to carry out a magnification of something that is already a close-up in itself.<sup>43</sup> For the philosopher, the face that tightly fills the frame is not an isolated part of the protagonist's body, but rather a transfer of the affection it conveys onto the plane of pure potentiality, abstracted from all spatio-temporal coordinates; it creates an image that does not express affection, but is rather pure affection itself.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, entangled in the close-up is the indispensable presence of the viewer inscribed in the image. Representation of the face, which Deleuze calls "the affection image," absorbs the viewer and transfers them beyond existing coordinates. Evoking a statement by Béla Balázs, Deleuze writes: "Faced with an isolated face, we do not perceive space. Our sensation of space is abolished. A dimension of another order is opened to us – physiognomy."<sup>45</sup> What is this physiognomy? It is not, of course, an encounter with a physically present face. It must therefore be a (bodily) confrontation with the image of an object, but not with the image as a representation of an object, but rather with its full-fledged, albeit different, variant. *Caniba* is not so much a record of the bodily presence of the ailing Sagawa, but a kind of a body vividly connected with the body of the viewer struck by the displeasure of the film.

The radical close-up used in *Caniba* seems derived from Deleuze's thought, but rather than in the aspirations of Sagawa himself the directors take interest in the desires of the viewer-consumers of images, and it is their position that becomes reflected in the large-scale image of the face. Castaing-Taylor and Paravel appear to make a justified formal choice: what can better convey the desire to eat than an image of an object that remains as close as food during eating?



The perspective of this invisibility and blurring is the most essential aspect of *Caniba* – Sagawa's face, which speaks volumes while remaining almost frozen, becomes an image of the desire of the viewer, who devours images in order to digest and assimilate their sense. Yet, the way that the human face is built renders it impossible to behold this liminal moment when food is in the mouth – this seems to be the unsolvable drama of Sagawa, persistently photographing subsequent stages of the cannibalistic act. This suggests, in turn, that an image of cannibalistic desire is, in principle, impossible in a form other than such extremely imperfect images falling out of focus, which capture the moment when the eye squints pathetically to see what is entering the mouth.

Remarks by Balázs and Deleuze are not far removed from reflection on being dispersed in the image, eating it and allowing it to be eaten. This trope is followed by Patricia MacCormack, who writes about the cinematographic dimension of masochism as a liminal opening for images that do not necessarily mediate discursive meaning, but above all require submission to sensory impact, going beyond the register of comprehensible messages, sliding into affects.<sup>46</sup> While cinematic sadism would consist in achieving domination over images by appropriating – devouring – their sense, masochism would instead involve resignation from such domination, allowing a visual intensity to emerge between the viewer and the image that would not be exhausted solely within meaning, but would entail bodily encounter and engagement.<sup>47</sup> MacCormack arrives at the conclusion that the stake of cinemasochism is opening up to chance and the unpredictable character of confrontation with images that always transgress what we are able to think about them.<sup>48</sup> Still, it is worth specifying that this does not pertain to merely any kind of chance. Following Deleuze, MacCormack may indeed remark that close-up has the power to “consume” the viewer,<sup>49</sup> but she does not appreciate the

importance of the process. I would rather say that the chance described by MacCormack is the possibility of transgressing the borders of the subject in a two-way flow of cinematic sadism (there is always some sense to be grasped) and masochism (when the viewer opens up to what they do not know but may feel), as I follow Freud and Sagawa in assuming that these two phenomena do not exist without one another, functioning as autonomous, yet connected, elements of the same regime. Masochism reveals itself here through transgression, encroachment – both “crossing the border” and “committing wrongdoing” – on the separation of the subject, which turns out to be as traumatic as it is ecstatic. This intuition is expressed by MacCormack, who notes that self-sacrifice, which characterizes masochism, leads to “cinecstasy,”<sup>50</sup> the ecstatic state of abandoning oneself when possessed by the cinema screening, when the self becomes a space of something different, a bodily proximity of the image. This is precisely Caillois’s moment of ecstatic depersonalization, in which the animal dies, devoured by space, dispersed in mimicry. With regard to *Caniba*, this process becomes an autonomous topic, highlighted in numerous moments of liminal close-up that suggest the increased visibility of the film itself, of this translucent, bodily membrane. This offers a perverse confirmation of Grønstad’s statement concerning the self-reflexive character of the cinema of displeasure – *Caniba*, which mounts effective resistance to consumptional sadism, lends visibility to what is hidden in traditional cinema: film.

Against the concept of identification, derived from psychoanalysis and classic film theory, it should be stated that the masochistic pleasure of engaging with *Caniba* does not entail recognizing in the immobilized cannibal a self who consumes unpalatable images, but in strengthening one's position as the film's viewer, in the profound experience of one's own fascination with images. Steven Shaviro describes this as "radical passivity,"<sup>51</sup> which means the lack of power over what one sees, but also the powerlessness not to see: even turning the gaze away from the film becomes a form of engagement, however negative. *Caniba* therefore requires complete submission and obedience, as depicted in the manga-reading scene, which clearly comments on the film itself. The physician who looks after Sagawa reads the comic strip drawn by his patient before having suffered a stroke, often expressing his irritation at the literal depictions of murder and cannibalism ("It's horrible, I cannot take it any longer"), while giggling from time to time with embarrassment that may be caused by the pornographic imagery. Despite the recurring complaints of the physician, who criticizes both the manga and the motivations of Sagawa as its author ("How can you draw such monstrosities?"), more than ten minutes pass before he puts the comic down, adding the obligatory remark that he found the experience unbearable. This extended shot portrays nothing but subsequent sections of the manga and the hand of the physician flicking through it. The self-reflexive dimension of this scene may be brushed off with the commentary that, like the man in the film, viewers are also masochistically fascinated by gruesome images of crime, and therefore manage to stay until the end despite the difficulties



(the sadists, of course, gave up and left long ago), but this simple remark cannot dismiss the most striking aspect of *Caniba*: that not much is visible in the film. Consent to being consumed by pressing images in huge close-ups is not connected with the perversion of looking at what is difficult to bear, but with the perversion of looking at what is invisible – at the bodily and troublesome link between viewer and image, where the border between one and the other is not easy to demarcate. For it is the persistent impact of images that compels the physician to mask his embarrassment with incomprehensible amusement, and makes viewers of *Caniba* realize their desire to consume images, coupled with the equally strong demand that the images “use me.”<sup>52</sup> An inaccuracy of hitherto formulated film theory was therefore the assumption of most scholars that the viewer’s desires concern gaining power, possession, domination, or stability, whereas the ambivalent experience of *Caniba* confirms Shaviro’s statement that “what film offers its viewers is something far more compelling and disturbing: a Batailleian ecstasy of expenditure, of automutilation and self-abandonment [...], the blinding intoxication of contact with the Real.”<sup>53</sup>

The fact that Shaviro, one of the most prominent theoreticians of the sensory reception of film, refers to the category of the Real, coined by Jacques Lacan – a representative of psychoanalysis, accused of failing to notice the agency of the body – can be understood as a subversive attempt to undermine it, or, in a different vein, proof that the accusations levelled at it are an oversimplification. We might also venture a slightly more suspicious interpretation which exploits unobvious links between the two conflicting factions. Proposed here, the iconophagic dimension of cinemasochism – based on the bodily reception of film – is reflected in an interesting way in the language used by Lacan to convey the relation between the subject and images. This kinship is once again brought to the fore by *Caniba* and its principal image: the face of Issei Sagawa.

I have already mentioned that the huge close-up employed by Castaing-Taylor and Paravel can be understood as a visual translation of the duality that characterizes cannibalistic desire in Freudian psychoanalysis – in the sadistic dimension of devouring images, as well the masochistic pursuit of being devoured by them. At the same time, it may also be an unexpected point at which the viewer is situated. I am returning here to what cannot be seen in *Caniba*, or rather to what becomes invisible due to overly intensive, close staring. This path makes it possible to build a bridge – however temporary – between MacCormack and Shaviro's remarks concerning masochistic disintegration in the filmic image, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, highlighting the significance of relations with the image for the subject.

Such a perspective is provided by Roger Caillois, already mentioned here, whose statements on mimicry are directly referenced by Lacan.<sup>54</sup> The camouflage that allows bonding with space abolishes the division into object and background, into the subject and the territory in which it is located; in Caillois's concept of depersonalization, all stable categories that for centuries determined the individual character of the subject in Western philosophy become suspended by making visible the point in which the gaze does not come from outside, as there is no longer any outside – all that exists is a moment of indistinguishability and a gaze which is existence itself inside this mystical mush.<sup>55</sup> This universal connection also obviously abolishes the strict division between the image and the observer: the subject is always in the picture, and the picture is in the subject. However, the latter remark is not fully expressed by Caillois, but only by Lacan. For Lacan, it was actually the picture that occupied the primary position in the relation between picture and subject: it is in relation to what is offered to the gaze, and to the gaze itself as a bodily power, that the autonomous subject becomes sanctioned.<sup>56</sup> For the gaze is not

only seeing oneself as a seeing subject (this introspective power has so far been of interest to philosophy),<sup>57</sup> but also the awareness, which paralyses the subject, of being beheld by a sourceless, omnipresent gaze, which Lacan refers to using the French term *le regard*.<sup>58</sup> That is why Lacan's attention is drawn to the technique by which animals develop coloration or plumage that resembles eyes. Is it not the case, Lacan asks, that it is not necessarily their resemblance to the organ that is overwhelming, but the similarity of eyes to the pattern expressing the omnipresence and uncontrolled character of the piercing gaze?<sup>59</sup> The totality of *le regard* leads Paweł Dybel to the observation that "the subject is ingrown in the picture as a certain foundational structure or understanding"<sup>60</sup> of the reality that calls it into being. Nevertheless, complete identification is out of the question here – Lacan's commentator notes – as the viewer is ultimately not in the picture; quite the opposite, the viewer is categorically separated from it, and thereby internally broken, as they can never fully identify with what they see, or transgress their own borders.<sup>61</sup>

In the light of this conclusion, the juxtaposition of Caillois and Lacan may at best raise doubts. Since the isolation of the picture from the subject is so complete, how would it be possible to abolish the border between them during a masochistic film screening? However, according to Tomasz Swoboda, this conclusion results from a trivial mistake in translation: while the English version, more widespread among scholars, reads "*But I am not in the picture*," the French original in fact states "*Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau*" [*but I am in the picture*].<sup>62</sup> The eye is always entangled in the picture, even before the first gaze, because it is the anteriority of the visual, of what is offered to sight, that determines the subject's coming to existence. The union of the viewer and the picture also points at the exchangeability of the two notions, the lack of independence of the seeing eye, and its orientation always from (not toward) the

picture.<sup>63</sup> Swoboda's remarks enable the establishment of a stronger connection between Lacan, the viewer's masochistic voracity, and the stain of indistinctiveness, especially as the language used by the scholar clearly matches the categories proposed here: "perhaps it is not the seeing eye that is primary, but the stain, devoid of sensorial functions and rooted in Bataille's *informe*."<sup>64</sup> Even if, according to Swoboda, the stain is sensorially inactive, it is clear that bodily investment in the picture is simply a conclusion drawn from Lacan's statement: "but I am in the picture."

The transversal character of this binding is most fully articulated by Lacan in his discussion of anamorphosis as an example of the intervention of the Real in the symbolic layer of representation. Interpreting Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533), he states that the formless stain of paint in the foreground is exactly such a gap in the field of vision, an aggressive intrusion in the order of sense and meaning of the element that cannot be named or classified.<sup>65</sup> Todd McGowan comments on this fragment as follows:

The gaze exists in the way that the spectator's perspective distorts the field of the visible, thereby indicating the spectator's involvement in a scene from which the spectator seems excluded. It makes clear the effect of subjective activity on what the subject sees in the picture, revealing that the picture is not simply there to be seen and that seeing is not a neutral activity. The skull says to the spectator, "You think that you are looking at the painting from a safe distance, but the painting sees you – takes into account your presence as a spectator." Hence, the existence of the gaze as a disruption (or a stain) in the picture – an objective gaze – means that spectators never look on from a safe distance; they are in the picture in the form of this stain, implicated in the text itself.<sup>66</sup>

McGowan's observation offers a great opportunity to return to *Caniba*: how to understand in the context of this film, if not completely literally, the remark that the viewer is inscribed in the image in the form of a stain? Sagawa's blurred and magnified face not only becomes a metaphor for the consumptional desire for destruction and self-destruction by means of images, but also testimony to viewers' bodily engagement in the film. This is also where the importance of *Caniba* lies as an ethical project – the first and most obvious question on that matter pertains to the use of the figure and history of a real murderer, but there is another, equally important, question which emerges: what is the bodily inviolability of the viewers? Where is its border? Such gestures of the cinema of displeasure – the best remembered in film history is perhaps the eye cut by a razor in *Un chien andalou* (dir. Luis Buñuel, Salvador Dalí, 1929) – problematize the presence of the embodied viewer. In *Caniba*, however, their presence becomes particularly acute, and the confrontation with film as membrane proves ethically challenging.

Castaing-Taylor and Paravel's film not only lends visibility to the relations of desire and devouring that occur on the plane where the image and the viewer meet – and which witnesses the blurring of the rigorous border – but also makes it difficult to swallow, due to the self-reflexive dimension of the filmic form. The discomfort and moral ambiguity of remaining so close to Sagawa, the exploitation of Renée Hartevelt's suffering, and the suffering of the ailing Sagawa himself, a man dependent on others, corresponds closely here to the discomfort of an encounter with images that escape meaning, not always subordinated to a linear, psychologically credible story, but that contain a surplus, that are transgressive, eccentric, and which refuse to accept the role of passive objects of sadistic



comprehension. That is why I believe *Caniba* is a fully responsible attempt to talk about extreme desires, since it does not offer cognitive satisfaction, but quite the opposite – Sagawa's story is shown as the matrix of a close, sadomasochistic exchange between viewers and images. After all, it would be naive to erase the aspect of pleasure from the story, and the film directors fully realize that. However, the pleasure that can be derived from *Caniba* comes at the expense of a certain effort and sacrifice – it requires crossing one's own borders, the acceptance of immobilization, and opening up to images (as MacCormack postulates), or adopting a radically passive approach (as Shaviro describes the state). Yet, the difficulty of this pleasure offers an interesting insight into a differently conceived relationship with film – based not on the voyeur's domination, but rather on the incessant puncturing of the consistency of oneself as the viewer and of the film as a meaningful story. Experimentation with the border of the medium, teetering on the brink of total illegibility, allows Castaing-Taylor and Paravel to extract from cinema its skin – film – much like Antonin Artaud pricked, jerked, cut, scratched, and pierced his works in order to extract from them the essence of drawing.<sup>67</sup> The tormented body of the film makes visible the site of the nexus between the viewer and the image – it is this nexus, it is a membrane, it is film. It is no coincidence that Shaviro, already quoted here, refers to Bataille: *Caniba* would certainly catch the interest of this theorist of the obscene, who explored in his writings the adjacency of desire and death, of libidinal and destructive power, but also, above all, perfectly demonstrated the premonition that the moment of illegibility, of dangerous proximity, is at the same time the point of indistinguishability between the object and the subject, the viewer and the image. This becomes the actual topic of the visual

self-reflection of representations – “the picture obliterates the text, and the meaning of the picture is not in the text behind it but in the obliteration of that text.”<sup>68</sup>

- 1 This particular deficiency of justification is the main argument put forward by critics of *Caniba*, for example in the telling title of the review by Michael Nordine, “‘Caniba’ Review: Cannibal Documentary Is One of the Most Unpleasant Movies Ever Made,” *Indiewire*, October 18, 2018, [www.indiewire.com/2018/10/caniba-review-issei-sagawa-documentary-verena-paravel-lucien-castaing-taylor-1202012309/](http://www.indiewire.com/2018/10/caniba-review-issei-sagawa-documentary-verena-paravel-lucien-castaing-taylor-1202012309/) (accessed January 28, 2020).
- 2 Asbjørn Grønstad, “On the Unwatchable,” in: *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, eds. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 195.
- 3 Jacques Rancière, “The Intolerable Image,” in: idem, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London–New York: Verso, 2009), 102.
- 4 Ibid., 105.
- 5 According to the legend quoted by Grønstad, 250 people left the screening of *Irréversible* at Cannes because of nausea. Grønstad, “On the Unwatchable,” 201.
- 6 Sigmund Freud, *Three Contributions to the Sexual Theory*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York and Washington: Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1910), 11.
- 7 Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 164.
- 8 Jenny Chamarette, *Phenomenology and the Future of Film: Rethinking Subjectivity Beyond French Cinema* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 39.
- 9 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 55.
- 10 Freud, *Three Contributions*, 11.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 12.
- 13 Ibid., 51.


- 14 Significantly, later psychoanalysts, such as Melanie Klein, distinguished in Freud's periodizations the error of attributing sadism primarily to the anal phase. According to Klein, the oral phase, related to sucking and biting, is already characterized by a cruel propensity for depleting, sucking out, and devouring. See: Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), 54.
- 15 Ibid., 217.
- 16 Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 4.
- 17 Ibid., 3.
- 18 Ibid., 32.
- 19 Ibid., 49.
- 20 Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," in: *Essential Papers on Masochism*, ed. Margaret Ann Fitzpatrick-Hanly (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), 275.
- 21 Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 48.
- 22 Ibid., 47.
- 23 Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 66.
- 24 Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism," 276.
- 25 Ibid., 278.
- 26 Ibid., 282.
- 27 Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 244.
- 28 Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 8-9.
- 29 Freud, *Three Contributions*, 42.
- 30 Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 288.
- 31 Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 164.

- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., footnotes omitted, 166.
- 34 Freud had already pointed this out in his earlier works, for example by writing: "The aggression which is mixed with the sexual impulse is according to some authors a remnant of cannibalistic lust, a participation on the part of the domination apparatus, which served also for the gratification of the great wants of the other, ontogenetically older impulse." Freud, *Three Contributions*, 22.
- 35 William Arens, *The Man-Eating Myth: Anthropology & Anthropophagy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 53.
- 36 Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 211.
- 37 Andrzej Marzec, *Widmontologia. Teoria filozoficzna i praktyka artystyczna ponowoczesności* (Warsaw: Bęc Zmiana, 2015), 89–90.
- 38 Michał Paweł Markowski, "Maurice Blanchot: fascynacja zewnętrznocią," in: *Maurice Blanchot. Literatura ekstremalna*, ed. Paweł Mościcki (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2007), 45.
- 39 Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia," trans. Claudine Frank and Camille Naish, in: *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. Claudine Frank (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2003), 97.
- 40 Ibid., 100.
- 41 Ibid., 101.
- 42 The best proof of the simultaneity of these desires is offered by the controversial case of Armin Meiwes from the German town of Rotenburg, who in 2001 killed and ate a partner found online, with the latter's consent. The cannibalized victim, Bernd Brandes from Berlin, voluntarily consumed part of his own body prior to dying due to significant blood loss.
- 43 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 99.
- 44 Ibid., 95–96.
- 45 Ibid., 96.

- 46 Patricia MacCormack, "Cinemasochism: Submissive Spectatorship as Unthought," in: *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy*, ed. David N. Rodowick (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press 2010), 161.
- 47 Ibid., 170.
- 48 Ibid., 171.
- 49 Ibid., 158.
- 50 Ibid., 172.
- 51 Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body: Theory Out of Bounds* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 47.
- 52 MacCormack, "Cinemasochism," 157.
- 53 Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 53.
- 54 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 73.
- 55 Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia," 100.
- 56 Paweł Dybel, "Les quatres concepts fondamentaux de la psychoanalyse," in: *Przewodnik po literaturze filozoficznej XX wieku*, vol. 5, ed. Barbara Skarga (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1997), 219.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 84.
- 59 Ibid., 74.
- 60 Dybel, "Les quatres concepts," 219.
- 61 Ibid., 220.
- 62 Tomasz Swoboda, *Historie oka. Bataille, Leiris, Artaud, Blanchot* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2019), 143.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Ibid., 143–144.

- 65 Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, 88–89.
- 66 Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 7.
- 67 Swoboda, *Historie oka*, 194.
- 68 Georges Bataille, *Manet*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons (New York: Albert Skira, 1955), 67.

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