



Nothing Personal: They Want to Eat You

By **ERIK PIEPENBURG** OCT. 26, 2013

ZOMBIES may be hogging the pop culture spotlight these days in “World War Z” and “The Walking Dead,” but now that the flesh-eating undead are selling Sprint cellphones in television ads, one has to wonder: have they finally jumped the shark as the monster of the moment?

Well, there’s a new wave of evildoers waiting to step in: cannibals.

At the Toronto International Film Festival in September, Eli Roth’s hungry-savages film, “The Green Inferno,” and Manuel Martín Cuenca’s dark love story “Cannibal” played to gore-loving crowds. Other releases this fall include “Butcher Boys,” an urban thriller based on Jonathan Swift’s satirical 18th-century essay “A Modest Proposal”; “The Colony,” about flesh-eating survivors of an apocalyptic attack; “We Are What We Are,” about a father and his cannibal children; the German-language “Cannibal Diner,” with young women on the menu; and “Evil Feed,” a comedy about a restaurant that serves the body parts of losing participants in an underground fighting ring.

On the small screen, NBC’s crime drama “Hannibal,” based on Thomas Harris’s notorious flesh muncher Hannibal Lecter, will return for a second season. And two plays (both closing this weekend) brought cannibalism to the stage: In New York, “feeling” told the story of a woman who talks with Jeffrey Dahmer; in Minneapolis, “Kung Fu Zombies vs. Cannibals” took a comic-book approach to the subject.

So what’s behind this burst of fascination with flesh eating?

For Mr. Roth, the director of “Hostel” and an expert on pushing the boundaries of horror, the fear of cannibals “is not just having your own flesh devoured, but that you would have a taste for another person’s flesh. It’s a primal feeling.”

The tag line for “The Green Inferno,” showing on Nov. 2 as part of the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s **Scary Movies** series, is, “The only thing more terrifying than Mother Nature is human nature.”

Gunnar Hansen, who played the weapon-wielding Leatherface in “The Texas Chainsaw Massacre” (1974), a pioneering foray into cannibalistic terrain, sees it as a sign of the times, just as the cold war gave rise to fever dreams of space invaders and Vietnam ushered in a modern zombie era with “Night of the Living Dead.”

“You can look at the economy and say the past is about to bite us literally and figuratively,” said Mr. Hansen, whose new memoir is called “Chain Saw Confidential.” “We are at the point where a new generation has nothing to look forward to.”

Or perhaps there’s something more visceral at work. Another early favorite of horror cognoscenti — and an inspiration for Mr. Roth’s “Green Inferno” — is Ruggero Deodato’s “Cannibal Holocaust” (1980), about a documentary crew that’s attacked by the flesh-eating tribe they are filming in the Amazon. Its depiction of real-life animal slaughter, which still shocks today, suggests a weird affinity with today’s animal-rights’ movement.

“People rarely think of steak or fried chicken as consuming a dead thing,” said Tim Kelly, who writes about the cannibal genre for Cinematallica.com. “Cannibals force you to confront something you don’t want to understand, which is the truth of what you are consuming.”

Then again, maybe it was just a matter of time before pop culture caught up with real-life reports of cannibalism, like the case of a New York police officer who was convicted in March for a plot to kill and eat women.

And there’s always the possibility of shock fatigue. “Ten years ago nobody would laugh at a movie about eating people,” said Aaron Au, a co-writer of “Evil Feed.” “But the zombie genre desensitized us to be accepting of it.”

On another, even creepier, level, what sets cannibals apart from zombies may simply be their humanity. As Kimani Ray Smith, the director of “Evil Feed,” put it: “A cannibal’s just a smarter zombie. You need more cunning to get away with being a cannibal. But cannibals still have day-to-day problems. They still have to pay the rent.”

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