



# The Cannibal's Journey: Semiosphere and the inversion of the meaning of Cannibalism in film

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Jorge Alberto Cid-Cruz

FIRST AND CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

CONCEPTUALIZATION - ANALYSIS - RESEARCH

METHODOLOGY - PROJECT ADMINISTRATION

RESOURCES - SOFTWARE - VALIDATION

VISUALIZATION - WRITING

cid.jorge@uabc.edu.mx

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

Mexicali, Baja California, México

ORCID: 0000-0001-9691-2503

Received: April 10, 2025

Approved: July 8, 2025

Published: September 29, 2025

## Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the cannibal trope in movies as a narrative figure of identity transformation. A corpus of seven films that address cannibalism as a ritual is analyzed from the perspective of various peripheral tropes such as *consuming passion*, *autocannibalism*, and *cannibal clan*, using Lotman's cultural semiotics approach. Pathological or survival representations are excluded. The film analysis is focused on the cinematographic language that makes specific sequences that prove key semiotic irregularities in relation to the central narrative figure of *Cannibal Tribes*. Results show that in contemporary cinema, cannibalism has ceased to represent exotic otherness and has become a poietic tool of introspection, particularly in female characters. We conclude that the cannibal trope has been reinterpreted in the modern context as a device that explores the ethical, emotional and identity limits of the subject.

**Keywords:** Cannibal trope, translation, semiosphere, semiotic operations, representation

## Resumen

Este estudio examina la evolución del tropo caníbal en el cine como figura narrativa de transformación identitaria. A través del enfoque de la semiótica cultural de Lotman, se analiza un corpus de siete películas que abordan el canibalismo como ritual desde los distintos tropos periféricos como *consuming passion*, *autocannibalism*, *cannibal clan*. Se excluyen representaciones patológicas o de supervivencia. El análisis fílmico se centra en el lenguaje cinematográfico que compone secuencias puntuales que evidencian irregularidades semióticas clave respecto de la figura narrativa central del *Cannibal Tribes*. Los resultados muestran que, en el cine contemporáneo, el canibalismo ha dejado de representar la otredad exótica para convertirse en una herramienta poética de introspección, particularmente en personajes femeninos. Se concluye que el tropo caníbal ha sido resignificado en el contexto moderno como un dispositivo que explora los límites éticos, afectivos e identitarios del sujeto.

**Palabras clave:** Tropo caníbal, traducción, semiosfera, operaciones semióticas, representación

## Introduction

**C**annibalism appears in movies as an ethnographic theme in the first decades of the 20th century. The stories of English travelers and merchants who frequently visited Southeast Asia often referred to encounters with tribes that practiced cannibalism, reinforcing colonial notions of exoticism and danger. *Gow the Head Hunter* (Salisbury, 1928) is considered the first film on the subject, shown as a cinematographic feat in remote and hostile territories, where extreme practices such as cannibalism were attributed to communities far from civilization (*The New York Times*, 1928).

In cinema, cannibalism turned into a narrative resource that was used to satirize, ridicule or demonize non-occidental cultures. In animated productions, cannibals were represented as uncivilized people who were fascinated by modern artefacts (as in *Jungle Jitters* [Freleng, 1938]), by the occidental beauty (*Betty Boop: I'll be glad when you're dead You rascal you* [Fleischer y Bowsky, 1932]), or by the popular music (*Walt Disney's Mickey Mouse: Trader Mickey* [Hand y Gillet, 1932]) highlighting a supposed natural inclination to devour humans (as in *Chew Chew Baby* [Sparber, 1958]).

Multiple studies (Arens, 1981; Franco, 2008; Jáuregui, 2008) have made evident that cannibalism has worked historically as a discourse of discrimination against indigenous and non-European villages. The term "cannibal" comes from a linguistic deformation adopted by Spanish colonists to refer to the Kari'ña tribe in northern Venezuela, now known as the Caribs. According to the letters and diaries that were picked up by Arens (1981), these people were described as belonging to societies that ate humans. Likewise, Villalta (1948) compiles the letters and diaries of the Spanish colonists in Mesoamerica, which describes acts of cannibalism in the New World. However, other studies (Arens, 1981; Salas, 1920) have disproved these statements, mentioning that this was a colonization strategy that allowed the slavery of indigenous persons who resisted evangelicalism, since the church authorized slavery in cases of cannibalism.

These narratives consolidated a symbolic differentiation between civilized and exotic, human and wild, rational and mythical. Thus, the figure of the cannibal came to represent the most radical otherness: an otherness that generates horror and fascination, whether through visceral shock or caricature. Early 20th-century cinema consolidated this image as a colonial projection that dissociated Westerners from what they considered barbaric.

From the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cannibalism returned to the cinema with new connotations. Far from being a representation for primitivism, the cannibal trope is reinvented, expanding its semiosphere, enabling symbolic readings that are richer in meaning. Violence, humor, drama and horror intertwined in these representations, expanding the field of visual and narrative experimentation. Then the main question of this study arises: how has the meaning of the cannibal trope changed in cinema? What new forms it takes and what is its relation with its original representations?

The hypothesis guiding this research argues that contemporary cinema has displaced cannibalism from its traditional place in exploitation cinema to a *poietic* figure capable of articulating processes of individual transformation. This transition involves the dissolution of a previous identity and the formation of a new ethic, marked by the pain of metamorphosis and the symbolic act of devouring another.

To validate and develop the hypothesis, the following specific purposes of the research were established:

1. To establish a conceptual basis for cannibalism as a process of hybridization. For this, it will be necessary to differentiate cannibalism as a ritual of hybridization from pathological anthropophagy, represented in serial killers and characters in splatter films; and from survival cannibalism, represented by characters who are forced to eat human flesh, sometimes in the form of necrophagia, in order to survive in extreme situations.
2. To identify and define the narrative and cinematographic elements that make up the semiosphere of cannibalism in cinema, based on Lotman's postulates (1996a; 1996b), particularly regarding the nuclear structure, the periphery, and the semiotic irregularities that serve as axes of translation and, therefore, of re-signification. The nuclear structure is defined from the super-trope *Cannibal Films*, according to its codification at the TV Tropes (TV Tropes Community, 2008a; 2008b; 2011; 2012; 2015; 2016; 2022) platform, which includes variations such as *Cannibal Tribe*, *High Class Cannibal*, *Consuming Passion* and *Autocannibalism*.
3. To make a detailed cinematographic analysis of specific sequences in selected films, observing how film language articulates

rhetorical operations of comparison, differentiation, and dissolution of the cannibal subject, and how these sequences function as zones of semiotic irregularity that allow the trope to be re-signified through processes of translation in the sense of Lotman (1996b), that is, the generation of new meanings precisely because of these irregularities.

### **Theoretical basis** *Conceptual configuration of cannibalism as a translation process*

The translation idea appears in Lotman (1996a) to denote the processes in which a text is decoded. There are two possibilities here. The first is that the decoding corresponds directly and unambiguously between the meaning within the sender's text and the meaning understood from the text generated in the receiver. In these cases, there is no loss or gain of information, so they are recognized as effective texts. The second case occurs when new information is generated within a communication process, whether due to error, chance, difference, or untranslatability between the initial text and the final text, between the code of enunciation and the code of translation.

Lotman (1996a) suggests that this type of cases, understood as "ineffective", occurs in art texts, for example, and is what makes the emergence of the new possible in them: new meanings, new coding processes, and new translation processes. This allows culture to mobilize. For this case, Lotman mentions (1996b, p. 7<sup>1</sup>): "the minimal condition consists of the presence of two languages, close enough for translation to be possible, yet distant enough so that it is not trivial. This type of text, he concludes, is richer and more complex than any language, since languages collide and overlap in it.

With cannibalism, beyond its empirical existence as a cultural practice, it functions as a symbolic construct that organizes representations of otherness. As Franco (2008, p. 53) states, "the theme of anthropophagy is a theme that alludes to the imaginary, the symbolic, and rhetoric." In this sense, the analytical interest does not lie in verifying whether certain cultures practiced cannibalism or not, but in understanding how the figure of the cannibal defines the boundaries of cultural identity: he is the absolute other, violent, threatening, radically separate.

However, this representation entails a paradox: the cannibal, as a narrative figure, also enables the dissolution of these differences. As Jáuregui (2008) explains, cannibalism has a polysemic value precisely because of its ability to operate metaphorically on the processes of constitution and dissolution of identities. In the cannibalistic ritual, the act of

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<sup>1</sup> T. note: The cited pages in this documents refer to the Spanish version of the book and may be different in the original language.

devouring another produces a hybridization: the devourer incorporates characteristics of the devoured, transforming into a new symbolic entity. This operation implies the material disappearance of one and the subjective reconfiguration of the other (Corominas, 2022; Franco, 2008; Jáuregui, 2008). It therefore involves a process of translating the narrative form of the cannibal into new juxtaposed forms that generate new meanings.

In this way, ritual cannibalism can function as a narrative trope of the processes of identity transition. Its violence not only transgresses “common sense” by violating cultural taboos, but also refers to physical pain as a threshold of transformation. In semiotic terms, the cannibal embodies a cultural irregularity that functions as a device of translation: it disrupts the boundaries between the human and the monstrous, the civilized and the savage, the internal and the external.

Franco (2008) recovers a typology developed by Alberto Cardín on the uses of cannibalism as a trope in cultural discourse. These are summarized in three major narrative functions.

1. As an expression of speech: cannibalism functions as a metaphor for desire or emotion (“I want to eat you”), particularly in erotic or emotional registers.
2. As a liminal figure: it represents the border between what is human and what is not, embracing the beastly, the spiritual, or the metaphysical, and marking the space of the untamable.
3. As a sign of radical otherness: it points out others as a threat or as a fascination, a radical otherness that generates terror precisely because of its ontological remoteness.

These general tropes of cannibalism allow to understand its efficiency as a flexible and powerful narrative figure, capable of being rewritten in multiple discursive contexts, including cinema. From this perspective, the cannibal trope analysis in films is not limited to identify its explicit presence, but rather functions as a textual element of translation, as a ritual of hybridization and dissolution, since it configures new ways of meaning and reconfigures the cinematic semiosphere, as expressed in Table 1.

Table 1. Semiotic operations of the cannibal trope as a translation device and cinematographic appliance

Semiotic operation	Symbolic meaning	Conceptualization	Cinematographic projection
Comparison	Pleasure	Sexual tasting	Scenes where erotic or emotional desire is articulated through metaphors of consumption (aggressive kisses, phrases such as "I would devour you," voracious fantasies).
Distinction	Liminal representation	The untamed wilderness	Appearance of border characters between what is human and what is monstrous: cannibal clans, hybrid bodies, rites of passage.
Dissolution	Otherness	Horror and fascination	Moments where the main character faces or undergoes an experience of radical otherness: autophagy, cannibalistic trance, transformation after the act.

Source: Compiled by author.

### Methodological design *Delimitation of the semiosphere of tribal cannibalism in cinema*

This study adopts Yuri Lotman's cultural semiotics approach to analyze the evolution of the cannibal trope in cinema. It starts from a core semiotic structure identified in *Gow the Head Hunter* (Salisbury, 1928), where cannibalism appears as a radical sign of otherness. In this inaugural representation, occidental explorers face exotic tribes that practice wild rituals. Based on Lotman (1996b), this core is established as the dominant self-description of the system: cannibals as primitive and barbaric communities opposed to civilized rationality.

In narrative terms, this nuclear structure is configured from a basic storyline which is repeated in multiple animated fiction or exploitation films encompassed in the super trope *Cannibal Films*: a group of occidentals, generally explorers or travelers, enters into a territory where cannibals live, lying in wait for them. The members of the tribe feel distrust and curiosity faced with strangers; there is a female protagonist, and a sexual attraction or threat arises. Eventually, the victim is the subject of a cannibal ritual, led by a shamanic or patriarchal figure. The dramatic dilemma is usually resolved with the escape or salvation of the civilized characters. This narrative reinforces the vision of cannibalism as a magical, barbaric, and exotic practice, where ritual hybridization is barely hinted at and remains incomplete, focusing instead on horror, savagery, and exoticism.

From this core matrix, five peripheral tropes are defined that challenge the dominant meaning of cannibalism through what Lotman (1996b) calls *semiotic irregularities*: dynamics that emerge at the margins of the semiosphere and allow new meanings to appear, as processes of translation between the key of the initial canonical text, *Cannibal Films*, and the subsequent texts in the variants mentioned in the introduction section. In this study, such irregularities are manifested as symbolic movement operating through three main axes:

- ◆ From collective ritual to individual experience.
- ◆ From sacred ceremony to wild eroticism.
- ◆ From barbaric violence to aesthetic self-knowledge.

These translations are articulated through rhetorical operations, such as comparison, differentiation, and dissolution, that allow us to decode the symbolic tensions between collective ritual, erotic violence, and subjective experience in filmic texts, which enable us to translate the cannibalistic act into polysemic signs that range from desire to the liminal and from radical otherness to the recognition of the self. Thus, the proposed methodology articulates the principles of cultural semiotics with the narrative forms of cinema, making the cannibal trope a device for exploring the ethical, identity-related, and affective limits of contemporary subjectivity.

A corpus of seven contemporary films was selected that treat cannibalism as a symbolic trope rather than simply a criminal pathology or act of survival in order to identify these transformations. Works in which cannibalism is a psychotic activity (e.g., *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991) or a necessity for survival (e.g., *Supervivientes de los Andes*, 1976) were excluded.

The chosen films were:

1. *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980)
2. *Somos lo que hay* (Grau, 2010)
3. *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Greenaway, 1989)
4. *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001)
5. *Bones and All* (Guadagnino, 2022)
6. *Grave* (Ducournau, 2016)
7. *Dans ma peau* (De Van, 2002)



These works are analyzed through the articulation of their narrative, visual and symbolic elements, from the five peripheral tropes of cannibalism:

- ❖ *Cannibal Tribe* represents the continuity of the core, with collective rituals and a tribal worldview.
- ❖ *Cannibal Clan* transfers the archaic ritual to the domestic sphere, hidden within the urban family.
- ❖ *High-Class Cannibal* represents the devouring act on sophisticated environments, giving violence a meaning of high culture.
- ❖ *Consuming Passion* eroticizes the cannibal desire, integrating coitus and devouring.
- ❖ *Autocannibalism* internalizes practice and transform it into a metaphor of identity reconfiguration.

Table 2 summarizes its narrative characteristics, symbolic displacement and analytic possibilities.

Table 2. Peripheral tropes of cannibalism, characterization, translations and analytic application.

Peripheral trope	Narrative characterization	Translation	Film analytic projection
Cannibal Tribe	Exotic tribe, collective ritual, communal pot, bodies treated as an offering. Tension with what is civilized.	Collective ritual:  border civilization/ barbarism.	Primitive wardrobe, ritualized bodies, fire, group violence, tribal hierarchical relation.
Cannibal Clan	Ritualist urban family, secret cannibalism, task distribution: one hunts, other cooks, another performs the ritual.	Tribal family:  Suburban secret cannibalism.	The house as a ritual scenario, central dining room, covered rituals, domestic tension.
High-Class Cannibal	Sophisticated individual, bourgeois environment, gourmet cannibalism. The aesthetic replaces the ritual.	Culinary ritual:  aestheticization of the act.	Restaurants, luxurious dinners, cultured language, directed lighting, classic music.



Consuming Passion	Intense erotic desire that culminates in devouring. Simultaneous coitus and cannibalism.	Eroticism: affective violence.	Violent intimate scenes, montage of skin and flesh, desire transformed into aggression.
Autocannibalism	The subject devours himself. Autonomy taken into the limit. Crisis and identity reconfiguration.	Corporal pain: self-knowledge.	Self-harm, close-ups of the body, internal dialogue, loss of control over the body.

Source: Compiled by author, from a re-elaboration of identified narrative categories in TVTropes.com; under Lotman's approach.

It's worth noting that TV Tropes is incorporated as an analytical resource, as it constitutes a repository of collective knowledge specific to Internet culture, where communities of users and fans organize, categorize, and comment on content from multiple media devices. This platform represents what Jenkins (2006) defines as culture of convergence, where audiences no longer only consume, but are also active producers of meanings. In this sense, TV Tropes gives epistemic relevance to cultural products, such as cinema, by reflecting persistent narrative structures and their transformations within the contemporary imaginary (Jenkins, 2006; Lévy, 2004).

The methodological focus makes it possible to understand how cinematographic cannibalism has moved from its original meaning, linked to exoticism and barbarism, towards representations that address the intimate, the affective, and the ethical. In this way, the semiosphere of ritual cannibalism is presented as a dynamic space where peripheral narrative forms introduce conditions for the displacement and translation of meanings within the cinematic cultural system.

## **Results** *Analytical description for the re-signification of cannibalisms in movies*

*Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), from the supra-genre of *exploitation* cinema, derived directly from the *Mondo* genre. It is presented as a documentary that follows an anthropologist that is in charge of investigating the disappearance of four adventurous young people who travel to a region of the Amazon to document the lifestyle of cannibal tribes. The film is a mix of false documentary and dramatic fiction which mixes scenes from the report on the rescue, interviews with the families of the documentary filmmakers and the content of recovered film tapes.

The key sequence (see Figure 1) happens when the young documentary filmmakers attack one of the tribe's villages through intimidation practices with firearms. They terrorize the inhabitants, lock them up

and burn them. The main character, Alan, mentions to the camera that in that region the law of the strongest prevails and that they want to demonstrate that. For their part, the documentary filmmakers intimidate the tribe members, mock them, and at one point allude to the massacres in Cambodia, identifying the documentary filmmakers with the genocidaires.



Figure 1. Scene of the massacre of an indigenous tribe.  
Source: *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980).

The entire scene is shot with a handheld camera. The point of interest is sought to be relocated using selective focus. In the foreground, the fire appears, and in the background, in the second or third plane, we see the main action: members of the tribe running or scared, the documentary makers intimidating or filming. The extradiegetic music is a melancholic waltz that intensifies as the scene grows in tension, and the camera emphasizes the tribe's terror and shows some charred bodies. The scene shows us the sadism the documentary filmmakers are capable while leaving a feeling of helplessness and sadness. This scene is key because it marks the climax of the role reversal: the American documentary filmmakers are the savages. By then, we had already seen the documentary filmmakers commit animal torture, watch a member of the expedition die and act indifferent, gang-rape a native woman, take over the village and instill fear in its inhabitants. The documentary filmmakers' narrative arc closes when they are captured by the Tree tribe, killed, skinned, and eaten on camera. The girl is raped by the men and killed by the women. The last scene of that arc is an extreme close-up of Alan's face, as he falls dead in front of the camera.

*Cannibal Holocaust* represents the *Cannibal Tribe* trope and possess rhetorical operations of comparison between the north American documentary filmmakers and the Amazonian tribes and the process of dissolution consists in transforming the occidental subject into an uncontrollable savage.

*Somos lo que hay* (Grau, 2010) tells the story of the structural reconfiguration faced by a lower-class family who practices ritual cannibalism in Mexico City, after the patriarch's death. A fictional and drama-like film, with a Latin American cinematic style, the film focuses on traditional gender roles, the precariousness of the lower classes, and family conflicts, as well as the widespread violence in Mexico City at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The cinematography is cold, with fixed shots and smoothed camera movements. Medium and close-ups

are favored, as the focus is on the immediate social space represented by the family and on the psychological space of the characters. The rare long shots are used to provide context. The main actions are carried out inside the house, whose sets reflect a neglected, hoarding lifestyle, also dark and cold, with earthy tones, where the impression is given that the characters live aged, in the dust, suggesting poverty and carelessness. All the aforementioned is consistent with the *Cannibal Clan* trope.

The key sequence involves the separation of the plots of Alfredo, the firstborn, and his family. Alfredo, confused about whether he should assume the role of leader, leaves the house and comes across a group of boys. He feels attracted by one of them and he follows them to different places in the city. The group notices and we later learn that they had been playing a chasing game. Alfredo's homosexual orientation is later revealed. At the nightclub, he meets his romantic interest, and the latter seduces him. At one point, he tells Alfredo he's going to the bathroom and to wait for him, because "there are a lot of hunters and they'd all like to eat you" (Grau, 2010, 00:51:57). The sequence continues with Alfredo's crisis as he retreats to the subway after the other boy tries to kiss him in the bathroom. Eventually, Alfredo comes to terms with his homosexuality, seduces the boy, and takes him home, with the aim of using him for the ritual (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Scene from Alfredo's "hunt."  
Source: *Somos lo que hay* (Grau, 2010).

This movie presents a mix of *Cannibal Clan* and *Consuming Passion*, contextualized in a time of violence and brutalization of the marginalized class in Mexico in the first decade of the 21st century. It presents rhetorical operations of differentiation and dissolution, the first in that sexual desire occurs in a homosexual relationship, and the second with the breakdown of the family, of which only the youngest daughter will survive, which implies that she is the one who can continue the family's cannibalistic tradition.

In *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Greenaway, 1989), Albert Spica, a violent and misogynistic mobster and owner of a newly opened restaurant, discovers that his wife Georgina is having an affair with Michael, a regular diner. Their romance has continued with the help of Richard, the chef. Albert's personality stands out, as he boasts of having the best restaurant, with the best chef and the most delicious food. However, in the eyes of the chef and his own wife, Albert lacks the

culinary knowledge and sufficient understanding of high culture to recognize the gastronomic delights served there. Albert "compensates" for his lack of good taste with arrogance and excessive conceit.

Stylistically, the film has a marked pictorial style, primarily inspired by Dutch Golden Age painting and operatic theater. The shots are wide and there are rarely close-ups. When they exist, they frame still lifes of food ingredients, emphasizing the pictorial style as a cinematic narrative device, or they focus on details necessary for the plot. The *lateral tracking* shot serves to change settings and emphasize the contrast between scenes. It forms a set of sequence shots and simultaneous transitions that structure the narrative arc of the story: the green kitchen with contrasting red elements, where we meet the main characters and their personalities. The red dining room, where Albert's violent personality and the wife's indifference unfold, and where the lover is introduced. The white bathroom, where the wife and lover meet. The bookcase in ochre tones, and the hospital in yellow.

The key sequence (Greenaway, 1989, 1:12:51) begins after Albert learns that Georgina and her lover are hiding to have sexual encounters. It starts with a close-up of Patricia, who is sobbing under the table, after Albert has stuck a fork in her. The *tilt-up* camera movement stops on Albert, who sits down to eat in a clear composition of triangular symmetry. Albert explodes and begins searching for Georgina. The camera follows him in a pan until he disappears into the background. A lateral tracking shot shows us the interior of the bathroom, following Albert's desperate search, which doesn't hesitate to break everything in its path. A *dolly out* shot shows us the interior of a van, where seafood is in a state of decay. A cut follows a joint shot that frames Georgina, Michael, and Richard, who warns the couple that Albert has discovered them. Off-screen, Albert's screams can be heard searching for Georgina.

The sequence continues with a long shot from inside a refrigerated room, where Georgina and Michael are hiding, framed against the light. Then a joint shot in the cupboard where Albert meets Richard asking for Georgina, and a long shot, where Albert is seen in the background destroying the kitchen, and in the foreground Richard stoically observing all the action. Then, we see a long shot of the restaurant's exterior, where one of the vans is approaching the entrance. There's a close-up of Albert, who continues destroying, now, the kitchen utensils. He then shouts that he'll find them and eat them [Michael]. An establishing shot is shown, framing the back of the van, the assistants opening the doors, Michael and Georgina recoil in disgust at the stench of putrefaction inside. They both get in and escape (Greenaway, 1989, 1:18:16) (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Scene from Albert's tantrum.

Source: *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Greenaway, 1989).

*High Class Cannibal* and *Consuming Passion* tropes are developed in this film, although the latter is shown in its metaphorical form, between lovers. For the first trope, we can see that Albert manifests his powers through violence. We now that he sexually abuses his wife and that she has been held against her will. Albert's power is not distinguished by intellectual or refined wisdom, quite the opposite. In this sense, the *High Class Cannibal* trope is subverted, as Albert is forced by Georgina to eat Michael's corpse. In this sense, the powerful but ignorant subject, who enjoyed torturing the powerless subject, has to fulfill his vow to eat Michael, revealing his weakness and projecting his brutality. The *Consuming Passion* trope is subtler, as it occurs as a dialogue about high culture and cannibalism between Georgina and Richard. Thus, the film presents all three forms of constitution-dissolution cannibalism: sexuality, bestiality, and radical alterity.

In *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001) there is a convergent montage and a mix of wide shots, many close-ups, and group shots. This blend of drama and suspense, with a few hints of *gore*, shows us two stories featuring two cannibals as protagonists: one female and the other male.

The photography uses a cool color palette, which helps emphasize the melancholic and lonely tone of the protagonists and their respective partners, except for the cannibalism scenes, where the red color and warm temperature of the photography communicate violent passion. The close-ups are particularly notable, especially in the laboratories, where there are echoes of urban symphonies, this time rendered as laboratory symphonies.

The key sequence is when Shane (the male cannibal) finds Korah (the female cannibal) in the house after she has finished eating one of the boys she seduced (Denis, 2001, 1:10:33-1:14:58). An over-the-shoulder close-up alternating with a full shot shows Coré walking down the stairs with her head bowed, in reverse shot of Shane's face, who is hiding behind a door. The camera focuses on contrasting both faces: Shane, calm, watches from the darkness, while Coré enters the kitchen. In a combination of close-ups, we see Coré light a match, look at the fire, and inhale the smoke. There is a cut. A very close-up shot is shown of Leo's face (Coré's husband), who is returning home on a motorcycle. Following the cut, we see Shane and Coré embracing in a joint shot (by this point in the story, we already know they knew each other). The hug



goes from Coré's feeling of relief to a struggle. A reverse shot shows Shane choking Coré. The camera follows them as they fall to the floor, where he ultimately kills her. The camera follows Shane until he exits through a door in the background. An unseen fire engulfs Coré's body, burning her to ashes. A couple of close-ups show us the fire consuming the house. The scene, which until then had a diegetic sound, is complemented by the sound of melancholic violins. And Leo's face, looking through the fire, showing no emotion. The next scene begins with an extreme close-up of Shane's face, caressing the back of his wife's neck, the two of them lying in bed (see figure 4).



Figure 4. Scene of the meeting between Shane and Korah.  
Source: *Trouble Every Day* (Denis, 2001).

While the film doesn't go into any detail about why the characters act the way they do, it does hint that the protagonists' cannibalism arose from a failed experiment, stemming from Leo's research when he was hired by Shane a few years earlier. It also suggests that there was a possible romance between Korah and Shane, and that their partnership later disintegrated. *The High Class Cannibal* and *Consuming Passion* tropes are present. For the first one, Shane is a rich scientist who stole Leo's research, in the process of which both Shane and Coré experimented with certain substances. This is also a case of people with intellectual superiority, associated with the upper classes. The fact that the experiment led to the development of a cannibalistic sexual drive integrates the elements of *Consuming Passion*. Both Shane and Coré devour their victims while having sexual intercourse with them, the violence intensifying during orgasm.

However, the chosen sequence is key because it allows us to distinguish between the two versions of this trope: the male gaze and the female gaze. The former in the sense of Mulvey (1975): women are shown in such a way as to provoke a strong visual and erotic impact. While the second can be understood as a fluid way of viewing masculinity, without falling into a strict definition of romantic, protective, and sexual fantasy-oriented masculinity (Coles, 2023). We'll see Shane abusing and devouring a hotel maid, before finally returning to his wife, fulfilling her dream of traveling to Paris. In this sense, the woman, as a sexual devourer, dies, while the man remains alive, continues his life with his partner, and learns to seek out victims. In short, Shane's constitution-dissolution as a cannibal within his marriage involves the murder of his female counterpart. This film presents sexual desire, bestiality, and otherness.

*Bones and All* (Guadagnino, 2022) is the most recent film in this review and possesses elements of the *Consuming Passion* and *Cannibal Clan* tropes, but mixed with the teen romance and *coming of age* subgenre. It features cinematography in warm tones tinged with green and are in tune with the semi-rural environment of the locations and the nostalgia that is usually projected in teen films. The care in the composition of the frames, joint shots and close-ups stand out. Wide shots and extreme wide shots are used to show the settings where the protagonist travels and thus emphasize that she is experiencing a physical and emotional journey.

The film presents the three semiotic operations as a translation device: comparison, differentiation and dissolution. The main character will learn and accept her cannibalistic condition, but not before experiencing the horrors and some sweetness that it entails. The following three tropes of cannibalism cinema are presented: *Cannibal Clan*, *Consuming Passion*, and *Autocannibalism*. The first trope focuses on cannibalistic activity in precarious urban environments. The characters are also presented as precarious and, in some cases, unkempt and dirty. However, the irregularity lies in the fact that these clans are built on ethical similarities rather than family ties, as in *Somos lo que hay*. In fact, there is a search for the formation of clans. Sully tries to convince Maren to join them. Maren looks in Lee for that person she can trust. Jake and Brad are a couple formed by an “eater” and a non-eater, who represent the most dehumanizing degradation, since one has unscrupulously embraced his bestial impulse, while the other has developed a sort of paraphilia within perversion.

The *Consuming Passion* trope is presented as the apex of the film: Lee is wounded by Sullivan and asks Maren to eat him. She does so as an act of dignity. Maren experiences ecstasy in a paradoxical situation, seeking dignity and love through Lee. It follows that this act represents Maren's complete transformation, as it is when she accepts her bestial impulse. It is here that Maren's constitution-dissolution is completed, and she now embodies Lee's otherness: his suffering and his capacity to survive as a cannibal.

The autophagy trope is underdeveloped; it is presented only as a last resort in the face of the uncontrollable urge to eat human flesh. This trope is represented by Maren's mother, whom we discover without arms and in a psychiatric hospital. It is assumed that she was the one who ate herself. However, we consider this to be the key sequence of the film (Guadagnino, 2022, 1:19:32-1:23:48), as it involves the inversion of significance of the *Cannibal Clan* trope, while also presenting the limits of the cannibalistic impulse in autophagy and acts in the name of filial love.

The key sequence begins inside a hospital (Guadagnino, 2022, 1:20:40), the handheld camera follows Maren, who looks into the back of a room at who is supposed to be her mother. With a cut, the handheld camera



shows us, from Maren's point of view, that the nurse seems to be caressing someone who is hidden behind the wall in the corner. The same point of view, with a handheld camera, reveals the nurse with a woman with two arm stumps and short hair, cornered in a chair. It is Maren's mother, who cannot articulate words and moves anxiously, seeking protection in the corner of the room. From this first-person shot, we see the nurse asking the woman if she wants her to give her a letter she wrote some time ago. She approaches the camera and hands it to her. The camera focuses on the addressee: *"for my daughter."*

From here, the interplay of shots and reverse shots will focus on showing Maren from a third-person close-up and her mother as seen through a handheld camera from Maren's point of view. While this is happening, her mother's voice reads in voiceover the contents of the letter. As the letter's content becomes more personal and painful, Maren's point of view will move from a close-up to an extreme close-up of her mother's face, who tries to hide by looking down. A joint shot shows us Maren as close as she can get to her mother as she reads the letter. Finally, in the letter, her mother tells Maren that the world of love doesn't want monsters like them, so she asks her to allow her to help her escape from it. So, From Maren's point of view, with her mother in the foreground, we see the woman suddenly lunge at the camera. A third-person close-up frames the moment her mother tries to bite her. Finally, the nurse stops her, Maren runs away, and her mother screams, "Maren, die!" (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Scene of Maren's encounter with her mother.  
Source: *Bones and All* (Guadagnino, 2022).

This scene triggers Maren's crisis, as she discovers that her mother went mad to the point of eating her own arms, and she realizes that her boyfriend killed a man with a family so that they could eat him. By this point, she has seen that there are all kinds of *"eaters,"* from the most violent who create communities to the most solitary who long for company. She then decides to embark on a path separate from Lee, whom she will meet again toward the end of the story. Basically, the sequence shows Maren as a fully individualized person.

The journey through the Mideastern United States represents Maren's journey of transformation, as she realizes that her impulse had manifested itself from a very early age and seeks out her mother with the intention of recognizing herself. At the same time, she learns that smell allows her to know who is a cannibal or who is about to die, and she also

learns some moral principles: not to eat fellow humans and not to kill to eat, but rather to wait until someone dies. In her personal journey, she meets other types of cannibals, with different principles, but she develops the idea that their lives are solitary, so it's important to know with whom, like her, she can form bonds. She learns that ethical boundaries can be exceeded, that there may be people who lack the impulse and still practice cannibalism, or who do so free of any moral constraints. Maren's journey is one of calling, learning, and building a cannibal ethic that culminates when she eats Lee, in an act of commiseration and love. But at the same time, she is able to understand that horrific acts can be committed based on impulse, that one is not exempt from them, that one may even fall into them as part of the learning process. And that love, while it didn't set her free, did allow her to rebuild herself.

*Grave* (Ducournau, 2016), with sequential editing, shows us the cannibalistic awakening and the learning process of a girl who used to defend animal rights. Medium shots medium shots, group shots, and close-ups abound because the film focuses on the psychological dimension of the character and her immediate relationships. The composition of the frames mostly features centrality and the rule of thirds, providing order and harmony to images that due to their graphic content, can be shocking, provoking mixed feelings of pleasure and displeasure alike. The color temperature is cool, with light blues for the exteriors, the medical spaces, and the violent moments. On the other hand, warm yellows are used for the bedroom, especially in the most intimate moments between the two sisters.

In the film, after Justine bites the boy she kisses for the first time, in a game of dares, she returns to her room and curls up with Adrien, her gay friend, who asks her questions about whether she has paraphilia and how strong they are. She goes away. The key scene begins just as she returns to the room (Ducournau, 2016, 1:08:54–1:10:47). A medium shot shows her positioned in the center of the frame. She replies, "It's bad," indicating that her paraphilia is severe. What follows is a series of side close-ups and close-ups of the characters furtively kissing. With abrupt cuts and a handheld camera movement intended to reframe the tight shot, the dynamics of domination and pleasure are revealed. At the moment Justine dominates the situation, the camera, from a low-angle *over shoulder*, shows Adrien's confused reaction, trapped between Justine and the bed frame. This shot is interspersed with reverse shots of Justine, framed in a frontal close-up, whose expression seems somewhere between fury and ecstasy. At one point, Adrien seems to be trying to control her, but without success. Finally, a medium close-up shows Justine biting her own arm until it bleeds, as she experiences orgasm. The scene, which began in very cold blue tones, ends with yellow lighting on Justine's face, where she stares at the camera with a stern expression that could be equal parts pain and anger. As her arm bleeds, Adrien strokes her head (see Figure 6).

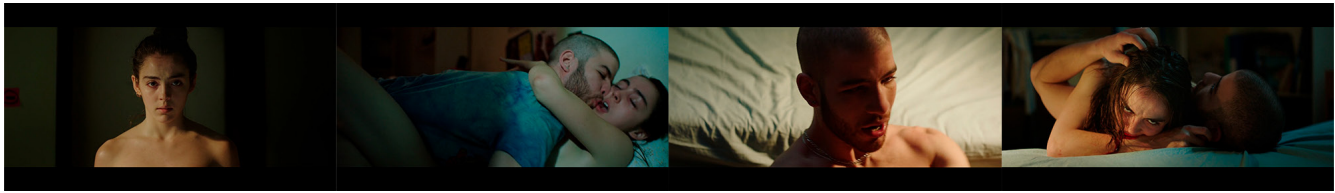


Figure 6. Scene of Justine's sexual act with her friend.  
Source: *Grave* (Ducournau, 2016).

The tropes that appear in this film are *Consuming Passion* and *Autocannibalism*. The former is present when Justine (the protagonist) kisses a boy (Ducournau, 2016, 1:05:16) and when she has sex for the first time (Ducournau, 2016, 1:08:50), although it is seen at other times (Ducournau, 2016, 0:42:17, 0:54:59, 0:56:35). The second case is present in the film's key scene, as it combines both tropes and is where the protagonist's ethical resolution is created.

On the other hand, *Dans ma peau* (De Van, 2002) is an independent film shot on a low budget. It was written, directed, and starred in by Marina de Van, so it can be considered art-house cinema. The film is narrated through linear editing, in which we see the protagonist's approach to the experience of autophagy, the process of assimilating what will become an obsession, and the outcome that culminates in her psychic reorganization (comparison, differentiation, and dissolution). It is told from medium shots to detail shots. Except for a few scenes, the entire story takes place indoors, mostly in dim light. A montage near the end of the film takes on video art overtones, interspersing shots of blood spatter in a room, sharp objects, skin, and photography equipment.

The key sequence (De Van, 2002, 44:04 - 49:51) begins when Esther, along with her boss, has the most important business dinner with some clients. Up until now, Esther has demonstrated great work ethic, and this meeting represents an opportunity for advancement in her career. However, as the scene progresses, we find her distracted and anxious, as she looks at her fellow diners' plates and begins to feel compelled to eat her own body. Meanwhile, the conversation progresses in a series of close-ups of each of the participants.

A frontal close-up of Esther's face is followed by a close-up from her point of view of her plate, where we see her hands clumsily manipulating the steak, to the point of pricking one of her fingers with the fork. Eventually, the sequence of shots will show Esther's face and hands fighting each other, implying that one of her hands is moving independently of her consciousness. While this is happening, Esther tries to follow the conversation. A close-up from Esther's point of view shows one of her hands trying to calm the other, which is grotesquely clutching the steak. A vertical camera pan goes from the fighting hands to her forearm. There we discover that Esther's arm is separated from the rest of her body. The frame returns to a close-up of Esther's face,

which appears alienated from the conversation and subtly disconcerted. A wide shot then shows Esther in profile, with her arm lying on the table, separated from her body. Esther looks at it. A cut to a close-up shows her touching her separated arm with her other hand, only to realize that it has become numb. While the conversation continues, the waiter approaches to remove her plate. With a clumsy movement, Esther prevents him from grabbing it, assuming the waiter wants to take her separated arm. Those at the table turn to look at the situation, but pay no attention to the separated arm. This tells us that only Esther sees it this way. A wide reverse shot shows Esther, now facing the camera, with her arm lying on the table, she discreetly pulls it away. She looks at her arm again and realizes that it is once again attached to her body. Eventually, her body's need to eat leads her to abandon the table and lock herself in the restaurant's wine cellar (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Scene of Esther at dinner with the guests.  
Source: Dans ma peau (De Van, 2002).

The significance of this scene is that it projects the character's subjective dimension, distancing her from any biological impulse, as in the previous films, and directing her toward the discovery of her own humanity, the lack of self-knowledge. A process of reintegration becomes evident, which involves separating from her social-affective and professional world in order to explore, through auto ethnography and aesthetic practice, the emotional dimension of her person.

Once the analysis of the films has been carried out in their narrative and semiotic dimensions, the analytical exercise is summarized (see Table 3).

Table 3. Analytic summary of the cannibal tropes and semiotic translation

Film	Cannibal trope(s)	Rhetoric operation	Narrative and audiovisual features	Semiotic translation
<i>Cannibal Holocaust</i>	<i>Cannibal Tribe</i>	Comparison, dissolution	Fake documentary, handheld camera, melancholic extra-diegetic music.	The civilized subject is translated as savage: role reversal.
<i>Somos lo que hay</i>	<i>Cannibal Clan, Consuming Passion</i>	Differentiation, dissolution	Cold photography, closed shots, precarious urban context.	The family as an urban ritual clan; homoerotic desire is the translation of the patriarchal into the different.
<i>The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover</i>	<i>High Class Cannibal, Consuming Passion</i>	Comparison, dissolution	Pictorial aesthetics, open shots, lateral tracking shot.	Ignorant power translates as bestiality; love, as a devouring voyeuristic passion.
<i>Trouble Every Day</i>	<i>High Class Cannibal, Consuming Passion</i>	Comparison, dissolution	Cold photography, close-ups, laboratory detail shot.	High culture translates into devouring science; feminine and masculine desire intersect in a single trope; the masculine devouring force persists, the feminine devouring force is annihilated.
<i>Bones and All</i>	<i>Cannibal Clan, Consuming Passion, Auto-cannibalism</i>	Comparison, differentiation, dissolution	Warm tones, wide shots, initiatory journey.	Affective translation of cannibalism as love; an ethical clan without blood ties.

Grave	<i>Consuming Passion, Autocannibalism</i>	Differentiation, dissolution	Tight framing, psychological shots, use of emotional color.	Self-discovery of bodily otherness: translation of desire into drive is inherited from mother to daughter.
<i>Dans ma peau</i>	<i>Autocannibalism</i>	Comparison, dissolution	Medium shot, subjective montage, video art aesthetics.	Autobiographical translation of subjective alienation into psychological reintegration in the form of artistic expression. Cannibalism as an aesthetic manifestation.

Source: Compiled by author.

Table 3 integrates the analyzed semiosphere of *Cannibal Films*. The narrative elements that characterize peripheral tropes are considered; the elements of cinematic language that give them internal structure; and the semiotic irregularities that make each film presented offer elements for redefining the cannibal trope. The second part of the table sets out the rhetorical operations of dissolution-constitution that are presented in each film. To this end, three narrative moments are established: comparison, differentiation, and dissolution. In the first case, the cannibalistic act, or the person who performs it, is or is compared to cannibalism itself, suburban everyday life, the pretense of high culture, sexual relations, based on moral affinity, etc. Differentiation occurs in determining a prior or subsequent otherness that demarcates the positioning of the main characters, and dissolution is presented as the narrative resolution with respect to cannibalism or the cannibal itself.

## Conclusions

A network of argumentative expositions was developed that aims to explain the cannibal trope as a *poietic* trope, that is, one that generates meaning regarding otherness. It has shifted from its original Eurocentric representation to the violent recognition of the contemporary civilized individual, who is now presented as a stranger to himself.

Each peripheral trope represents a semiotic irregularity that pushes the limits of the core canon, either by displacing violence toward eroticism (*Consuming Passion*) or transforming ritual into a subjective experience (*Autocannibalism*). This analysis demonstrates the shift from the collective to the individual, from the ceremonial to savage eroticism, from savage violence to a highly sophisticated form of self-knowledge. Cannibalism in cinema has functioned as a semiotic device for identity and



cultural translation, where the transformation is violent, first exerted on others, and then exerted on oneself.

The various cinematic texts presented reveal a paradox: one in which cannibalism seems to stop emphasizing difference and instead focus on similarity, on the inversion of meanings, where the savage is no longer the stranger from a world frozen in the Neolithic. In any case, the cannibal begins to take on characteristics specific to modern civilization, or rather, a form of cannibalism emerges at the center of modern civilization, which mutates and, at the end of this process, at least until now, is represented by the Western subject devouring itself. But not as the explicit result of an excess of individuality, particularly in *Dans ma peau*, where this relationship is not manifested as a simple excess of individuality, but as an autobiographical exercise of recognition.

"Cannibalism functions as a *myth* not only of colonialism, but also of the disciplines that produce knowledge about Otherness" (Jáuregui, 2008, p. 19), which means that cannibalism is essentially a theme about the representation and assimilation of otherness, and that this can be represented both in science, as in anthropology or medicine, and in the field of art, particularly cinematography.

In this sense, we can say that the cannibal's journey is analogous to the hero's journey, with the proviso that the cannibal undergoes a process of comparison, differentiation, and dissolution in his cannibalistic condition, that is, as a form of desire for the other, the liminal representation of oneself, and the assimilation of one's own otherness. It seeks to confront the individual, particularly the female, with her potential for hybridization and as a source of translation of meanings into new information.

The tracing of the semiosphere, by identifying irregularities and key scenes that point to the transformation of the characters in the set of films analyzed, allows us to understand the evolution of the trope itself. Cannibalism in cinema has changed in the same way that popular culture has changed. That is, cannibalism as a cinematic theme reflects some of the existential themes of consumer culture. From exotic cannibals in remote jungles in the *exploitative* cinema of the late 1970s, to the erotic pleasure of the Other; to autophagy as a form of personal transformation.

At this point, cinema ceases to have a distant, ethnographic perspective and focuses on the interior space, the intimacy and psychological space of cannibals. Something that draws attention to this shift in meanings is the influence of the "female gaze" in cinematic representation. Exploitation cinema clearly shows white heroes, rescuing "bimbos." But in films such as *Trouble Every Day*, *Bones and All*, *Grave*, and *Dans ma peau*, the female cannibal possesses a cannibalistic drive and also manifests



a deeper affective dimension than that of her male counterparts. Her psychological and emotional dimension gains relevance, as the films explore the subjective aspect of the characters.

The aspect of the female gaze—exposed in Coles (2023), in the sense of encouraging a cinematic representation of female desire and sexuality, and in the sense of Soloway (TIFF Originals, 2016), through a subjective camera that explores the protagonists' interior—is consistent with the identified semiotic irregularities and, therefore, essential for the possible translations that derive from it. All of the above has been necessary for the cannibal trope to completely shift from its exclusive origin in *Gow*, *The Head Hunters*, and the sexualizing trope of *Cannibal Films* to its poetic potential in 21st-century films. 📌

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### ◆ About the author *Jorge Alberto Cid-Cruz*

Designer-researcher and audiovisual creator based in Mexicali, specializing in pedagogical, methodological, and technological approaches applied to graphic design, visual communication, and design thinking. His work integrates design thinking, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and data visualization as technical-conceptual assemblages for the training of designers in complex sociotechnical contexts.

He has developed methodologies that connect communication models and media labs with educational processes aimed at innovation, transdisciplinarity, and critical reflection. His research also extends to film analysis, with an emphasis on science fiction, horror cinema, gender representation, internet history, and documentary typologies, from semiotic and cultural perspectives.

He complements his academic activity with artistic practices in video projection, video mapping, and VJing, exploring complex visual narratives and performative environments. This creative dimension broadens his critical approach to design as both experience and medium.

His publications appear in indexed journals and repositories such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate, where he contributes integrative perspectives on technology, education, design, and contemporary visual culture.



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