

(S4, E5) MeatCute: The Fine Young Cannibals of Modern Horror

Hi friends! So, I mentioned last week that my Gwyneth Paltrow rabbit hole was actually me getting totally side-tracked from what I was doing, which was spending an extensive amount of time thinking about romantic cannibalism. In like... a literary sense, not a literal one. If there is one promise that this podcast can make you, it's that we will never try to eat you in a sexy way. I was going to make a joke about oral sex there, but I have refrained because I am a bastion of podcasting integrity and also because, due to the 'mum' effect, a not-insignificant component of my audience is over 60. Ladies, this one's for you.

Anyway, I got all the "yelling about ski crimes" out of my system and now I'm back to this podcast's primary purpose: yelling about movies I've watched and calling it an intellectual exercise. You're going to hear me say the word 'flesh' a lot this episode. You're welcome.

I'm Alex – this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about cannibalistic romances.

Ok, so this specific thought process for me actually started all the way back in 2016 when I watched the French film, *Raw*, which is a sort of coming-of-age story but with compulsive cannibalism standing in as a metaphor for budding

sexual desire. *Raw* was one of those cinematic experiences I think about a lot. I went in knowing very little about it beyond the fact that it was screening as part of a horror festival and some of the reviews had been glowing; I had a deep and visceral reaction to it and then I never watched it again. But it didn't really leave my brain – I think about it so often because it was both an extremely well-done film and profoundly upsetting. Sometimes I talk to other people who've seen it and almost all of them saw it by accident or because someone else recommended it, and every single one of them reaches a point in the conversation where they darkly mutter "fucked up... fucking French films, man". And look, that's fair. It is deeply French, but I think they're mainly responding to the subject matter. Scenes of cannibalism remain an uncomfortable watch for most people, even when they're wrapped in a tightly scripted metaphor about female sexuality and the violent suppression of desire. And unlike American films, the French aren't really shy about actively showcasing the gore. I loved it, but it's a pretty uncomfortable watch. It's wild to me that people are just out here recommending it to their friends without a caveat.

Anyway, other people's questionable recommendation practices aside, I was

kind of fascinated by this rare breach of cannibalism into the artistic mainstream. *Raw* debuted at Cannes, was awarded by the International Federation of Film Critics, and was generally reviewed pretty favourably as an artistic endeavour. Cannibalism, when it's depicted, is so taboo and splashy that it's often relegated to the B-grade – a grindhouse staple associated with low production values, average acting and a thin plot. For *Raw*, the shock value of the subject matter didn't detract from its success as a film, or the sense that it should be taken seriously. But obviously I never got around to writing anything, I just continued on seeking out fellow traumatised viewers and making them rehash the experience of watching it with me while conspicuously avoiding ordering the house red.

But then when 2022 rolled around something weird happened – not one but two American cannibalism movies were released with big names attached. *Fresh*, starring Sebastian Stan and Daisy Edgar-Jones, was released digitally on Disney+ in early March and, through some clever marketing, was positioned as a rom-com with a lurking hint of menace that doesn't become apparent until you sit down and watch. *Bones and All* was released in November, starring Timothée Chalamet and Taylor Russell, and was positioned as a *Natural-Born-Killers*-esque, couple on the run, romantic horror. They both received wide release, and while they were definitely doing different things plot-wise, they both very firmly featured romance as a central theme. Which is an odd turn of events considering cannibalism's usual position as a grindhouse shock tactic.

I've done a few episodes on horror for this podcast, because it's my favourite genre to watch (aside from action movies where everything explodes), and we've kind of talked about how the monsters in horror movies are usually allegories for the audience's real-world anxiety – aliens and xenophobia, vampires and sex, etc. Given that cannibalism is a rare-ish subject for films to tackle, and we've gotten two films in a single year that bleed romance into their flesh-eating tendencies, I thought it might be a nice time to finally look at what the fuck is going on there. Join me, Clarice.

Alright so I think it's probably worth starting with defining what I mean by cannibalism and giving a little bit history on modern cinema and man-eating. Firstly, because monstrosity and the consumption of human flesh is kind of a slippery slope in terms of working out where you draw a line. And secondly because I'm sure there's at least one horror movie nerd listening to this and going "Dude, there's like so many cannibalism movies – what does she mean "rare jump into the mainstream"?"

To start with, when I'm talking about cannibalism I mean 'people eating people', which sounds simple enough, but what I'm really saying is that I'm excluding common monsters that have or retain a human shape from my film roundup. Zombies are probably the main example that people want to argue the point on. While zombies are human and they eat human flesh, they're usually portrayed as losing some of their agency prior to the switch to flesh-consumption. They've been possessed by the devil,

or taken over by a mysterious virus, or whatever it is depending on the day. The actual horror often lies in the sudden loss of humanity to the void of mindless meat consumption – they're stripped of their human qualities. So though technically it counts as cannibalism, it's also something else entirely.

Now, as for the film history – it's impossible to talk about cannibalism movies without talking about racism. Hollywood films? Racist? Shocking, I know. Cannibalism made its way into popular culture in dribs and drabs, mostly through white people writing titillating accounts of misinterpreted religious practices for the booming adventure fiction market. These novels usually took place in colonial territories which were right in the midst of being systematically annihilated by the brutality of British imperialism. Cannibalism functions in these stories to paint the local populations as distinct from the white settlers and justify the presence of heroic white patriots bringing Christianity to the barbaric and uncivilised.

Skipping forward a few decades to the 1970s, and the world feels on fire. In a period that included regime changes, collapses and installations in former British colonies, and US interference basically everywhere in Latin America there was this sudden return to 'tribal' cannibal figures through what's referred to as the 'Italian cannibal boom'. Though its peak was really only from like 1977 to 1982, the boom generated a number of extremely violent, generally quite racist films usually involving native populations dismembering and consuming white explorers or documentary film crews.

The most notable example is probably *Cannibal Holocaust* which is as famous for the surrounding controversy as it is for its content.

Indigenous people in these films were fine to be wiped out because even though they are human, the flesh-eating marks that there is Something Wrong with them. Later, when the cannibal genre moves away from out and out depictions of colonialism, you see the same technique applied to class themes by American directors – think *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* where cannibalism is used to highlight the wrongness of the poverty-ridden people who practice it. In this way, cannibalism is generally used in horror to further warp the image of an undesirable Other and make them an acceptable target for the audience's fear and loathing.

I'm bringing all this up to highlight the difference in direction that both *Fresh* and *Bones* and *All take*. You'll notice that the cult status of the classic films I've mentioned is not necessarily because of their position as highbrow art, though they are innovative in their own ways. Rather, much of their status as cult classics is a result of the timing of their release – there was increased scrutiny of censorship and obscenity laws at the same time as imperialist atrocities were being broadcast on national television. Both *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Cannibal Holocaust* were banned in various countries for their graphic nature, and the director of *Cannibal Holocaust*, Ruggero Deodato, was arrested because the public believed he'd created an actual snuff film instead of just one where he psychologically tortured the actors and

killed a bunch of local wildlife. These are low-budget productions – Texas Chainsaw Massacre was made for about \$80,000 in 1974 money. They achieved unexpected success in spite of their genre, and are still often only talked about with reverence by people who are invested in horror as a genre or the making of cinema more widely. The position these films occupy in cinematic canon was created through social upheaval and creative envelope-pushing.

In comparison, *Fresh* and *Bones and All* are both mid-budget films from reputable production companies with big names attached to them. They're still genre pieces but they're not aiming for buckets of blood and severed limbs as the shock tactic that keeps audience bums in seats. The reputation of horror has evolved in recent years, after audiences and critics alike watched Jordan Peele's *Get Out* and decided that horror didn't just mean 'slasher flick'. Horror movies have always been widely consumed, but now they're also participating in the cultural mainstream in a different way. The audience can consume shocking or taboo content like cannibalism, and get that full-body shiver you get when something scares you. But they also get to feel like they're participating in something cerebral, rather than just a Friday night gore fest.

So, why these fine young cannibals and why the romantic themes? My working theory is that cannibalism has become the stand-in visual metaphor for the constant creation, observation and consumption of identity that we're now forced to do through the various digital mediums that rule our lives. Simply, we're cannibalising

ourselves and each other to perform online identity, and the actual process of being peeled back and seen is anxiety inducing enough that we're playing it out on the screen. Look, this episode is sort of a "why are the kids always on their phones?" episode, OK? The further I get into my thirties the more I become an old man yelling at a cloud, but stick with me, I promise I have a point that doesn't require you to log off.

Of the two films, *Fresh* is the most straightforwardly concerned with the digital age, and specifically with online dating. The film follows Noa, a single woman living in Portland, Oregon. She's doing her best to navigate the modern dating landscape, including various Tinder, Hinge and Bumble stand ins, but her nights are peppered terrible dates with dudes who neg her and unsolicited dick pics. After her bisexual BFF, Mollie, encourages her to seize the moment, she goes on a date with Steve, a handsome stranger she meets in a grocery store. They have a great time, and after a couple of dates but against Mollie's advice, Noa decides to go away with Steve for a weekend, complete with stopover at his luxury mid-century modern home. Once there, Noa starts to feel woozy and passes out. As it turns out, Steve's name is Brendan and he's holding women in his basement so he can harvest their meat for the black market. He keeps them alive while he does it because fresher meats fetch a higher price.

The film does a really good job of setting itself up as a completely different genre experience before doing a hard smash cut into horror by rolling the credits about 20 minutes in just after Noa passes out

and hits the floor. It was really only on the re-watch that I noticed that the rom com meet cute had a number of red flags – lingering close-ups on food and mouth and body parts, often cut close together so there's little distinguishing the body from the meal and overlaid with uncomfortably wet sounds of cutting, scraping and chewing. These themes are repeated later, when Noa decides to use the fact that Steve/ Brendan is a little infatuated with her as leverage to get out. She expresses curiosity about the taste of human flesh, and he cooks up a meatball dish using the unfortunately named Hope. Though the meal looks like something out of a gourmet magazine and we don't see or hear Hope's demise, the close ups of the food retain a damp, visceral quality that makes watching its consumption unsettling.

The film consciously doesn't associate blood and gore with the meal – it paints preparation and consumption of human meat as deliciously everyday and even Instagram-ably aesthetically pleasing. The actual act of cannibalism in the film is linked to the performance that Noa is putting on in her dating life – she knows she is being observed as a potentially consumable product (both literally and figuratively), so she makes herself more amenable to being figuratively consumed as a fun-loving cannibal gal who is 'enjoying' her beautifully prepared spaghetti and human flavoured meatballs. It's bloodless, every day and all the more sinister for it.

The only real blood in *Fresh* comes when Noa takes Steve to bed only to bite his dick off and make her escape. The dick-biting scene is reminiscent of real-life

instances of women severing the genitalia of the men who abuse them – most notably Lorena Bobbitt, but there are a not-insignificant number of other cases with depressingly similar motivations. Covered in blood but organised and driven by a will to live, Noa collects her friends and fellow victims, including Mollie. They repeatedly beat a bleeding Steve until he's unconscious. The film ends up with not one, but three final girls. It's telling that the most visceral instance of the sinking of teeth into human flesh, and the breaking of the perfect bloodless performance of cannibalism is the thing that allows them to survive.

Bones and All is less immediately concerned with the digital interface, but it is very interested in observation, knowing and understanding. The film is positioned more as an art-house piece, and plot-wise it meanders a little. Set in 1988, the film follows Maren who we quickly discover has cannibalistic urges when she bites off her classmate's finger at a sleepover. She flees town with her father, though he eventually abandons her, leaving her with her birth certificate, her mother's name and birthplace, and a cassette where he explains his memories of her cannibalism and why he had to leave. She decides to travel to track down her mother and better understand herself and her cannibalistic urges. Though the plot exists outside the realms of persistent technology use, there are still similar themes to *Fresh* of identity and knowing embedded into the consumption of human flesh.

Maren's first proper understanding of herself as a cannibal is driven by an elderly man named Sully who introduces

himself by indicating that he could smell what she was and orchestrating a scenario that effectively forces them to eat together in a way that is implied as extremely intimate. Though this is her first real encounter with deliberately consuming human flesh, she still finds Sully unsettling in a way that she can't quite put her finger on. He has declared that he knows her and understands her before she's even had a chance to fully reckon with herself. He's forcibly peeling back the layers in a way that she cannot stop and does not want. When they finish eating, she takes the opportunity to run away while Sully is in the shower.

Eventually she meets Lee, who she discovers also shares cannibalistic urges. Maren and Lee are closer in age and their relationship starts by her asking for help and him reluctantly providing it. They spend the night together and feel a connection strong enough that they spend the rest of the film falling in love, feeding and occasionally encountering fellow cannibals existing on the weird fringes of society. Though the pair quietly establish their relationship through conversation, moments of actual cannibalism between them serve as punctuation points in scenes that may have otherwise simply been delivered as heated dialogue.

At one point, they have a romantic evening at a carnival, and while Maren is away, Lee flirts with a carnival attendant in a heavily coded way that implies that he's familiar with cruising and has done it before. When he sneaks off into the cornfield with the attendant, Maren sees them leave, follows them and spends a moment watching the two men kiss and fuck before Lee catches her eye. Their gaze

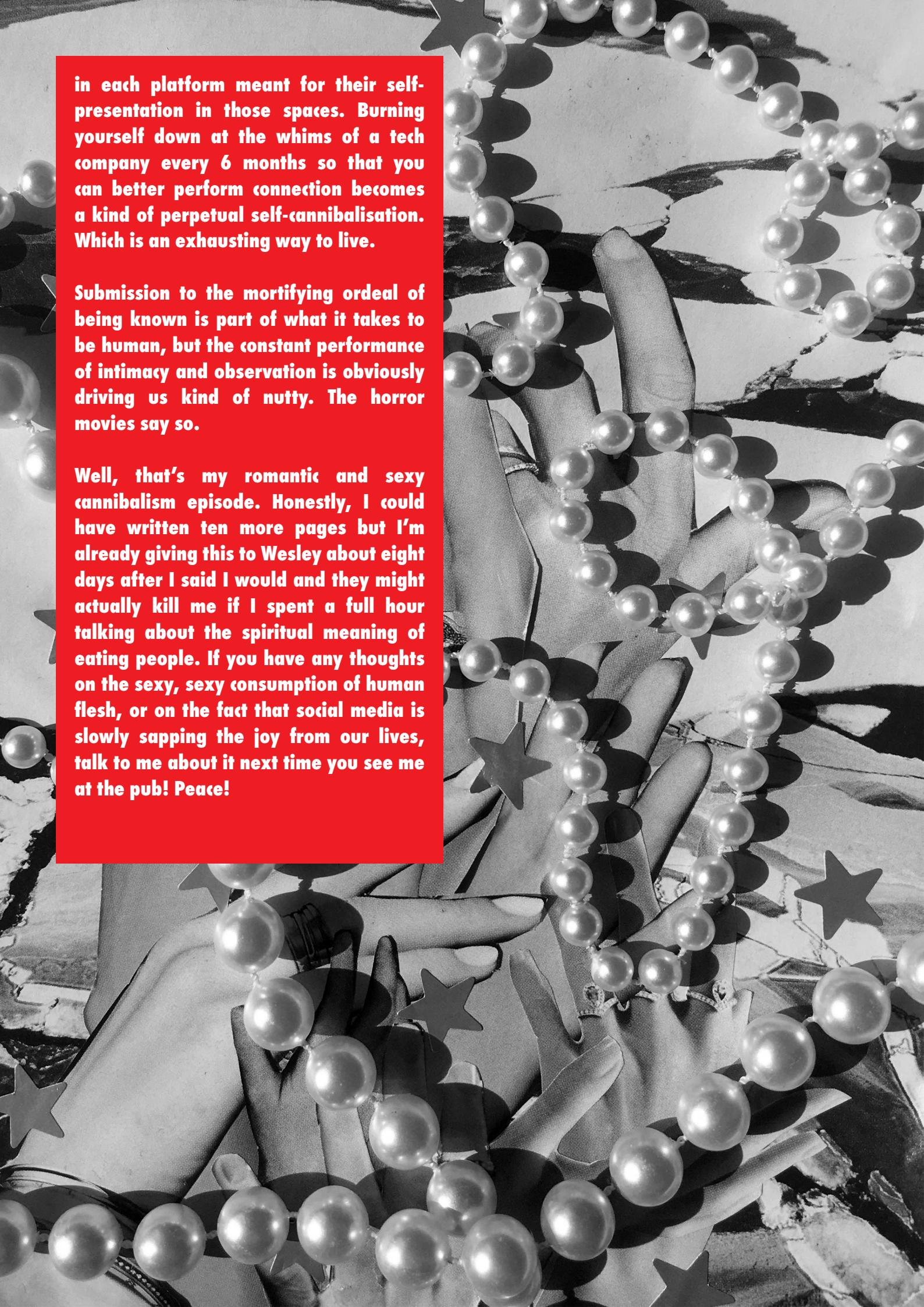
lingers on each other while the sexual element of the encounter continues, before Lee bites out the attendant's throat so they can eat together. The scene is a revelation about Lee's appetites literally and figuratively, and something that in another, less bloody context, may have warranted full discussion. But here it is calmly accepted by Maren – queerness is not shocking to her and there is no drive to perform anything more acceptable from Lee. Unlike her feeding with Sully, this isn't a forceful peeling back of layers, but rather a comfort. In the film's climactic moments, Lee is wounded in an altercation with Sully and encourages Maren to eat him, bones and all. Her full consumption of him is the final act of love and understanding.

Louise Flockhart says that the humanity of the cannibal is what makes them such an ambiguous horror subject – consumption of human flesh marks cannibals as monstrous, but their humanity is confirmed by our identification with them. Maren and Lee are sweetly loveable, even as they devour. Noa's resorting to the tactics of her captor and to tooth-to-dick-based violence is understandable and even something we might cheer on. These are ambiguous monsters constructing themselves through others, and sometimes by consuming them. I think the release of *Fresh* and *Bones* and *All* mere months apart tell us something about the increasing anxiety we feel in a society that requires near-constant performed intimacy and identity. A study by Aparajita Bhandari and Sara Bimo found that most users of social network sites were acutely aware of the interactions between the different digital spaces they inhabited and what changes

in each platform meant for their self-presentation in those spaces. Burning yourself down at the whims of a tech company every 6 months so that you can better perform connection becomes a kind of perpetual self-cannibalisation. Which is an exhausting way to live.

Submission to the mortifying ordeal of being known is part of what it takes to be human, but the constant performance of intimacy and observation is obviously driving us kind of nutty. The horror movies say so.

Well, that's my romantic and sexy cannibalism episode. Honestly, I could have written ten more pages but I'm already giving this to Wesley about eight days after I said I would and they might actually kill me if I spent a full hour talking about the spiritual meaning of eating people. If you have any thoughts on the sexy, sexy consumption of human flesh, or on the fact that social media is slowly sapping the joy from our lives, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!





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Episode written and narrated by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey. Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))

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