

To Live is to Devour Others: Food Ethics and Tragedy in *Tokyo Ghoul*

Christian Frigerio

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Abstract: This paper studies how Ishida Sui's *Tokyo Ghoul* creates its typical sense of "tragedy," by stressing the injustice inherent in every act of eating, and by generalizing the model of nutrition to every ethically laden act. Ishida undermines the Kantian principle that "ought implies can," depicting a twisted world which forces us into wrongdoing: we have to eat, but there is no Other we can eat with moral impunity. Still, his characters provide some ethical models which could be implemented in our everyday food ethics, given that the tragicality spotted by Ishida is not that alien to our food system: food aesthetics, nihilism, *amor fati*, living with the tragedy, and letting ourselves be eaten are the options Ishida offers to cope with the tragedy, to approach the devastation our need for food brings into the world in a more aware and charitable way. The examination of Ishida's narrative device, conducted with the mediation of thinkers such as Lévinas, Ricoeur, Derrida, and other contemporary moral philosophers, shall turn the question: "how to become worthy of eating?" into the core problem for food ethics.

Keywords: food ethics, vegetarianism, animalism, otherness, ecology.

Author Bio: Christian Frigerio is a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Milan. His research interests turn around contemporary speculative philosophies (particularly the works of A. N. Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze), American pragmatism, and ecology. He is currently working on his thesis about the debate over internal and external relations.

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Introduction

The first chapter of Ishida Sui's *Tokyo Ghoul*¹ ends with the protagonist, Kaneki Ken's prophetic statement: "If I were to write a book with me as the main character, it would be a tragedy."² This paper examines the double narrative device through which Ishida stages this tragedy. First, he depicts a situation that stresses the injustice inherent in any act of nutrition: Kaneki is saved from the aggression of Rize, a girl he had dated and who reveals herself to be a ghoul – a creature identical to a human, except for its extraordinary physical skills and the fact that it can only eat human meat – by the mysterious fall of some steel beams that kill her. But the transplant he undergoes to cure his injuries is done using Rize's organs: Kaneki's own body begins to turn into that of a ghoul, normal food starts tasting disgusting to him, and he rapidly understands that only human meat will placate his hunger. Second, alimentation is adopted as the paradigm of any ethically laden action: acting is often, like eating, inevitable, and inevitably unjust. "To live is to devour others"³: this is the best summary of *Tokyo Ghoul*'s tragedy, which enhances reflections affecting our everyday ethical dilemmas.

Even if the theoretical frame of this paper is not unitary, there are two main fields of reference. The first is, for obvious reasons, contemporary moral philosophy, and especially analytic food ethics. What a reflection based on *Tokyo Ghoul* can contribute to food debates is the overcoming of the philosophical prejudice according to which a right choice is always possible (even vegetarianism, that would appear as the best solution when one considers the suffering brought about by eating, seems to be disqualified by the tragic situation staged by Ishida; this point is dealt with in the conclusion). The positive result of this inquiry is not a definite diet, but rather an *ethos* that could teach us to cope with an ill-structured world. This is why the second

main field of reference is modern French philosophy: post-structuralist thinkers (if we may call them all so) like Derrida, Lévinas, Ricoeur, and Deleuze have often pointed to an ethics of undecidability that fits well with a vision of the world that teaches the intrinsic unfairness of every positive solution.

The Meat of the Other

As Christian Coff has said, “Eating is a transformation where what is ‘other’ is transformed into the self. Eating confronts us with one of the most fundamental kinds of transformation, namely, encountering the *otherness* of our surroundings, which, through this activity of ‘internalizing’, are transformed into oneself, into one’s own body.”⁴ But this transformation is only possible because nutrition brings the differentiation between Same and Other to a critical point. Discussing the plausibility of ascribing a moral status to beings according to their “capacities,” Cora Diamond has spotted a fallacy in many animalist arguments: the problem resides for animalists in the suffering of slaughtered animals; thus, they would have no problem eating, say, a cow killed in a storm. But why then would they refuse to eat the human victim of an incident or an amputated human limb? The core of the problem, for Diamond, is not that the cow should not be killed because it is capable of suffering; rather, “what underlies our attitude to dining on ourselves is the view that *a person is not something to eat.*”⁵ Our refusal to eat people “is not justified by what human beings are: it is itself one of the things which go to build our notion of human beings. And so too... the idea of the difference between human beings and animals. We learn what a human being is in – among other ways – sitting at a table where WE eat THEM.”⁶ In Diamond’s view, the felt impossibility of eating something and its recognition as Same to ourselves – as a person or a “fellow creature” – ground each other.

This surely goes for Western contemporary cultural norms, to which *Tokyo Ghoul* seems to conform (the objection of cannibalism should be treated carefully since, despite the “myth” construed around it, cannibalism is less a cultural phenomenon than something attributed to “other” cultures in order to discriminate between “human beings” – given the idea that “human beings don’t eat one another” – and uncivilized or enemy populations⁷). At first, Kaneki refuses to eat human flesh despite his hunger, because he feels that in doing so he would cease to be a person; he says to Touka, one of the first ghouls he meets: “Human meat... There’s no way I can eat it. How could I possibly eat it? I’m human, I’m different from you monsters!”⁸ I cannot eat what I recognize as the Same, as a person; and I am a person only insofar as I refuse to eat people. The point of view of a ghoul is displayed by Nishiki, who says to Kaneki, when he refuses to eat his best friend: “To ‘us’ humans are just food. It’s the same as beef or pork to ‘them’. Why are you pretending to be friends with some food?”⁹

Emmanuel Lévinas’s work is one of the best starting places when one needs to conceptualize the Other and our relation to it. According to Lévinas, the Other becomes manifest in the “face,” and is signaled by “the ethical impossibility of killing him in which I stand.”¹⁰ But this impossibility is specular to the foundational role of alterity or otherness with respect to killing: “The alterity that is expressed in the face provides the unique ‘matter’ possible for total negation. I can wish to kill only an existent absolutely independent, which exceeds my powers infinitely.”¹¹ Hence Lévinas’ negative definition of the Other: “The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”¹²

The situation dramatized by *Tokyo Ghoul* obliges us to put this definition in even stronger terms – to make it *tragic*. While killing is a somehow gratuitous act, a

bare affirmation of power, eating is necessary, since living beings are metabolic systems: as Derrida says, *il faut bien manger*, everybody has to eat. The thought of the Other becomes tragic when we substitute the act of killing with that of *killing in order to eat*. We do not simply kill the Other; we *prey on* the Other. And this suggests a new definition: *the Other is the sole being I can wish to eat*.

Now, the tragedy in *Tokyo Ghoul* is engendered when the main character is deprived of his Other. Kaneki, formerly human, discovers that his body rejects everything that is not human meat; the only alternative would be for him to eat ghoul meat. But even this option seems ethically foreclosed after Mr. Yoshimura, a ghoul managing a cafe where ghouls can find shelter, employs him as a waiter, and he begins to make friends with other ghouls. Against Touka's accusation that Kaneki is neither human nor ghoul, a bastard without a place in the world, Yoshimura will sustain that, actually, he is both, "a single person who has two worlds in which to belong."¹³ Yoshimura's well-intentioned words bring to light the heart of the tragedy: Kaneki's alimentary choices are reduced to two domains, and he belongs to both of them. He has no Other to eat and still he has to eat; he is a structural cannibal, and if he doesn't want to starve, he can only eat the Same to himself.

In the light of alimentation, the problem is not the ethical necessity to admit the other as such, but what happens once we exclude it. *The tragedy is the absence of the Other*, the absence of anyone I could possibly wish to eat. The tragedy lies in the physiological impossibility of holding to ethical principles that we perceive as fundamental: namely, don't eat the ones belonging to your same existential category. To resume Diamond's metaphor, Kaneki's tragedy is that he is obliged to eat around the table and not on it.

A twisted birdcage

Tragedy comes from an inescapable “tension between *opposite necessities*.”¹⁴ It is the dynamics of alimentation that moves (somehow like Fate in Greek tragedies) the world of *Tokyo Ghoul*: ghouls act in order to eat humans, and humans act because of fear and hatred towards ghouls; humans live in fear of being eaten, ghouls live in fear of being hunted. “I have to eat. To eat is to steal. I have to eat. To eat is to protect. I have to eat. To eat is to lose. I have to eat. To eat is to make a mistake.”¹⁵ These tormented words of the narrator display the way the question of alimentation is generalized and becomes a model for every ethically laden act¹⁶: the characters are often obliged to act, just like they are obliged to eat; this obligation is all the more urgent when the Other moves them through hatred and fear, and both parties feel they are justified in acting only while they have an Other they can damage without moral consequences.

But Kaneki, both human and ghoul, problematizes this opposition. He will come to consider himself as the symbol of hope that humans and ghouls may come to understand each other, to consider the opposing party as the Same. But once again, if the Other disappears, tragedy is engendered: if all parties belong to the Same, then in acting I can only hurt the Same. When the Other disappears, the tragedy is extended to the domain of praxis in general, because there is no existential opposition that grounds the righteousness and superiority of my ideals.

According to Christine Korsgaard, one of the reasons why many believe in the Kantian principle that “ought implies can” is that, if we were to reject it,

We would have to conclude that the world is in a certain way morally objectionable, a way that forces us into wrongdoing. Life does prey on life; nature is a scene of suffering; if those things are repugnant to human moral standards, then the world is set up in a way we must deplore, but in which we must nevertheless participate.¹⁷

This is exactly the conclusion found in *Tokyo Ghoul*: eating is wrong, and the world is wrong because we have to eat. The mantra “the world is wrong”¹⁸ is the motto of the champion of justice, Amon Koutarou, a CCG (Commission of Counter Ghoul) investigator and Kaneki’s nemesis.¹⁹ Amon is initially convinced of the possibility of justice: “This world is wrong. We must correct it... I’ll show them I can change it. I’ll change this incorrect world.”²⁰ The reason for his faith in justice is that he thinks the world is wrong because ghouls predate humans²¹: once ghouls disappear, justice becomes possible.

Amon will soon change his mind. The acquaintance with Kaneki, and the fact that he himself is turned into a ghoul, make him understand that the world is wrong, but not because of ghouls: in a world like this, there is no possibility of acting right. It is the arrangement of the world itself – the fact that ghouls can only eat humans and humans can only kill ghouls, and not ghouls or humans themselves – that is contorted. This also means that there is no possibility of eliminating the wrong: ought does not imply can, justice is foreclosed.²²

This shows an interesting shift, in Amon, from a Hebrew-Christian conception of the wrongness of the world, to a tragic one. As Salvatore Natoli explains,

in tragedy guilt, if it does not spring directly from the innocent cruelty of existence, surely finds in it its primordial reason for emergence. Suffering is not the only one but is surely the preponderant matrix of guilt. In the Hebrew tradition exactly the opposite happens: guilt originates sufferance and pain comes to men as the *wage* of sin. If things are so it is evident that tribulations, pain and death follow sin. On the other hand, the opposite is true: if there is no sin there will not have to be tribulations, pain and death.²³

Amon initially thinks that eliminating ghouls would resolve the problem, just like in the Hebrew-Christian tradition ceasing to sin would eliminate pain. In Greek tragedy however, it is guilt that comes from the cruelty of the world, which is

structured so that in acting we can only produce suffering. This way, guilt gives place to a somehow twisted innocence. Natoli continues:

There is something guilty in this innocence... The image of the world deployed in the tragical draws an innocent guilt, that is not guilty because it cannot be imputed to anyone, because no one chose and willed it; at the same time innocence is guilty because guilt is identical to the immediacy of existence. There is an original guilt that is one with the injustice of birth.²⁴

The human leader of the society for the defense of ghouls enunciates this situation clearly in stating the principle of his association: “We just happened to be born human.”²⁵ The *fortuity* of our being born human or ghoul forbids us to consider an agent guilty of certain acts on which its existence depends. Ghouls are the “born wrong”²⁶; as Touka cries against agent Mado Kureo: “If the only thing you can eat is people then that’s what you do, right? How can we live correctly with a body like this?”²⁷ As the president of the society continues, “In this world, the circumstances of your birth dictate your side in that war. No wonder we cannot but become twisted.”²⁸

Ethics for a twisted world

It is the presence of the Other that defines the conditions of an action itself, in the form of hunger (for ghouls) and hatred (for humans). This engenders the “spiral of revenge”²⁹: for instance, CCG agent Mado Kureo fought ghouls to vindicate his wife; he will kill the parents of a ghoul child, Hinami, and will be killed by her and Touka. Mado’s daughter, Akira, will fight ghouls to revenge her parents. But she finds herself in the impossibility of acting after her acquaintance with ghouls – Hinami and Touka among them – makes her understand how futile her hate was: “If I can’t even feel hatred, then it’s a dead end. I can’t go anywhere.”³⁰

This is the form that tragedy takes in the dominion of praxis. Otherness, creating the spiral of revenge, dictated one’s reasons to act; but when the Other, the object of hatred vanishes, acting becomes, in a certain sense, a *groundless*

inevitability: the necessity of acting with the awareness that our reasons are not better than our opponents' is a constant in *Tokyo Ghoul*. As a hallucinatory Rize declares to Kaneki: "In choosing both, losing both... There are times when you'll have to protect something, even at the cost of something else."³¹ Furuta is even more radical: "There is no real need to have a reason to do things. People who can't act without a reason are trash."³²

Amon defines the loss of the Other (the loss of one's reason to act) as a state of "emptiness."³³ But this emptiness can be filled. Almost all the main characters fill it through what Yomo calls "being connected"³⁴: finding people to care for and protecting them. For instance, when Amon meets Kaneki after a long time, he asks his reason for fighting for ghouls; Kaneki answers that "instead of fighting for someone I can't even see with my own eyes, I want to fight for the people near me. It's just that in my case, a lot of those people are ghouls."³⁵ Even if this is a "pretty weak motive," clinging to it is the sole criterion for action when the Other doesn't push us through hunger, hatred, or fear.

However, this is of little help when we turn to food ethics, where the question is not about whom to protect, but what to hurt. Ishida never gives a definite answer; but he gives a number of hints for a true *ethics of tragedy*. This is done through the creation of some *conceptual personae* (to borrow the term from Deleuze and Guattari), ethical models that, while never completely satisfying, furnish suggestions on how to move in a twisted world. I'll expose briefly the peculiarities of four of these models, that constitute divergent responses to the same feeling of the wrongness of the world: while the first two remain on a somehow nihilist terrain – the first is an enjoyment of one's role in the tragical play; the second, an attempt to turn tragedy

into a *comedy* – I suggest that the third and fourth models are the more robust ethical tips we can get from *Tokyo Ghoul*.

First: *food aesthetics*, something like an alimentary version of Kierkegaard's aesthetic life, an existence that is content with a continuous drift among pleasures and sensuality. Whereas taste has been mistreated in traditional accounts of senses, the omnipresence of the alimentary aspect turns it into the major worry in *Tokyo Ghoul*,³⁶ where the tragical necessity of eating is often transformed into a source of pleasure. It can assume two forms. Firstly, gluttony: as stated by Touka, "the hunger of a ghoul is literally hell,"³⁷ and Kaneki admits that it is hardly surprising that ghouls such as Rize exist.³⁸ Rize was in fact known as the Binge Eater, given her insatiable hunger. Discussing with Tsukiyama, she articulates her ravenous philosophy: "It's true that nothing is better than food being delicious when you're eating, but for a ghoul to fuss over flavor and form an elaborated plan over it stinks of being upper class. That's completely like a human and utterly ridiculous."³⁹ This is why Tsukiyama, the ghoul nicknamed Gourmet and self-proclaimed Epicurean,⁴⁰ despises her: "That woman... if she was full then she didn't care about anything else. Just a pig that would swarm around grain... That gluttonous female pig ridiculed my food."⁴¹ Tsukiyama displays the second mode of this way of existence: he is a food aesthete, always in search of "the very essence of the desire to eat": "I've made tons of attempts to test it out but my interest still hasn't waned. The path of gourmet is pretty profound."⁴² He will find this magic ingredient in the sole ghoul with a human scent, Kaneki, with whom he will become obsessed. His philosophy is one of food uniqueness, based on the conviction that "finding a new feast does more for a person's happiness than discovering a star,"⁴³ and it assumes a dimension that crosses the sexual and the religious: he reserves to gastronomy – "the preparation for

taking the Other into oneself”⁴⁴ – a maniacal carefulness, for instance when he stages a situation where he will be able to eat Kaneki while he is eating a human.⁴⁵

In both cases, food is strongly sexualized, but libido takes two different courses: either it is vented without restraint, or it is sublimated in an aestheticization of taste. Even if we lack the space to discuss the relation between the two, it should be noted that the axiological distinction endorsed by Tsukiyama between nutrition and cuisine is not that plain, and that the possibility of an “aesthetics of hunger” as the one assumed by Rize, is not as absurd as it may seem.⁴⁶

Second: *clownish nihilism*. The Clowns are ghouls interested only in having fun through devastation and chaos. Roma, the founder of the group, states this clearly: “The world is a circus. Everything is funny meaningless.”⁴⁷ Identically, Furuta decided to destroy everything because of his belief in the pointlessness of the world: “this world is just a toy chest. You play with it while you can, but when the time comes, it’s all over. The chest is shut, and there’s no reopening it.”⁴⁸ When nothing has intrinsic meaning, fun becomes the only criterion of action. Like food aesthetics, nihilism can give rise to two different models. The first is displayed by Itori, when, after Kaneki’s monstrous transformation, she discourages his friends from intervening, stating that the only thing they can do is watch him;⁴⁹ an ethics of entertainment that shifts the clown’s position, from onstage actant to spectator: if nothing is meaningful, then one can only watch, hoping to be present at the moment of destruction.⁵⁰ On the contrary, Roma finds in acting the only way out of despair: “What do you think ghouls and humans have in common? It’s boredom. It’s like a terrible cold that’s hard to recover from. If it’s not treated properly, you’ll start thinking ‘what’s the point of even living?’ Change what’s around you, and keep on stimulating... that’s the best cure.”⁵¹

Clownish nihilism stems from awareness of tragedy; as Itori says, “The clowns are ghouls who got tired of despair. We’ll keep on cracking jokes onstage so that we don’t go crazy.”⁵² The clowns are the ones who were incapable of living with the tragedy and had enough power to put the world itself at risk. The same opposition between “carelessness” and “desperation” is displayed by Takizawa, a human turned into a murderous ghoul: but while Clowns choose carelessness in order to overcome desperation, Takizawa, after he is partially redeemed by Amon’s words, embraces desperation, accepting his sins and striving for what of good can still come from his evil existence.⁵³ Takizawa thus demonstrates that escaping from tragedy is not the only ethical possibility in a twisted world.

Third: *amor fati*. When he is shown the amount of death and devastation his actions have caused – and after Rize says to him that he “should’ve done nothing from the start”⁵⁴ – Kaneki recognizes that it was only through pain that he found teachers, friends, allies, and love: “And even though I have erred so much, and hurt so many, I simply don’t believe that it was all for naught. And that’s why, even if I were to know everything that’d happen after, I still would have gone to meet Rize that day. To me, all of it was necessary. This world isn’t wrong. It just is.”⁵⁵

When he is asked if he will be able to shoulder his sins, he answers: “I’ll try to take responsibility.”⁵⁶ This is the final step of Kaneki’s maturation: from the despair of being incapable of defending the ones he loves, to the despair of having caused destruction, to the quiet acceptance of all these happenings. But this *amor fati* – as the Stoics and Nietzsche call the heartfelt acceptance of a destiny that one has not chosen⁵⁷ – seems somehow hypocritical: it is not only his suffering that he is accepting but also the deaths that his last transformation has caused. Is it ethically legitimate to accept the pain we have caused to someone else? Kaneki even justifies it

through his personal acquisitions: “I’ve experienced all these things, but I feel like it was necessary so that I could meet all these people in my life.”⁵⁸ We must however keep in mind that Kaneki has undergone a process of transformation that has excluded the Other from his world: there is no way he could hurt someone without caring. Through *amor fati*, Kaneki does not escape tragedy; rather, he (somehow heroically) endorses it. *Amor fati* also becomes Kaneki’s way of finding reasons to act without the intervention of the other: after Furuta derides him for striving despite the futility of the world, Kaneki answers that “even if eventually everything will come to naught, I’ll still strive, like I did today, Furuta.”⁵⁹ Action is what gives sense to a meaningless world, redeeming it. Contrary to the Clowns, Kaneki doesn’t lose the sense of importance of everything that happens – he holds that “life is an accumulation of decisions... that one decision you make can derail you from your final destination, and you can’t turn back from that altered path.”⁶⁰ Only, rather than letting the world produce casual suffering, he prefers to be the one whose choices can determine who will be spared from pain.

Fourth: *living with the tragedy*. The last model is displayed by Amon, once he understands that wrongness comes from the world itself: “This world is twisted. What is right, what is wrong... you can’t easily tell the difference. That’s why you must keep thinking whether what you’re doing is right or not. That act itself, alone, can be called right.”⁶¹ With Amon, justice becomes less a law or a criterion than a disposition or a state of mind: justice is a sincere and tormenting interrogation regarding a conduct that can only be unjust. This is somehow similar to Derrida’s hyperbolic ethics, according to which “casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one’s own being-ethical, seems to me to be – and is perhaps what should forever remain – the unrescindable essence of ethics, decision, and responsibility.”⁶² The

difference is that Amon's is more than a doubt: what underpins his interrogation is the awareness of the impossibility of justice. He has no Other from which a distinct call for responsibility could come. In this model, justice is the awareness and the burden of your own inescapable injustice. While Kaneki endorses and transmutes it into an affirmation of fate, Amon refuses to renounce the tragedy and preserves it as the matrix of a torment that becomes the only way to morality.

The third and fourth models are not that distinct, and it seems that modulations are possible between them. For instance, Takizawa's "desperation" lies in the awareness of being not only unjust but actively evil. But even more perspicuous is the case of Yoshimura. Twice, before engaging in battle to protect his employees, he states his philosophy:

The world continues to give birth to anger and sorrow, struggling and killing one another. So it's natural that everyone is trying to justify themselves... There's no good reason to kill someone. The act of taking away life is equally evil.⁶³

We, from the moment of birth, continue to take. Food, connections, even fellow blood... Life is to constantly sin. Life is evil itself. I am aware I am evil, and so are you all. Come, kill me. And I shall do the same!⁶⁴

Alfred N. Whitehead once wrote that "life is robbery," and therefore "the robber requires justification."⁶⁵ According to Yoshimura, the robber is never justified: there is no possibility of escaping the twisted spires of this world.

Whether we prefer to endorse the tragedy or to live with it, it seems that a certain degree of *amor fati* is needed anyhow. Amon would not act at all if he stopped at the interrogation of his actions; a certain *consent* is required. In his philosophy of the will, Paul Ricoeur depicts consent to three conditions we have not chosen – our character, our unconscious, our biological life – as an integral part of the freedom of our acts.⁶⁶ Ricoeur writes that "consent which reaffirms an existence which is not chosen, with its constriction, its shadows, its contingencies, is like a

choice of myself, a necessary choice, as the *amor fati* celebrated by Nietzsche.”⁶⁷ Consenting to my character, unconscious and life means transforming them into myself. Thus, “Freedom is not a pure act; it is, in each of its moments, activity and receptivity. It constitutes itself by receiving what it does not produce: values, capacities, and pure nature.”⁶⁸ It is especially the biological side that matters in *Tokyo Ghoul*: the question is on which side of the barricade that divides two great Others – human or ghoul – we will casually fall, together with the awareness that, once we are situated, we will only be able to act unjustly. Kaneki comes to a radical form of consent when, during the final battle, he says to himself: “I choose ‘this one’. Forever choosing. Forever being chosen.”⁶⁹ This co-constitution of choosing and being chosen could be considered as the common root of the two strategies of endorsing the tragedy and living with it. Whether stoic or tormented, the ideal actant of *Tokyo Ghoul* is something like Deleuze’s “spiritual automata”: “Only he who is chosen chooses well or effectively.”⁷⁰ In order to act, we need to consent – and that always means to consent to tragedy.

How to become a good meal

We may choose to follow the aesthetic path, either the glutton or gourmet one; or to treat the world as a toy chest, turning tragedy into a meaningless comedy; or to endorse the pain our existence causes, or to continue eating while preserving the awareness that what we are doing may be both inevitable and evil. These options conform to the usual model of food ethics: since humans are at the top of the food chain, the question is how to eat properly. But in *Tokyo Ghoul* they aren’t. Thus, a new problem arises: are there cases where we should rather wonder how to become a good meal, how to let ourselves be eaten for the benefit of something we consider more important than ourselves? When he was a child, Kaneki’s mother asked him to

be always gentle: “Rather than a person who hurts others, become the person getting hurt.”⁷¹ Turning to nutrition, the request can be restated thus: *Rather than someone who eats, become someone who gets eaten*. Volunteering one’s flesh is anything but unnatural: it is widespread among animals⁷²; it is sanctioned by some cultures (like the Chinese, where as a reflection of the Confucian philosophy of filial piety, many cases are known of children volunteering body parts as food for their parents⁷³), and it should not strike as absurd the descendants of a religious culture whose adepts get redeemed by eating the blood and flesh of their savior.

Offering oneself as food to allow someone else to continue living is a constant option in *Tokyo Ghoul*; the existence of a last conceptual persona is thus suggested, one which shifts our place from the exclusive *subjects* of food ethics to its possible *objects*. First, in order to give Touka the strength to fight Tsukiyama, Kaneki will let her eat a portion of his meat.⁷⁴ Second, Nishiki tries to heal his wounds by eating his human girlfriend, Kimi. Discovering only then he is a ghoul and revealing to him how he had dispelled her temptation to commit suicide after her parents’ death, Kimi offers her body to him: “You came to my side and saved me. So it’s fine. Continue living.”⁷⁵ Third, the CCG agents’ belief in “justice” is so strong they use Arata, a special armor construed with ghoul cells that reaches its maximum strength by consuming the meat of its user. Fourth, after Kaneki is mortally wounded, his human best friend, Hide, who had already intuited his transformation, volunteers his body to allow him to escape from CCG: “I want to help you. Eat me.”⁷⁶ Finally, to overcome the usual impossibility of having human-ghoul hybrid children born – a ghoul bearing the child of a human would digest the fetus, while the child of a ghoul growing in a human womb would lack nourishment – Ukina, Yoshimura’s human

partner, will create a “miracle;” she will eat her own meat to give her child the human nourishment she needs.⁷⁷

Offering himself, Hide says to Kaneki: “I’m letting you know that you’re worth saving.”⁷⁸ This suggests a new perspective for food ethics. The question is not if eating something is right or wrong, since eating is necessary; nor how to *bien manger*, how to eat correctly, since nutrition is always more about the death of the eaten than the life of the eater. Rather, the question should be *how to make ourselves worthy of eating*. On which conditions, given our ecologically negative value – we take from the environment more than we can give – is our existence worthy of being preserved? On which conditions are we worthy of maintaining our place as the subjects of food ethics, even in front of the possibility of becoming its objects?

Urie, a human agent with ghoul powers, says to his subordinates that he would kill them should they lose control of their capacities, expressing the idea that “because we have been bestowed power that far surpasses that of the average mortal, we are also shackled with the responsibility to quietly and quickly disappear if needs must.”⁷⁹ Humans have been bestowed the greatest power on Earth, and given the ongoing ecological crisis, we should probably wonder whether we still deserve to eat, whether we should take disappearing as a serious ethical option; or better still, we should wonder how to become worthy of the monstrous consummation with which human existence burdens the planet. Even on an individual scale, a tragical conscience reminding us that our existence is never free could act as an encouragement to make the best we can out of our lives, while causing the least possible suffering and eating in the most aware and charitable manner.

Conclusion

At the end of the manga, humans and ghouls are able to create a unified front to fight a new common enemy. On the alimentary side, this is possible through the creation of artificial food that ghouls can eat instead of human meat. This somehow inhibits the tragedy which constitutes the core of *Tokyo Ghoul*. Rather than dispelling the tragedy, a more narratively robust solution could have been to make it *apparent*. Realizing what kind of world we live in could bring about a more attentive *ethos*, a more sensitive mode of existence towards other beings, now conceived as our fellow sufferers in tragedy. For instance, stating that “coexistence and confrontation are both trivial matters,” Hirako says that Arima envisioned a more radical upheaval: the possibility for all humans to be turned into ghouls.⁸⁰ Even if Ishida does not elaborate on the question, it is important to note that, while the opposite option (the disappearance of ghouls) would not bring any effect since humans would continue eating as usual, their transformation into ghouls would mean they could only cannibalize. Arima’s solution would be to make apparent the tragedy inherent in every form of nutrition.

Explaining the apparent lack of moral sense in many ghouls, Yoshimura generalizes the tragedy to our world:

When you look at cooked meat or fish, do you feel sorry for it? Even if you don’t see the living form, it’s hard not to have any feelings of guilt when eating a life. However, there are many ghouls who naturally kill people with their own hands, and each time they do so they must face a life. In order for ghouls to walk atop the empty husks peacefully, they mustn’t just strengthen their hearts. So they kill their emotions. They must defend themselves. And in order to do so, a living ghoul will forget the value of life.⁸¹

We would probably go mad if we had to consciously shoulder the whole burden of what comes to our tables. It is possible that Kaneki’s condition is not that far from our own: as Kaneki finally recognizes, “Everyone is the protagonist of their own tragedy.”⁸²

There is a saying among Inuit, for whom a plant-based diet is a biological impossibility, that “the great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls.”⁸³ They cannot help preying on animals they recognize as fellow creatures. In other cultures, vegetarianism and veganism are the most immediate responses to this feeling, and surely they are a way of diminishing the amount of evil brought about by our need for food; but it is not plain that pain is the sole criterion for what should be taken into ethical consideration, as assumed by the mainstream of the animalist movement.⁸⁴ Human relationship to plants is just as culturally informed as that with animals⁸⁵: why should animal pain deserve more respect than a leaf’s stretching toward the light or the thirsty plunging of roots into the terrain? As demonstrated by Diamond, the restriction of the domain of the Same is always somehow arbitrary and dependent on our concrete life practices, and what we consider the Same to ourselves can virtually come to coincide with all that exists. This is precisely the resolution that the ongoing ecological crisis suggests we should take. This would mean that every diet is a virtual form of cannibalism, since what we put on the table always comes from the Same, from a fellow claimant to a place in the world.⁸⁶

It is obvious that there is something profoundly wrong with our food system: “The gap between consumers and producers, scientific developments that we are losing control of, impotent governments, the boundless greed of large food and agriculture companies, apathetic consumers,”⁸⁷ and so on. While improvements would surely be possible, *Tokyo Ghoul* suggests that the destruction inherent in nutrition implies that we are structural wrongdoers. We may choose to exclude animals from our diet, or to purchase food in a more conscious way; it remains that the amount of violence our bellies bring into the world appears hard to justify. The

difference between Kaneki's world and ours is a difference in degree, not in kind. But it is precisely in this situation that the root of a permanent ethical disposition could be found.

Talking about the “universal cannibalism of the sea, all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began,” Herman Melville wrote thus:

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!⁸⁸

Tokyo Ghoul reminds us how close we are to this ocean, and how creating our little Tahiti, excluding something from what we consider as “eatable,” should not blind us to the tragedy we are immersed in. Whether we choose to embrace fate or to live with the tragedy, we should make things so that we are worthy of eating, worthy of being saved from what we consume.

Notes

¹ Ishida Sui, *Tokyo Ghoul*, 14 vols. (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2011-2014) (hereafter: TG followed by the chapter number); Ishida Sui, *Tokyo Ghoul:re*, 16 vols. (San Francisco: Viz Media, 2014-2018) (hereafter: TG:re followed by the chapter number).

² TG 1.

³ TG 63, 103.

⁴ Christian Coff, *The taste for ethics*, trans. E. Broadbridge (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 8.

⁵ Cora Diamond, "Eating meat and eating people," *Philosophy*, vol. 53, no. 206 (1978), 468.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 470.

⁷ William Arens, *The man-eating myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 129. In *Tokyo Ghoul*, cannibalism has an ambiguous status, being at the same time a source of strength and monstrosity. Kaneki will recur to it in order to protect his friends, since cannibalism makes ghouls stronger. But, as stated by Tsukiyama, "cannibalism would only ruin a ghoul. It's a chaotic power" (TG 104). Kaneki almost goes crazy when he feels like the ghouls he ate are eating his mind back: "I wasn't the one eating ghouls. The one being eaten was me" (TG 136); and his final, monstrous transformation is obtained by an extreme act of quasi-self-cannibalism, eating ghouls created with Rize's cells, which are his own (TG:re 144).

⁸ TG 5. This is an ancient idea: even Plato could write that "anyone who has tasted even a single morsel of human entrails mixed in among those of other sacrificial offerings is bound to become a wolf," Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University, 1993), 307.

⁹ TG 8.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 87.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ TG 9.

¹⁴ Salvatore Natoli, *L'esperienza del dolore* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999), 36.

¹⁵ TG 143.

¹⁶ This generalization is very present in our world; for instance, croissants are said to have been invented in Vienna in 1683, to celebrate the victory over Ottomans: "In this case, not only is the crescent shape recognized as denoting the foreign enemy, but the fact that one *devours* the crescent reenacts the defeat of the invaders, and perhaps also represents Christianity conquering Islam;" Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making sense of taste* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 119. Ghouls and humans are reciprocally Other, just like Christianity and Islam.

¹⁷ Christine Korsgaard, "Fellow creatures," *Tanner Lectures on Human Values 2004: 24* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2004), 107.

¹⁸ The metaphor of a "twisted birdcage" is also used: TG 99; TG:re 61, 64.

¹⁹ The claim is pronounced when he sees an orphan whose parents have been killed by a ghoul (TG 13), after a colleague of his has been killed for revenge (TG 21), and when Amon first meets Kaneki and tries to understand how ghouls can kill humans without remorse (TG 25).

²⁰ TG 21.

²¹ TG 25, 106.

²² TG:re 98, 171.

²³ Natoli, *L'esperienza del dolore*, 159-60.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁵ TG:re 103.

²⁶ TG:re 68.

²⁷ TG 25.

²⁸ TG:re 103.

²⁹ TG 95.

³⁰ TG:re 121.

³¹ TG 63.

³² TG:re 101.

³³ TG:re 121.

³⁴ TG:re 71, 171.

³⁵ TG:re 119.

³⁶ This goes also for the other overlooked sense, smell, that drives ghouls to meat. Tatara even holds that smell is what ruins civilization: “The act of finding things by sniffing them out always leads to devastation” (TG:re 124).

³⁷ TG 6.

³⁸ TG 26.

³⁹ TG 35.

⁴⁰ TG 97.

⁴¹ TG 35.

⁴² TG 35.

⁴³ TG 35.

⁴⁴ Coff, *The taste for ethics*, 77.

⁴⁵ TG 41.

⁴⁶ Nicola Perullo, *Taste as experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 43.

⁴⁷ TG:re 135.

⁴⁸ TG:re 176.

⁴⁹ TG:re 148.

⁵⁰ TG:re 116.

⁵¹ TG:re 135.

⁵² TG:re 169.

⁵³ TG:re 115.

⁵⁴ TG:re 158.

⁵⁵ TG:re 176.

⁵⁶ TG:re 159.

⁵⁷ Michel Onfray shows how Nietzsche’s concern with dietetics “is a pragmatic illustration of the theory of *amor fati* as well as an invitation to the ascetics of ‘become who you are’. The regimen is the will to self-harmony, the demand for the consonance of appetite and consent. It presumes the choice of what is imposed, the selection of the necessary;” Michel Onfray, *Appetites for thought*, trans. D. Barry and S. Muecke (London: Reaction Books, 2015), 66.

⁵⁸ TG:re 159.

⁵⁹ TG:re 176.

⁶⁰ TG:re 143.

⁶¹ TG:re 98.

⁶² Jacques Derrida, *The animal that therefore I am*, trans. D. Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 126.

⁶³ TG 78.

⁶⁴ TG 126.

⁶⁵ Alfred Whitehead, *Process and reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 105.

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, *Freedom and nature*. trans. E. Kohak (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).

⁶⁷ Ibid., 484.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 484.

⁶⁹ TG:re 177.

⁷⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, trans. H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 178.

⁷¹ TG 62.

⁷² For instance, newborn black lace-weavers eat their mother alive following a signal of hers, and caecilians’ skin has developed a capacity to repair and replenish that allows broods to eat their mothers; cf. Bill Schutt, *Eat me* (London: Profile Books, 2017), 30; *ibid.*, 66-7.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 146: “the practice was intended to provide nutrition to a starving loved one or as a treatment of last resort, to afford the sufferer some medical benefit.”

⁷⁴ TG 44.

⁷⁵ TG 43.

⁷⁶ TG:re 68.

⁷⁷ TG 119.

⁷⁸ TG:re 68.

⁷⁹ TG:re 111.

⁸⁰ TG:re 162.

⁸¹ TG 40.

⁸² TG:re 177.

⁸³ Cf. Paul Thompson, *From field to fork* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 150. On the anthropology of eating – a good reminder that “Humans will swallow almost anything that does not swallow them first” – cf. Peter Farb and George Armelagos, *Consuming passions* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 165.

⁸⁴ Peter Singer, *Animal liberation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

⁸⁵ For instance, “In the German perception of nature, extensive virgin forests with primeval cattle play an important role; a greenhouse is regarded as an unacceptable intrusion. The Dutch perception is different: since hundreds of years, fruits and vegetables have been cultivated here in greenhouses”: Micheil Korthals, *Before dinner* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2004), 62.

⁸⁶ Stressing the arbitrariness inherent in every ethics which prescribes boundaries between what we should or should not eat, the vision sketched here is near to Michiel Korthals’s pragmatist, practice-based food ethics, according to which “material, conceptual, and social sources are changed or modeled in a long-term process of knowledge production without a clear final goal. The particular novelty and fruitfulness of this lies in two aspects. Firstly, material aspects such as equipment, accommodation, and means of transportation are just as important during the production of knowledge as social sources and cognitive impressions, ideas, and concepts. Secondly, an acceptable knowledge product only comes about in a continuous process of transformation, in which the three above sources permanently change through continuous fine-tuning and tinkering. Concepts thus keep getting adjusted in response to the social and material sources, and vice versa. Applying this practice concept to our involvement with animals means that not only material aspects such as accommodation and care constantly change in response to each other, but also conceptions about the nature, the subjective experience, and the welfare of animals, as well as the social rules related to their treatment and further processing” (Korthals, *Before dinner*, 78). The main difference between the two is once again the ontological teaching of a vision based on *Tokyo Ghoul*, according to which not only do right and wrong depend on concrete practices, but wrongness is ineliminable given the metabolic nature of living beings.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁸ Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (New York: Penguin, 1978), 380-1.

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