

GIVING LIFE HARMONIOUSLY

Animal Inversion in Cattle Decapitation

Erik van Ooijen

Images of meat, violence, and ecological disaster shape the thematic core of the music of Cattle Decapitation, a San Diego deathgrind band formed in 1996. As is common for the genre, the lyrics, written by singer Travis Ryan, seem steeped in pig blood and human feces, and covered by the dust of demolished civilizations. These motifs are extended visually to the artwork of album covers, t-shirts, and music videos, forming a thematic network of corresponding images. A recurring motif is particularly prominent, setting the band apart: it is the inversion of power between man and animal (or, more specifically, man and livestock). Related are further reversals, where death becomes life and life becomes death, and where evolutionary and civilizational progress is turned into a decaying loop, the eternal return of samsaric disaster.

As a critical concept, inversion is usually traced back to a passage from Friedrich Engels, famously quoted and commented upon, for example, by Frantz Fanon. Says Engels, apropos the main characters of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719):

If Crusoe could procure a sword for himself, we are equally entitled to assume that one fine morning Friday might appear with a loaded revolver in his hand, and then the whole "force" relationship is inverted. Friday commands, and it is Crusoe who has to drudge.¹

In art criticism, Engel's notion of inversion has been related to what is termed "World Upside Down" broadsheets, i.e., a particular genre of pictures emerging in

the sixteenth century depicting the reversal of relations associated with proverbial dichotomies. As explained by David Kunzle, these broadsheets

are based upon the principal of hierarchical inversion (wife takes male role, children punish parents, servant commands master, animal kills hunter, prey hunts predator, etc.). . . . The natural and social impossibilities represented in the World Upside Down broadsheets are no longer used as discrete rhetorical and metaphorical figures, . . . but for their own sakes, and as constituents of a complete world that could, at any time of social stress, be taken to represent an existing, or threatening, or desired reality. Unless the broadsheets illustrate simply a kind of verbal nonsense, they posit social revolution.²

Such motifs point out a hierarchical relationship by acknowledging how each marked opposition relies on the possibility of its own reversal. In a carnivalesque manner, they depict social upheaval in a comic mode, suggesting the possibility of a new order which may at first seem absurd, yet, at second thought, shockingly feasible. Often, the focus lies on class relations: the peasant riding while the king is walking, the servant arresting the master, and so on.³ In other instances, they also invert the relationship between animal and man, or prey and predator: Birds eat man, ass drives master, sheep eats wolf, etc. Sometimes, animal rises up against man with a vengeance: when ox flays butcher, pig guts butcher, or parrot teaches caged man to talk. It is in these latter images we approach the thematic realm of Cattle Decapitation.

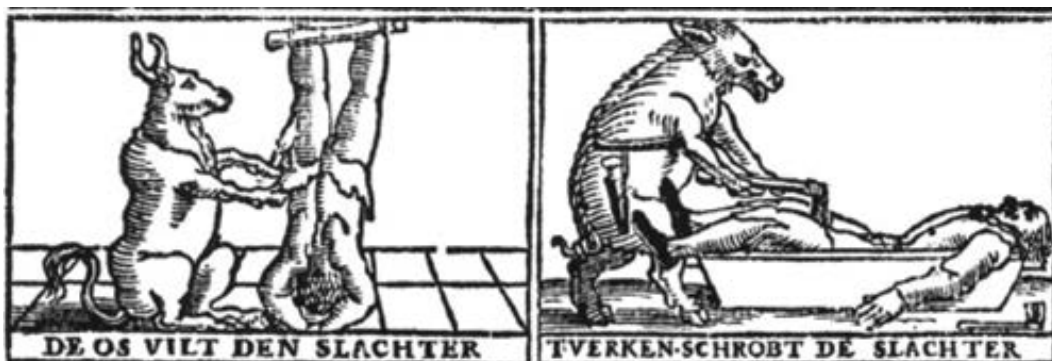


Figure 1. Ox flays butcher, pig guts butcher. Detail from a Dutch late-sixteenth-century woodcut. (After Kunzle, p. 200.)

According to James C. Scott, man / animal inversion motifs may seem less obvious than the simple reversal of master / slave dichotomies. For Scott, pictures of two geese turning a human on a spit over a fire seem less meaningful, bordering, even, on the purely absurdist comedy of conceptual incongruity. In this view, such images will only become subversive through the act of allegorical interpretation: the fox is the law feeding upon the geese symbolizing the economically poor, and so on.⁴ However, such an interpretation only implies how the very notion of an animal ethics or politics seems absurd to the interpreter. In *Cattle Decapitation*, on the other hand, it is precisely the dichotomy between animal and man that must be overthrown, since it forms a hierarchy even more violent than that between ruling and working classes.



Figure 2. *Ten Torments of the Damned* (1997).

Consider the notoriously gruesome artwork of their album covers. The self-released debut *Ten Torments of the Damned* (1997) presents a direct allusion to the tradition of ox-flaying-butcher motifs in the World Upside Down broadsheets, showing a man with the head of a cow about to behead a cow with a human face. The image suggests how the band's name refers not only to the human act of slaughtering animals, but also to animals rising up in order to become decapitators: Through a playful use of double entendre, it includes its own inversion. More bluntly, the song "Long-Pig Chef and the Hairless Goat" (2002) speaks of "an orgasmic decapitation of human cattle."⁵

The moniker is not chosen for pure shock value. Whereas it fits within the violent framework of the grindcore tradition, it further disturbs this framework by unsettling the structural hierarchies inherent to the genre. The butchering,

slaughtering, and turning of humans into pieces of meat is a common motif in deathgrind lyrics. Here, it is taken a step further, as the violence of the genre starts to dismantle its own ideological hierarchies. Through animal inversion, a queer position of the other is initiated, upsetting the misogynistic power of death metal and grindcore, as well as the anthropocentric tradition of a humanist morality presumably outraged by the genre.

As pointed out by Rosemary Overell, grindcore brutality often relies on a masculine / feminine murder / victim relationship.⁶ A compulsively common motif depicts the male serial killer and rapist in the act of what may be called, with reference to a Dutch death metal band, "Prostitute Disfigurement." In this respect, deathgrind and grindcore, while seemingly transgressive, correspond with contemporary meat culture at large: The eating and killing of animals is rendered masculine, misogynistic brutality against women is conceptualized in terms of animalization, and women are reduced and reified as pure "pieces of meat."⁷ Keith Thomas has stressed how the Western ethic of human domination served not only to remove animals from "the sphere of human concern" but also to legitimize violence against all people considered less human.⁸ In this view, meat culture rests on the same conceptual and ideological foundation as rape culture, racism, slavery, and so on.⁹ Along similar lines, Jacques Derrida famously settled for adding the prefix *carno-* to his notion of "West's phallic 'logocentrism,'"¹⁰ in order to emphasize how, in a culture dominated by and reproduced through sacrificial rites, women are made subordinate to men and nonhuman animals to both.¹¹ Against erect man, the freestanding subject, woman has been defined as lacking the presence of the phallus, just as animal, in turn, is understood in terms of a lack of language, reason, consciousness, reflection, ipseity, and the power to name the other (animal).¹² For Derrida, it is by eating the other, thus turning the other into an object for consumption, that man "creates the inner space that is the subject."¹³ Accordingly, it is not just that the animal is rendered lawless, situated on the outside of judicuality, but rather that the law itself constitutes a sacrificial structure reliant on the possibility for "a noncriminal putting to death."¹⁴ Against this "carnophallogocentric" backdrop, instances of deathmetal and grindcore and its subgenres (deathgrind, goregrind, pornogrind, etc.) could be considered to harbor a potential for upsetting humanist morality, due not only to the shocking explicitness of the genres, but their ability to disenchant the violent reification through which animals, women, and so on, are rendered into meat. Like many horror and ultraviolent movies, deathgrind makes explicit how the apotheosis of dominant masculine sexuality is expressed in the raping, dismembering, cooking, and eating of feminized, animalized flesh. But the music may launch a further attack against

political power by also making explicit the fact that, as Derrida wittily stresses, the “*chef* must be an eater of flesh.”¹⁵ As Derrida puts it: “in our countries, who would stand a chance of becoming a *chef d’Etat* (a head of State), and of thereby acceding ‘to the head,’ by publicly, and therefore exemplarily, declaring him- or herself to be a vegetarian?”¹⁶ To be a subject, to master a subject, to speak with authority on a subject in the name of the subject, one must do so with masculine virility, as one who “accepts sacrifice and eats flesh.”¹⁷ Consequently, as pointed out by Derek Attridge, Derrida may himself talk “animatedly about carnophallogocentrism while eating with gusto a plate of steak tartare.”¹⁸

Cattle Decapitation is less interested in the role of the eater than in that of the eaten as they set out to stand the sacrificial structure on its head by channeling the violent potentialities of deathgrind in a direction that no longer risks merely cementing the conceptual foundation of humanist morality but aims at demolishing it. In a kind of ferocious *meaterialism*, all become meat, and flesh and soil the prominent stuff of the world. Grindcore’s patriarchal order is replaced by a chaotic violence where everything and all relations must be dissected, switched around and reassembled in new and eerie combinations. The rather *queer* result is not a politics of rainbow solidarity but the vengeful act of “forced gender reassignment,” the brutal transformation of the male homophobic bigot into what he most despises: “A slice up the shaft and around the corona / Unsheathed penile muscle exposing the urethra / Welcome to forced gender dysphoria / How does it feel to be a woman now and not a man?”¹⁹ Oppositions are not dismantled but turned around, and the opponent’s position is mercilessly reaffirmed. As a result, inversion comes to oscillate between a disgust *and* a desire for violence, as it becomes clear that the only way to end man’s dominance may be to end man himself.

The video for the song “Forced Gender Reassignment,” directed by Mitch Massie, has caused online controversy and was banned from both YouTube and Vimeo. Whereas many comments have concerned its mere visual gruesomeness, some have touched upon whether the gory depictions should be viewed as politically meaningful or mere speculation in gratuitous violence. The video details how religious anti-gay protesters get kidnapped and are forced to undergo a brutal “sex change” where the genitals of a man and a woman are cut off or sewn closed and then reattached, once more, to the partner of the opposite sex. In motivating the depiction, the band makes explicit references to the theme of inversion. An official press release describes the video as “a gory, obscenely graphic and explicitly intense story of what could happen when the tables are turned on a group of people whose faith blinds them to the point of being unable to mind their own business and just letting others be themselves.”²⁰ Furthermore, Ryan states that “the song is

about taking certain religious sects and showing them what it's like to be in another person's shoes—someone whose life is simply different than theirs.”²¹

Unsurprisingly, the video has been denounced as a trite revenge story, obscuring any potential political message by its blunt outrageousness. As one concerned commenter states, “what they do in the video is not a proportional response to these people.”²² Similar opinions are echoed even in positive reviews, which may declare that the video “isn't really about transfolk,” but “hatred, pure and simple”:

There's never any sense of reason or poetic justice to the events: the homophobes are clearly shitty people, but do they really deserve what comes to them? There's a fairly large divide between writing songs about butchering slaughterhouse workers for their crimes against animals and cold-blooded torture of some morally dubious protestors.²³

But doesn't this miss the extent to which the simple fantasy of turned tables is accompanied by a corresponding shift towards the experiential position of the other's “shoes”? In addition to the base justness of an eye-for-an-eye ideology, we are presented with an artistic rendition of the absolute distance towards the otherness of the other, of what extreme means are necessary for the crudest approximation of the “transfolk” experience, that is, of being alienated towards one's own body, an uncanny corporeality consisting to an essential degree of organs of the “wrong” sex, utterly alien in themselves. Along with the visceral explication of symbolic violence, we are presented with a hint at the embodied painfulness of gender dysphoria as such. This alone suggests a message worth teasing out and taking seriously.

Obviously, Cattle Decapitation is far from suggesting a hippie politics of getting along. Rather, they charge an attack against the brutality haunting the very pathos of humanism. Unlike The Smiths, they are not content with the sentimental indignation caused by images of cute creatures having to die for no reason. According to the structure of inversion, meat is not only murder (as in the title of The Smiths' famous animal rights anthem), but must rise up to murder. The point is not that “heifer whines could be human cries,” as Morissey has it, but rather that the heifer will *cause* human cries, as the ox and the butcher switch places.²⁴ Or, as it is put in the punningly titled “To Serve Man”:²⁵

Men, women and children shall be strung
Sliced from hands to feet
Innards save for a tasty treat

and beaten profusely to tenderize the meat

...

Millions of humans hung upon hooks

Suspended in deep freeze

Subzero, sterile environment

keeps meat tender and lean

Choice cuts from slaughter—

Husband, mother, daughter

Dead families kept together

Their hides made into leather

Surprisingly multiple uses for something so useless²⁶

Inversion does not simply entail a dismantling of dichotomies resulting in a flat uniformity of non-friction. Writing on suicide, Hume famously declared that “the life of a man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster.”²⁷ That is, from the detached “standpoint of the Absolute” (Slavoj Žižek),²⁸ everything is equal in being equally gratuitous. As ethics dislocates the humanist center, a tension arises between total Gaia and multiple singularities, a tension well summarized in Derrida’s notion of “an immense multiplicity of other living things that cannot in any way be homogenized, except by means of violence.”²⁹ In Cattle Decapitation, animal inversion takes place on both levels, as a disruption of the cosmic order, when the godlike regulation of the universal cycle of death and re-birth is put in the hoofs of bovine deities, as well as of the local order, when castrated ox flays butcher and hangs him on the hooks of the factory farm. On the one hand, all perspectives are negated; on the other hand, all perspectives are affirmed. Thus, we see man from the alien point of view of the other, that is, Hume’s oyster, or, better yet, the shark: “These things you call humans but we call it lunch.”³⁰ For the dark mirror of Hume’s argument is, of course, one raised by Sade: it is only according to the violent hierarchies of anthropocentrism that we may assert “that there was no wrong in butchering a pig for food, while there was nothing worse than performing the same operation upon a human being.”³¹ If the life of man is equal to that of an oyster, the eating of man is equally justified.

However, in Cattle Decapitation, violence against man is not fuelled by nihilism but rather by the foreboding suspicion that only the killing of man may end human tyranny. As the ox and the butcher are turned upside down, we are forced to remove ourselves from the position of center, but before we can even imagine a standpoint of total Gaia or the myriad standpoints of multiplicities, we, as humans, must acknowledge our own monstrosity as seen from the subaltern point of view.

If the resulting position is anti-humanist, it is so because it derives from the fury and desperation of the oppressed trying to free themselves from a very real and particular set of social relations, the entanglement of the ones snared by leashes and chains, confined to feed lots and gestation crates, dangling from meat hooks, still conscious while their throats are being slit. As often pointed out by deconstructivist theorists, such a shift of perspective will not *undo* the lopsided opposition. On the other hand, it gets its dialectical energy precisely from *maintaining* the opposition through reversal, by switching the locus of power from one end to the other. In this sense, the turning upside down of the world will for Cattle Decapitation result in a position that may very well be termed “animal supremacist.”³² In place of postmodern inertia, the opposition is worked by establishing a new point of dominance seeking aggressively to annihilate the current one. The result is a kind of samsaric circle, that is, the repeating cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, or production, disaster, and creativity, in several Eastern religions, or, in brief, an ethics of eternal return: “Brutality in ouroboros.”³³ The flattening of relations does not precede violence, as in the leveled universe of equal men and oysters, but must be forever shifted and reproduced through the operations of violent cyclic processes. As such, it depends upon the production of new and always already dismantling hierarchies of power.

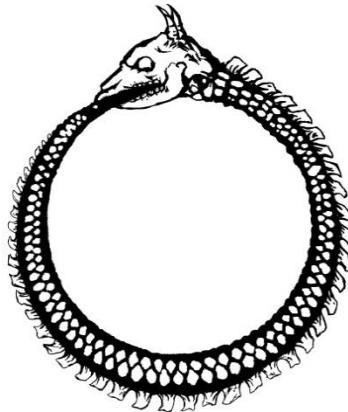


Figure 3. Brutality in ouroboros; one of Cattle Decapitation's logos.

Through animal inversion, post-humanism becomes post-apocalyptic: it is the violent upheaval of a dominant civilization in its entirety. However, since existence as such prevails without humans, it is apocalyptic only when seen from the very humanist perspective that is now rendered obsolete. As stressed by Elizabeth

Grosz, the human, like all life forms, is destined to be overcome, “a momentary blip in a history and cosmology that remains fundamentally indifferent to this temporary eruption.”³⁴ Cattle Decapitation imagines a time when the study of man can only be carried out as “scatanthropology,” the exploration not of human nature, but of “humanure,”³⁵ remains preserved in coprolite, “thousands of years of bipedal mammalian hierarchy” now “fossilized in feces.”³⁶ This echoes several arguments made recently by post-humanist and feminist neo-materialists. For example, Jane Bennett follows Darwin in pointing out how worms help preserve human civilizations for future archeological excavations by covering in their castings our residual artifacts.³⁷ But like Grosz, Cattle Decapitation moves a step further by seeking not only to inscribe animal agency in human history, but to imagine a natural history or evolution beyond the very limits that humanity comprises. Here, all of man is buried in his own castings, and thus preserved for the coming age of the mutant maggot. In the scatanthropological era, ethics will be as inevitably post-humanist as humanist ethics is post-dinosaurian, caring, at best, for bones and bezoar stones: Only disaster can bring radical change to us “fellow future fossils.”³⁸ In samsara, the detached universal and the situated subaltern perspectives combine to form an ethics of “extermination and re-genesis.”³⁹ “Decomposition—a morbid demonstration / The cycle of life—in all its majesty.”⁴⁰

Thus, a second inversion turns upside down the relationship between life and death: life is no longer that which must be nourished in order to prevail, but that which must be destroyed in order to nurture the new. We become earth and food for generations of alien others. In the age of man, a multitude of species were butchered in order to feed a single one; in the age of the maggot, a single species is butchered to feed the many. The motifs are combined on the cover to *Humanure*, where a cow defecates a gory mass of human remains. Or, to put it in the immortal words of Slipknot: “People = Shit.”⁴¹

By destroying his own kind, the sadistic and cannibalistic serial killer emerges as an agent of change, more radical than any meat-eating socialist, more virtuous than any meat-eating humanist. By the relentless killing of animals, man negates his own justification. In genocide, on the other hand, he acts as a tool for his absolute other, the just karmic divinanimals who themselves are brutal butchers with bovine heads and hoofs. Perhaps, these deities may be likened to Eduard von Hartmann’s “*Unbewussten*,” the drive towards total extinction operating as the propelling force behind all living creatures. In Hartmann’s view, man is created for the very reason of achieving total annihilation in order to end all suffering, and thus he works to extinguish all life, including his own.⁴² The serial killer is simply “picking clean”⁴³ a species with a perverted delight responding to what Pierre

Klossowski, apropos Sade, terms “the categorical imperative of a cosmic tribunal that demands the annihilation of all that is human.”⁴⁴ When asked why, the mass murderer may simply answer: “Because you are human . . .”⁴⁵



Figure 4. *Humanure* (2004).

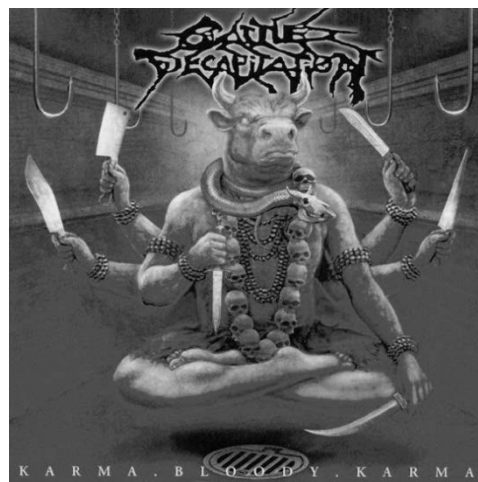


Figure 5. *Karma.Bloody.Karma* (2006).

In Sade, murder is not a crime against Nature but the murderer her instrument, “since she is a great murderess herself and since her single reason for murdering is to obtain, from the wholesale annihilation of cast creatures, the chance to recast them anew.”⁴⁶ Consequently, the most “wicked individual on earth, the most

abominable, the most ferocious, the most barbarous, and the most indefatigable murderer is therefore but the spokesman of her desires, the vehicle of her will, and the surest agent of her caprices.”⁴⁷ Klossowski interprets Sade’s philosophy as a death drive ontology refusing to treat death as a return to an inanimate inorganic state. Rather, death is teeming with life, and is what allows for an individual to transcend conatus and open up for a vital production exceeding the homogenous specimen, the species, and even the kingdom: In decaying, dead matter “proves that it is not inert; it enriches the soil, fertilizes it, and serves in the regeneration of the other kingdoms as well as of its own.”⁴⁸ In this sense, Sade approaches a kind of dark materialism pending between the Bergsonian virtuality of prebiotic soup⁴⁹ or “a quivering protoblob of creative élan”⁵⁰ and Derrida’s notion of life as a multiplicity of relations between multiple forms of the living and the dead.⁵¹

Sade and Cattle Decapitation both affirm the full extent of the violence inherent to a cyclic model of life. Man is reduced to a paste and putty from which new species are molded.⁵² The cycle of life is a cycle of shit. Man is born from and gives birth to shit, turning the act of procreation into one of defecation.⁵³ He dies from cancers, polyps, and the “gastrointestinal nightmares”⁵⁴ caused by years of digesting “fetid flesh”⁵⁵ and feces packaged as food.⁵⁶ This is no hyperbole. Today, when people die of “Hamburger Disease,” they do so from bacteria brought into the food by the mixing of feces and meat during production. In our everyday food factories, putrid meat brimming with maggots is turned into baby food, and chicken meat has been allowed to soak up feces-filled water, or what the industry secretly terms “fecal soup.” In contemporary meat culture, customers literally spend their dollars on chicken shit. For, as is made clear by a USDA meat inspector: “We used to trim the shit off the meat. Then we washed the shit off the meat. Now the consumer eats the shit off the meat.”⁵⁷ In Cattle Decapitation, man, having died from consuming shit and rancid animal, may rot away in order to birth new animals. Finally dead, he becomes the breeding ground for a multiplicity of new creatures: fleas and flies;⁵⁸ maggots and mites;⁵⁹ planaria and protists, and other “secondary human byproducts.”⁶⁰ As it is stated in “A Body Farm”: “For every life I take, an ecosystem I create.”⁶¹

Slavoj Žižek has famously commented upon the song “Circle of Life” from Disney’s animated movie *The Lion King* (1994), noting that its appraisal of samsara “of course” is sung by the lions: “life is a great circle, we eat the zebras, the zebras eat grass; but then, after we die and return to the earth, we also feed the grass, and the circle is closed—this is the best message imaginable for those at the top.”⁶² What is needed from political critique, according to Žižek, is a will, not just to switch one’s position—a “bottom feeder working its way to the top”⁶³—but to change the circle

itself. In *Cattle Decapitation*, on the other hand, singing man decenters his own position. In the (literally) post-human scatanthropological perspective, Žižek's position seems too closely tied to the anthropocentric view of man as a privileged agent working within the delimited framework of civilized society. The limitations of such a position become apparent when considering Žižek's fictional counter-example, a version of the song imagined to be sung by the Jewish father in Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* (1997):

The Nazis are killing us here in Auschwitz, but you should see, my son, how all this is part of a larger Circle of Life: the Nazis themselves will die and turn into fertilizer for the grass, which will be eaten by the cows; the cows will be slaughtered and we will eat their meat in our pies.⁶⁴

The rhetorical force of such an example relies on its humanist pathos. Although sarcastically expressing a revulsion against the brutality of the Nazi Holocaust, it fails to acknowledge the concentration-camp-like violence inherent to humanism itself (even spelled out by Derrida⁶⁵): In Žižek's notoriously anti-vegetarian politics, where the individual abstaining from meat eating is immediately rendered less human, more animal,⁶⁶ cows are unthinkable as anything else than protein pie filling for human consumption. From the bovine standpoint of the shackled cow, on the other hoof, the kosher Jew is an equal threat, and *shechita* slaughter is just another form of slaughter. Thus, animal inversion suggests a shift reaching beyond radical humanist politics.

According to Joanna Demers, it is easy while reading post-apocalyptic fiction to fall prey to the notion that "a post-human world would be a more beautiful and peaceful place," and thus to start believing in "a possibility that in reality affords no possibilities at all."⁶⁷ From the radically scatanthropological perspective, on the other hand, the emergence of new forests from the industrial ruins of a human civilization is full of possibilities and nothing but possibility, a possibility made possible precisely by turning the human world upside down by disaster. Through human apocalypse, new vital ecologies spring forth, "the cadaver now giving life harmoniously."⁶⁸ Hereby, evolution becomes de-evolution,⁶⁹ an eternal return of mutants and monsters, filtered "through genetic anomaly."⁷⁰ Civilizational advance brings technologized bestiality, and man is a mere mistake, a gestational mutation evolved from feces.⁷¹ The emergence of intelligence is a budding disaster in itself, calling for a melancholic nostalgia of dark evolutionary origins: "Had we stayed lichens, had intellect not have been . . . a paradise this would be."⁷² Yet, although technological progress is presented as an intensification of human dominance and

degeneration, there is little patience for primitivist luddism: as indicated by the artwork for *Monolith of Inhumanity* (2012), with its obvious allusions to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), beginning and end are equally barbarian moments in human history.



Figure 6. *Monolith of Inhumanity* (2012).

Through its destructive force, technology itself harbors a potential for obliterating violence by means of violence. With reference to *Divine Heresy*, we could say that the first femur club and the slowly degrading rubber tire are both equal manifestations of human artifacts as “Monolithic Doomsday Devices.”⁷³ Whereas Hartmann found it unfeasible for nineteenth-century man to fulfill his self-destructing purpose, the philosopher nevertheless imagined a future where mankind had gathered the practical technological means to be able to choose to cease to exist.⁷⁴ Working in Hartmann’s tradition, Ulrich Horstmann argues for an apocalyptic and “anthropofugal” philosophy of “*Menschenflucht*,” a state of existential peace achieved through the human escape from the world. Like *Cattle Decapitation*, Horstmann finds in human history little more than an expansive slaughterhouse, a “continuous litany of chopping, stabbing, skewering, hacking, the monotony of slaughtering and smashing skulls.”⁷⁵ Paradise is not found in pre-civilizational innocence but in the final expelling of man: “The true Garden of Eden—is desolation.”⁷⁶ But unlike Hartmann, Horstmann finds such an

annihilation to be within actual reach for modern man due to the development of advanced nuclear, biological, and chemical technology.⁷⁷ In *Cattle Decapitation*, similar themes are succinctly presented in a song like “Everyone Deserves to Die”:

Adoration for man's expiration

Pain . . .

Disease . . .

Ignorance . . .

Extinction of man

And peace on earth

. . .

Extreme holocaust of the peoples

The unbiased hand of death

Resetting an evolution

Reversed big-bang conclusion

You are the disease

Your existence is cancer

Ecological tumor

A disgrace to the earth

Deserving of pain

Deserving of euthanasia

. . .

Visualize nonexistence⁷⁸

In other words, the band seems to be joining the German pessimists in viewing the “self-destructing human parasite”⁷⁹ as primarily a “self-propelled death machine” heading towards “voluntary human extinction.”⁸⁰

Is committing suicide, then, the only viable ethical option? We must remember that in *Cattle Decapitation*, whose works still are artistic rather than philosophical, thematic imagery is presented precisely as a *theme*, that is, as meaning rather than performative action. Unlike Philipp Mainländer, Ryan does not stack up his published works in order to form a platform from which he may hang himself. Rather, the band performs music communicating in a present political situation. From the standpoint of the Absolute, they are fatalists: the samsaric cycle of eternal disaster is inevitable. Yet, the music as message is still performed by, and directed at, what Žižek terms “a finite agent engaged in terrestrial struggle.”⁸¹ As an artistic theme, radical anti-humanism may still commune what Levi R. Bryant terms “an ontology

where humans are no longer monarchs of being but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings,⁸² or what Grosz describes as a “perspectivalism that is always relative to the perceiving, moving, acting body and its particular morphology . . . and the ways in which each species, from the humblest to the most complex, orients its world according to its interests, capacities, knowledges, and uses.”⁸³ Cattle Decapitation lets us approach, by means thematic and artistic, a critical point where post-humanism starts feeling uncomfortable even for an avid advocate of ontological flatness like Bennett. For the latter, the notion of a flat ecosystem must be carefully distinguished from that of a democratically (and basically humanist) ordered public society; there is, simply, no possibility of a polity “so egalitarian that important human needs, such as health or survival, would not take priority.”⁸⁴ At this point Bennett, following Jacques Rancière, but in contrast to Grosz, seems to abandon an ontology of difference for one of affinities where the human apparently is re-inscribed in an ethical and political center surrounded by the traditional abyss of language: as she bluntly puts it, “my conatus will not let me ‘horizontalize’ the world completely.”⁸⁵ Neither Bryant nor Grosz are interested in the absolute equality of detached Totality, yet, their models may still allow for an endless number of perspectival shifts, including the violent, blood-thirsty, tyrannous inversion of the slave procuring a gun or the ox flaying the butcher. In contrast, Bennett’s model risks relapsing into a traditional notion of a gradually “expanding circle” where “more nonhumans” simply are acknowledged in “more ways” by a fixed, sovereign center.⁸⁶

What, then, is the political message of Cattle Decapitation? At first, it seems close to unintelligible, delivered, as it is, in Ryan’s peculiar style of growling and shrieking. This may seem fit for the motif of animal inversion, as expressing the becoming-animal of the human voice or the animal disruption of the very linguistic order it is so often denied. Overell associates the grindcore voice with a devolving of speech into Lacanian *lalanguage*, “the pre-symbolic and pre-gendered babbling of the infant.”⁸⁷ In the Lacanian tradition, Julia Kristeva has described the communicative order in terms of a symbolic regularity based on fluctuating, ephemeral, and corporeal forms of the body’s pre-linguistic semiosis. In this view, the pure meaning of ordered speech is always already possibly disordered by the corporeality of the speech organs, every message thus working against its own visceral grain. Yet, Ryan must be seen as moving beyond Lacan, and, in the manner of Derrida, as inquiring critically the abyss separating animal from man, by replacing the dominance of the Master Signifier with a multiplicity of modes where the ability to form communicative traces stems from materiality itself. Similarities are found in Grosz’ attempt at understanding language according to a model of

uncentered vitality. In her view, all kinds and stages of linguistic elaboration, “from the glorious rhythmic dancing of bees to the pheromonal impulses of ants,” exist not as undeveloped stages culminating in the human tongue, but side by side, paratactically rather than hierarchically.⁸⁸ For Grosz, language is but one path emanating from the affective possibilities of certain organs making possible certain sounds, and, in the extension, song, vocalization, musical cadence, and so on.

When comparing the music of *Cattle Decapitation* with the Kristevan model, things seem to be the other way around: the growling of animal semiosis is rather disrupted by pressing meaningfulness, a descent or a devolution, not into noise, but into meaning. By situating the grindcore growl in a signifying communicative context of album cover artwork, music videos, t-shirt prints, official websites, interviews and printed lyrics accompanying each album, the corporeal force of the seemingly un-articulated music directs the listener towards an ethical and political imperative of stressing relevance for their daily interactions with the world. Hereby, a final inversion, between sound and meaning, will also come to stand the very brutality of deathgrind on its head, as revelry in gratuitous images of extreme violence pale in comparison to the prevalent gruesomeness of our apparently peaceful everyday meat culture. *Cattle Decapitation* demonstrates how the “scandalous” and seemingly extreme images of deathgrind violence in fact form the ideological foundation as well as material practices of humanity’s mystified and reified violent interactions with its significant others. Through channeling the potentialities of violence, noise, and disruption, *Cattle Decapitation* lets the deathgrind message become, almost against its own will, one of refusing, not producing, violence. In lieu of a conclusion, we may, indeed, behold the gruesome “*Chunk Blower*”:

A gigantic grinder
Fused of steel and turbine
Blades flay muscle from bone
Nobody dies alone
As hundreds wait for death
The sound of engines grinding
Every tissue, organ and lining
explode in a mulch of compost
Churning corkscrews of pain
Razor-sharp gears and cogs
For the creation of human sausage logs
The splattering of meat on flesh
Enzymes, acids and fats

trickle down into vats
Nightmarish humanoid mower
Behold, the chunk blower

Your grinded mash
of arms and legs
Torsos and heads
Now hamburger meat⁸⁹

Extreme, gratuitous ultra-violence? Little more than the simplest inversion, switching one privileged meat for another, in the horrific inferno we laxly term modernized food industry.

NOTES

¹ Frederick Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, trans. Emile Burns, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch15.htm>. Cf. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004), 25.

² David Kunzle, "Bruegel's Proverb Painting and the World Upside Down," *The Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 198.

³ Kunzle, "Bruegel's Proverb Painting," 201.

⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1990), 169.

⁵ Cattle Decapitation, "Long-Pig Chef and the Hairless Goat," *To Serve Man* (Metal Blade, 2002).

⁶ Rosemary Overell, "[I] hate girls and emo[tion]s': Negotiating masculinity in grindcore music," *Popular Music History* 6 (2011): 204-205.

⁷ Cf. Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory* (Continuum, 2010).

⁸ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: A History of the Modern Sensibility* (Pantheon, 1983), 44.

⁹ Cf. Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Duke University Press, 2011), 12.

¹⁰ Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion," trans. Brian Manning Delaney, *e-flux* 2 (2009), accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/an-interview-with-jacques-derrida-on-the-limits-of-digestion/>.

¹¹ Cf. Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 157.

¹² Cf. Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 95. On naming the animal "animal," see Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)," trans. David Wills, in *Animal Philos-*

ophy: *Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (Continuum, 2004), 118.

¹³ Birnbaum and Olsson, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida."

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject," trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford University Press, 1995), 278.

¹⁵ Derrida, "Eating Well," 281.

¹⁶ Derrida, "Eating Well," 281.

¹⁷ Derrida, "Eating Well," 281.

¹⁸ Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 54.

¹⁹ Cattle Decapitation, "Forced Gender Reassignment," *Monolith of Inhumanity* (Metal Blade, 2012).

²⁰ Cattle Decapitation, "Cattle Decapitation's 'FORCED GENDER REASSIGNMENT' Trailer #1 is up now!," October 3, 2012, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.facebook.com/cattledecapitation/posts/379157178831934>.

²¹ Travis Ryan, quoted in Jonathan Barkan, "[Exclusive] Cattle Decapitation Release What Might Just Be The Most NSFW Music Video Ever," *Bloody Disgusting*, October 15, 2012, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://bloody-disgusting.com/news/3195804/exclusive-cattle-decapitation-release-what-might-just-be-the-most-nsfw-music-video-ever/>.

²² Black Shuck, October 15, 2012, comment on Islander, "Cattle Decapitation's New Video for 'Forced Gender Reassignment' Sets a New Standard for Foulness," *No Clean Singing*, October 15, 2012, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.nocleansinging.com/2012/10/15/cattle-decapitations-new-video-for-forced-gender-reassignment-sets-a-new-standard-for-foulness/comment-page-1/#comment-47790>.

²³ Rhys Williams, "Video: Cattle Decapitation - 'Forced Gender Reassignment'," *Invisible Oranges*, November 28, 2012, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://www.invisibleoranges.com/2012/11/video-cattle-decapitation-%E2%80%9Cforced-gender-reassignment%E2%80%9D/>.

²⁴ The Smiths, "Meat Is Murder," *Meat Is Murder* (Rough Trade, 1985).

²⁵ The title alludes to a notable 1950 short-story-cum-*Twilight Zone* episode, written by Damon Knight, where a pig-like alien race brings "peace" to humanity by turning it into a food supply.

²⁶ Cattle Decapitation, "To Serve Man," *To Serve Man*.

²⁷ David Hume, "On Suicide," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford University Press, 1993), 319.

²⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously* (Verso, 2012), 110.

²⁹ Derrida, "The Animal," 125-126.

³⁰ Cattle Decapitation, "Chummified," *Humanure* (Metal Blade, 2004).

³¹ Marquis de Sade, *Juliette*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Grove Press, 1968), 890.

- ³² I borrow the term from Villi Thorne, "Cattle Decapitation – Ten Torments for the Damned," *Volumes of Sin* April 1, 2012, accessed October 1, 2013, <http://villithorne.blogspot.se/2012/04/review-cattle-decapitation-ten-torments.html>.
- ³³ Cattle Decapitation, "Karma. Bloody. Karma.," *Karma.Bloody.Karma* (Metal Blade, 2006).
- ³⁴ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 24–25.
- ³⁵ Cattle Decapitation, "Humanure," *Humanure*.
- ³⁶ Cattle Decapitation, "Suspended in Coprolite," *Karma.Bloody.Karma*.
- ³⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press, 2010), 96.
- ³⁸ Cattle Decapitation, "The Carbon Stampede," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.
- ³⁹ Cattle Decapitation, "A New Dawn," *Karma.Bloody.Karma*.
- ⁴⁰ Cattle Decapitation, "A Body Farm," *The Harvest Floor* (Metal Blade, 2009).
- ⁴¹ Slipknot, "People = Shit," *Iowa* (Roadrunner, 2001).
- ⁴² Cf., e.g., Tobias Dahlkvist, *Nietzsche and the Philosophy of Pessimism: Schopenhauer, Hartmann, Leopardi* (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2007), 66–68.
- ⁴³ Cattle Decapitation, "Reduced to Paste," *Humanure*.
- ⁴⁴ Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbour*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1991), 87.
- ⁴⁵ Cattle Decapitation, "Tooth Enamel and Concrete," *The Harvest Floor*.
- ⁴⁶ Sade, *Juliette*, 768–769.
- ⁴⁷ Sade, *Juliette*, 769.
- ⁴⁸ Sade, *Juliette*, 770.
- ⁴⁹ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 33.
- ⁵⁰ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 61.
- ⁵¹ Derrida, "The Animal," 124.
- ⁵² Cattle Decapitation, "Reduced to Paste," *Humanure*.
- ⁵³ Cattle Decapitation, "Total Gore?," *Karma.Bloody.Karma*.
- ⁵⁴ Cattle Decapitation, "Colonic Villus Biopsy Performed On The Gastrointestinally Incapable," *To Serve Man*.
- ⁵⁵ Cattle Decapitation, "Gristle Licker," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.
- ⁵⁶ Cattle Decapitation, "Lips & Assholes," *Humanure*.
- ⁵⁷ David Carney quoted in Gail A. Eisnitz, *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (Amherst: Prometheus, 2007), 155.
- ⁵⁸ Cattle Decapitation, "Gristle Licker," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.
- ⁵⁹ Cattle Decapitation, "Polyps," *Humanure*.
- ⁶⁰ Cattle Decapitation, "Into the Public Bath."
- ⁶¹ Cattle Decapitation, "A Body Farm."
- ⁶² Žižek, *The Year*, 110.
- ⁶³ Cattle Decapitation, "The Earthling," *Humanure*.
- ⁶⁴ Žižek, *The Year*, 110.

⁶⁵ Derrida, "The Animal," 119.

⁶⁶ Cf. the (admittedly hilarious) segment in Astra Taylor's documentary *Zizek!* (2005) where it is suggested that vegetarians will turn into monkeys.

⁶⁷ Joanna Demers, "The Ethics of Apocalypse," *Evental Aesthetics* 1 (2012): 83.

⁶⁸ Cattle Decapitation, "A Body Farm," *The Harvest Floor*.

⁶⁹ Cattle Decapitation, "Suspended in Coprolite," *Karma.Bloody.Karma*; Cattle Decapitation, "Your Disposal," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.

⁷⁰ Cattle Decapitation, "A Living Breathing Piece of Defecating Meat," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.

⁷¹ Cattle Decapitation, "Humanure," *Humanure*; Cattle Decapitation, "A Living Breathing Piece of Defecating Meat," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.

⁷² Cattle Decapitation, "Success Is . . . (Hanging By The Neck)," *Karma.Bloody.Karma*.

⁷³ Divine Heresy, "Monolithic Doomsday Devices," *Bringer of Plagues* (Century Media, 2009).

⁷⁴ Cf. Dahlkvist, *Nietzsche*, 68–69.

⁷⁵ Ulrich Horstmann, *Das Untier: Konturen einer philosophie der Menschenflucht* (Verlag Johannes G. Hoof, 2004), 7. "[F]ortsetzende Litanei des Hauerns, Stechens, Spießsens, Hackens, die Monotonie des Schlachtens und Schädelspaltens."

⁷⁶ Horstmann, *Das Untier*, 8. ("Der wahre Garten Eden – das ist die Öde.")

⁷⁷ Cf., e.g., Klaus Vondung, *The Apocalypse in Germany*, trans. Stephen D. Ricks (University of Missouri Press, 2000), 85–86.

⁷⁸ Cattle Decapitation, "Everyone Deserves to Die," *To Serve Man*.

⁷⁹ Cattle Decapitation, "Forced Gender Reassignment," *Monolith of Inhumanity*.

⁸⁰ Cattle Decapitation, "Success Is . . . (Hanging By The Neck)," *Karma.Bloody.Karma*.

⁸¹ Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, 110.

⁸² Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Open Humanities Press, 2011), 40.

⁸³ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 21.

⁸⁴ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104.

⁸⁵ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104.

⁸⁶ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 109.

⁸⁷ Overell, "[I] hate girls and emo[tion]s'," 206.

⁸⁸ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 14.

⁸⁹ Cattle Decapitation, "Chunk Blower," *To Serve Man*.