

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

How to Cite: Mann, N. (2021) Book Review: Emelia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood (eds.), *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory. Gothic Nature. 2*, pp. 207-209. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

Published: March 2021

Peer Review:

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Artist: D Rosen

Cast Aluminum (Original Objects: Buck Antler and Stomach (Decorative Model), Camel Mask

(Theatrical Model), Whip (Didactic Model), Stiletto (Decoy Model), Goose Neck (Decoy Model),

Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

21 x 25 x 12 in.

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Emelia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood (eds.),
Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory
(Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Noelle Mann

Veganism is possibly at the highest level of visibility and popularity in West European and American culture that it has ever been. Vegans do not eat meat, fish, eggs, or dairy products, and also avoid any goods which are produced from animals, such as leather or wool. Where once it was impossible to buy non-dairy milk from anywhere except specialist health food shops, all of the major supermarkets now strain under the range of new products launched in time for Veganuary, where consumers adopt a vegan diet for the first month of the year. The biggest names in fast food now promote their vegan burgers and chicken substitutes, seemingly championing choice and the opportunity for a kind of speculative veganism. A movement which was initially driven by concern over animal welfare and the increasingly mechanised and large-scale production methods of modern farming, veganism has recently been strengthened by a growing concern with the environment, especially among young people. The Extinction Rebellion movement has politicised Europe's youth against many industries which are seen as being harmful to the planet as it enters the age of the Anthropocene: where human activity becomes the dominant influence on climate and the environment.

Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture is then a welcome and timely publication, as it collects essays on the influence, ethics and wider complications of veganism in the academic sphere and beyond. Arranged in four sections, the book focuses on politics and theory, with references to film, art, literature, and the intricacies of personal vegan beliefs. Beginning with a useful introduction 'Thinking Through Veganism,' the editors trace the development of academic vegan theory from the initial foundation of critical animal studies (CAS) to the definition of veganism as a 'queer' way of existing within and seeing the world. As a way of viewing humankind through an alternative lens, the application of queer theory to moral choices in consumption is a novel and enticing idea. The collection of papers contained in the book are all valuable and

interesting in their own sphere of focus, but there are a few contributions which also lean towards horror and the Gothic.

Animal rights activists have frequently used striking (and disturbing) visual graphics to uncover the horrific scenes which are necessary points in the process of our meat consumption. Jason Edwards, in 'The Vegan Viewer in the Circum-Polar Worlds' explores J.H. Wheldon's painting *The Diana and Chase in the Arctic* (1857) in a similar way, opening up a discussion on the European industries of whaling and seal-skin production as represented in art. These practises are now considered horrific relics of the Victorian age, but at the time they were deemed to be somehow natural, and an expression of the spirit of the Enlightenment. This was despite what Edwards calls the *humanimal* tragedy of not only the slaughter of whales and other animals, but also the fatalities suffered by the men working in these hazardous industries.

Anat Picks's 'Vegan Cinema' explores film and its capacity to consume and preserve the subject of its gaze. Instead of 'eating up' big screen narratives, the idea of 'vegan cinema' envisioned by Pick enables cameras, audiences or critics to construct a kind of non-devouring gaze on film content. Where films, or moments in films, invite 'the complicity between the desire to look and to eat' they enact a vegan mindset. For Pick, this applies to all films, not simply those with the emphasis on promoting veganism, and her concept draws on the writings of Simone Weil and the Realist movements in film theory. The films she chooses to explore have an unmistakable animal element, including *Noah* (Aronofsky, 2014) but also include the theme of eating in Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987). Furthermore, she touches on the horror trope of being eaten in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), *Grizzly Man* (Herzog, 2005), and cannibalism in *Raw* (Ducournau, 2017).

Hybrid human and animal monsters have appeared in Anglophone Literature for over two hundred years, Emelia Quinn points out in her essay 'Monstrous Vegan Narratives: Margaret Atwood's Hideous Progeny,' but surprisingly, she continues, the vast majority of critics have overlooked the fact that these creatures do not eat animals. Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy of novels (2003-2013) present a possible future where humans struggle to survive in an environmentally decimated world of their own making. Two monsters, the Crakers and God's Gardeners, are depicted as opposite sides of the same vegan coin: the messy embodiment of lived

veganism versus the impossibly perfect and spiritually pure vegan. In this way, Quinn discusses the complexities of veganism in literature, resisting stereotypical representations of veganism, whilst also touching on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1819) and H.G. Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).

Benjamin Westwood takes on the myth of the physically weak or disappearing vegan in his essay, 'On Refusal.' A discussion of the protagonist's polite denial of any food apart from ginger nut biscuits (and later, even those) in Herman Melville's 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853), leads into an examination of the latent political resistance contained in the simple expression: 'I would prefer not to.' Further narratives contained in Franz Kafka's 'A Hunger Artist' (1922) and Han Kang's 'The Vegetarian' (2015) serve to impress upon Westwood that veganism needs a new model which is not composed entirely of 'tragic, individualist iconoclasm' but is flexible enough to represent the ideals of moral choice without rejecting the inherent inconsistencies and compromises.

I highly recommend this book to anyone wanting a more nuanced understanding of veganism and how it exists as not just an ethical stance, but also an emerging theoretical discourse. Insofar as the fields of ecohorror and the ecoGothic are concerned, vegan theory stands to provide a unique reading on a large number of available texts, from the classic literature of Shelley to the extreme, feminist visual feast of *Raw*. There is much we can learn about ourselves, both as humans and academics, from the power of nature and the cultural complexities of consumption.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Quinn, E. and Westwood, B. (eds.) (2018) *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory*. Oxford: Palgrave Macmillan.