

BOOK REVIEWS

The Vegan Revolution... with Zombies

David Agranoff (2010) *The Vegan Revolution... with Zombies*, Deadite Press.

Reviewed by Colin Salter

David Agranoff's satirical *The Vegan Revolution... with Zombies* (TVR) is an unrelenting, if at times subtle, tongue in cheek expose of the insular, self-centered and self-aggrandizing of hipsters, locavores and a number of other 'alternative' subcultures. Founded on critiques of speciesism and genetic engineering, the zombie metaphor is used doubly as a critique of consumer-capitalist society in a general sense, and more specifically to expose anthropocentric and human chauvinist concern for the treatment of nonhuman animals.¹ It is from here that the apocalyptic zombie plot emerges—forming a humorous and enjoyable reading experience.

TVR starts with a press release outlining a 'breakthrough' in the genetic engineering of nonhuman animals to satiate anthropocentric concern over their treatment and suffering. This new process limits/inhibits the production of specific proteins important to brain function, targeting regions and receptors that transcode pain signals. The outcome is that nonhuman animals can now be reared without pain to assuage taste buds of the 'conscientious omnivores' — all without any feelings of guilt. Adding another layer to the placating of any normative and well-meaning, if inconsistent, concern, further advances have facilitated the suppression of boredom, abandonment and stress typical to the rearing of nonhuman animals for consumption. What has emerged, or perhaps should be described by the hand of 'man' as 'god', is the literal pinnacle of 'happy meat'.²

The first two pages, having outlined the (scientific) realization of René Descartes soulless beast, set the scene for the consumption of pain and stress free animal products. The

¹ See Richard and Val Routley (1979) for a detailed outline of human chauvinism.

² A number of scientists are actively engaged in what Richard Twine (2010) refers to as 'welfare bioethics', seeking similar breakthroughs in genetic manipulation to that fictionalized by Agranoff. Such outcomes are not as far fetched as they may seem.

stage is also set for that which much of the readership will see as a form of reciprocal justice, and far from ironic, apocalyptic downfall of the first ‘victims’.

Controversial ethicist and public intellectual Peter ‘Sangar’ (Singer) and the Humane Society of the United States add their voices to the chorus of praise, reflecting arguments presented by both, often at the chagrin of those working to end the exploitation of animals (in contrast to it’s regulation). Michael ‘Poland’ (Pollan), a figurehead of the conscientious omnivore movement, and Sangar are ceremoniously identified and lauded as the first to consume the genetically engineered happy meat. The forthcoming, first, and central, reap what you sow moment of TVR is set in motion.

Consumption of these ‘100% Stress-Free label products’ (including dairy and eggs) is the root of the zombification process. The genetic manipulation central to the inhibition of brain function to produce the undead farm animals has an unexpected bio-accumulatory effect. The ‘infliction’ is transferred to those who consume the genetically altered products. Over a short period of time, an increasingly noticeable lack of consciousness (directly paralleling the selfish unconsciousness, or strategic ignorance³, of carnism⁴) is visible amongst the infected — the vast majority of the population. The pandemic spreads rapidly, with all non-vegans (including freegans and some raw foodists), becoming undead (at least in the USA, where TVR is set).

What might be initially perceived as a linkage to the popularity of the rising ‘with zombies’ genre in literature—of it being overrun, pun intended—is itself a critique upon which TVR builds. This is not to take away from the efficacy of the zombie literary subgenre which emerged in the 1990s. Rather, it takes aim at what followed Seth Grahame-Smith’s (2009) remix parody *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*: portrayed as another consumer-capitalist enterprise unleashed on a zombie-like public. I am certain there are many nuances throughout TVR that are beyond my limited exposure to the genre.⁵ In light of this, I will focus more on the commentary about the societal positioning of nonhuman animals.

³ By Strategic ignorance, I am referring to what Charles Mills (1997) and others have referred to as cognitive disfunction, the management of collective social memory and formation of patterns of ignorance (see Sullivan & Tuana 2007). In essence, a strategic practice of (at times unmarked and unconscious) actively maintaining ignorance. The outcome of this is a non consideration of the exploitation inherent in the use of animals for human pleasure.

⁴ Carnism is a term coined by Melanie Joy (2010) to label to the normalised practice of consuming (certain) animals. It is a belief system that renders the practice unquestioned. The term acts in the same way as veganism — it identifies the actions as emanating from ideology.

⁵ There are also a number of ‘geek’ inferences, name-dropping (and equivalents) that are outside my realm of scene knowledge.

Set in Portland', considered the centre of the vegan universe for some, what is considered the 'vegan mini mall' — home to a number of well-known (in North America) vegan small businesses including Food Fight Grocery, Herbivore Clothing Company, Scapegoat Tattoo and Sweet Pea Baking Company — becomes the rallying point. Those uninfected, and a number of freegans and raw foodists without visible symptoms, converge on the mall seeking to escape the slow moving and intellectually challenged zombie population. Discussions begin regarding how to survive the apocalypse, how to respond to and deal with the approaching zombie hordes, and how to envision the approaching world free from the exploitation of nonhuman animals.

Whilst we can regard TVR as merely a humorous light read, it is strengthened significantly by Agranoff's detailed awareness of key issues and debates. He lucidly exposes and engages with, in a clever way, many of the divisions within discourse surrounding the use of nonhuman animals in contemporary society — including debates about how to challenge and undermine this. These, at times subtle, engagements continue throughout the novel.

Agranoff's nuanced understanding is made visible in the portrayals of, or references to, key figures within public debate and those positioned within what we can loosely term as the animal movement(s). I have already introduced Peter Sangar and Michael Poland—readers can clearly deduce who these two characters represent in real life. Agranoff's depth of awareness is most clear, and will be for those who have followed key issues and debates (those having an insiders perspective), in references to a non-present character: Professor Gary L. Fonzie (Francione). Many readers will find this as a rather witty, apt, and quite humorous choice. Whether Francione will see any humor, or substantive critical commentary, in this portrayal is another story entirely. This is in part based on emerging criticisms of a fanboi like culture of identity politics among some of the many who see the value in his theorizing on the exploitation of animals. This is, unfortunately, embodied in a zombie-like either/or rationalist-exclusionary approach, often mobilized via dismissive rhetorical devices, which are explicitly highlighted in meetings between those in the mini mall about how to deal with the zombie 'problem'. TVR satirises this in two ways: through introducing one of his books with a title of *Animal Freedom—The Only Way, My Way*; and multiple instances of the character Samantha, a Fonzie abolitionist, responding to other perspectives and approaches with 'as Professor Fonzie says...'

Beyond the specific critiques of discussions within the animal movement(s), the zombie metaphor drawn on, increasingly used in academia, provides the foundation on which

the story rests as a broader social critique. Both before and after the affliction and transformation of the masses, the (technological) somnambulism of the zombie or the ‘walking dead’ has resonance.⁶ The anthropocentrism behind the genetic engineering central to the plot, introduces a dualistic positioning. The framing of the brain (un)dead masses and the enlightened vegans will most certainly be a source of criticism labelled against TVR. Those who do so, however, will miss the more important and pertinent satire of the dualism—which will also be seen as overly-critical and controversial by those positioned in the potential zombie pool.

What TVR explicitly sets out to critique is patently visible in the character of Sangar, and to a lesser extent Poland, as the first to undergo the zombie transformation. Peter Singer’s utilitarian and consequentialist philosophical approach to the question of the nonhuman animal, and the inaccurate however widespread references to him as the godfather of the animal rights movement, position him as an obvious choice for the first inflicted (as the character Sangar).

It is far from a stretch to foresee (the real-life) Peter Singer coming out in support of such genetic engineering should it be proposed in the (scarily near?) future. As with the character in absence Professor Fonzie (a.k.a. Gary L Francione), there are many who will find some humor, even satirical pleasure, in this portrayal. At it’s roots, some will incorrectly see and frame TVR as another salvo in the abolition v regulation debate. The nuance blended into the plot by Agranoff goes much deeper, highlighting schisms and (at times unseen) identity politics that act to dismiss valid criticisms. This is most clear in the the created subtitle of Professor Fonzie’s book (*The Only Way, My Way*) and an often uncritical zombie-like deference to his ideas (‘as Professor Fonzie says’). These parallels will certainly resonate with those who have witnessed real life personal attacks against those who have expressed substantive critical and constructive comments about Francione’s definition (even co-option) of the abolition label.

As speculative fiction, which I consider to be an apt label irrespective of whether it is overtly such, TVR has the potential to alter world views of those who read it. This is the cornerstone of good literature — it is the level of influence on the reader which will be differentiated. Amidst the tongue in cheek wit and what may be reacted to as dry humor, the

⁶ See Langdon Winner (1989: 10) for an examination of how we ‘willingly sleepwalk through the process of the reconstitution of human existence’.

social messages throughout are clear for those open enough to see, laugh, and personally reflect on it.

Many will find basis for enjoyment in reading TVR as I did, whether they be punks, hipsters, vegans, zombie geeks, misanthropes, or someone who randomly comes by a copy.

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