

“*Caniba*: Feasting on Abjection”
by George Crosthwait

On June 13, 1981, Issei Sagawa, a 32 year-old doctoral student at the Sorbonne, was caught disposing of two suitcases in a park on the outskirts of Paris. The contents: the putrefying remains of his classmate Renée Hartevelt, a Dutch national whom he’d shot two days before, and whose corpse he’d then proceeded to have sex with, before eating her body, and finally discarding her remains in the Bois de Boulogne. Deemed unfit to stand trial and deported to

Japan two years later, Sagawa checked himself out of a mental institution on August 12, 1985.

Since his re-entry into Japanese society, Sagawa has been ostracised for his crime, but has made a living by exploiting his macabre celebrity. His endeavours include recreations of his crime in books, manga, and pornographic films, several true-crime novels, and even a stint as a restaurant critic. He has been the subject of several documentaries prior to *Caniba*, and has inspired music from the likes of The Stranglers and The Rolling Stones.

Caniba is the latest project from Harvard University’s innovative Sensory Ethnography Lab, and is filmmakers Véréna Paravel and Lucien Castaing-Taylor’s collaborative follow-up to their critically adored *Leviathan* (2012). Whilst in *Leviathan*, Paravel and Castaing-Taylor attached go-pro cameras to fishermen, buoys, nets, and to actual fish in order to create an experience of sensory overload, their approach in *Caniba* is far more reserved, yet no less radical.

Shot in unbroken takes and extreme close-ups, the viewer is given little respite from the encounter with Sagawa. The camera glides ceaselessly yet glacially over the face of its subject, and at no point do the filmmakers settle into a full shot of the man’s face. The effect of this is to refuse a comfortable framing of the man, and to refute our desire to gain a clear picture of him. These incomplete and agitated framings adhere to the notion of *kire* [cut] in Japanese aesthetic theory. Rooted in Zen Buddhism, *kire* requires abstracting a figure through cutting in order to reveal some pure essence of their character. Perhaps Paravel and Castaing-Taylor aim to show the unequivocally human side to Sagawa that has been lost through his committing of such an unusually heinous crime.

Caniba asks its audience to stare into an abject abyss, and dares them to recognise themselves in those queasy depths. Whether we ultimately empathise with him or not, Sagawa’s crime is so abhorrent that our own perversions or "abnormal" desires are likely to pale in comparison. Cannibalism allows us to conceive of our own dark urges and thoughts without shame, as they cannot compare unfavourably to humanity’s ultimate taboo. Thus, *Caniba* offers the viewer a space to find solace from their own transgressions. A place where, through our own debasement, we emerge with reaffirmed humanity.

La folie indeed