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# Communicating Vegan Utopias: The Counterfactual Construction of Human-animal Futures

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## ABSTRACT

Industrialized animal agriculture reveals human-animal relations defined by routinized, institutionalized violence on a staggering scale. Despite greater public recognition of these issues, consumption of meat and other products from industrially processed animals continues to rise globally. This article responds to an ongoing need to consider unexplored sites in research addressing challenges to “meat culture” and the promotion of alternatives. To this end, it examines the film *Carnage*, about a future vegan utopia, as a distinctive artistic intervention. It is analyzed as a unique example of the construction of counterfactual futures – the practice of imagining the potential impact of hypothetical events on future scenarios. It is claimed that *Carnage* reflects potential advances in effective animal advocacy, and further innovation in artistic, cultural and methodological interventions that can enliven campaigning repertoires of rhetorical strategies, discursive and narrative frames.

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## Introduction

There can be little doubt that industrialized animal agriculture reveals human-animal relations defined by routinized, institutionalized violence on a staggering scale (Cudworth, 2015). The number of animals involved is astonishing. There are an estimated 23 billion chickens on the planet at any one time, roughly three chickens for every human, by far the most numerous bird species alive today. The number slaughtered annually is estimated by the United Nations at 66 billion (Ritchie & Roser, 2017); compared to 1.5 billion pigs and 0.3 billion cattle (Bennett et al., 2018). The overwhelming majority of these animals are reared and killed in factory-like farms, accurately characterized “as places of unending terror and gratuitous cruelty” (Hunnicut, 2019, p. 154). An ethical critique of animal agriculture on these grounds is increasingly supplemented by challenges drawing on (human) health and environmental narratives (e.g. Carrington, 2019; Heidemann et al., 2020). Farmed animals eat a third of all the food grown on the planet, almost four-fifths of agricultural land is used to produce animal feed and a quarter of the Earth’s ice-free terrestrial surface is used for grazing (Bennett et al., 2018). It is hardly surprising then that a growing global population, raising and eating more domesticated animals, significantly contribute to intersecting ecological crises – the extinction of wild species, habitat loss and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Reynolds, 2013). Regularly eating significant quantities of processed meat is also closely correlated with health risks such as cancer, heart disease and diabetes (Bouvard et al., 2015).

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Greater public recognition of these issues reflects a wider cultural and political questioning of “meat culture” – “the representations and discourses, practices and behaviours, diets and tastes that generate shared beliefs about, perspectives on, and experiences of meat” (Potts, 2016, p. 20) – accompanied by a growth in the visibility and legitimacy of “plant-based lifestyles”.<sup>1</sup> However, such practices remain decidedly niche in the global context of a *rising* average per capita and total consumption of meat, a greater proportion of which is processed prior to purchase (Godfray et al., 2018). If we accept that the radical reform and overhaul of animal agriculture is vitally necessary for the reasons noted above, how might demand for these changes be encouraged, especially considering the taken-for-granted, intersecting and recalcitrant nature of the myriad practices involved in maintaining the production and consumption of meat? When it comes to effective animal advocacy, what types of artistic and cultural interventions can we add to a campaigning repertoire of rhetorical strategies, discursive and narrative frames?

Whilst the disclosure of violence and mistreatment suffered by farmed animals can be a powerful tool for animal rights and welfare campaigners, a primary assertion made here is that it is unlikely to be an effective rhetorical strategy in isolation. As a result, there is an ongoing need to consider adjunct and alternative means of engaging audiences, and a great deal of scope for examining multiple and varied approaches to animal advocacy. Research and debate in environmental communication studies, Critical Animal Studies (CAS) and related fields has developed knowledge about the potential or actual effectiveness of different medium, messages and strategies for challenging meat culture and promoting alternatives. Whilst it is argued that we can learn a great deal from this work, new sites of animal agriculture contestation are emerging all the time, integrating both new and familiar rhetorical strategies and narrative frames. The article first outlines how meat culture has been critiqued and alternatives promoted in animal studies and environmental communication studies, identifying key rhetorical strategies for effective animal advocacy as well as persistent obstacles embodied in meat culture. The article then focuses on a specific, novel attempt to challenge the ideologies and practices associated with meat culture – the film *Carnage* (BBC, 2017). It approaches the film as an “unexplored site” in research addressing challenges to meat culture and promoting alternatives (Singer, 2017), understood as an artistic intervention, but also analyzed as a unique version of the construction of counterfactual futures – the practice of imagining the potential impact of hypothetical events on future scenarios (Todorova, 2015). It is argued that the film and the broader approach it represents offers a distinctive contribution to research, scholarship and activism concerned with effective animal advocacy, with wider potential for related research methodologies.

## Communicating & challenging meat culture

Eating animals is deeply ingrained in cultural practices and perpetually reinforced by ideologies, routines, and habits (Adams, 2010; Joy, 2011). Potts refers to “meat culture” in this vein (Potts, 2010, 2016), whilst others document the ideology of “carnism” and related psychological, social and structural dynamics legitimizing meat eating practices (Cudworth, 2015; Loughnan et al., 2014). Academic analysis of the combination of “beliefs, representations, discourses, practices and behaviors, diets and tastes” involved is growing rapidly (Potts, 2016, p. 19), as one element of a wider interdisciplinary “animal turn”. This “new nexus of interdisciplinary scholarly interest in the human-animal relationship” (Andersson Cederholm et al., 2014, p. 5) encourages a reconceptualization of how nonhuman animals contribute to many domains of human social and psychological experience; and of how human and nonhuman animal experience is often shared, reciprocal, and mutually implicated, if often profoundly asymmetrical in terms of power (Haraway, 2008). It is reflected in the establishment of fields such as anthrozoology, Human–Animal and Critical Animal Studies, multispecies and more-than-human methodologies (e.g. Åsberg, 2018; DeMello, 2012; Haraway, 2016; Pyyhtinen, 2016).<sup>2</sup>

In environmental communication studies, the animal turn is evident in a growing body of research addressing the various media processes through which meat culture is communicated and legitimated, advanced by emerging fields such as Critical Animal and Media Studies and vegan studies (Almiron et al., 2015; 2018; Wright, 2017). Accounting for how farmed animals are represented is at the core of these processes. Media and communication studies delineate the ways in which animals are constructed as expendable objects (David & Stephens Griffin, 2021; Kha-zaal & Almiron, 2016; Taylor, 2016); animal bodies made invisible as “absent referent[s] in the act of meat eating” (Adams, 2010, p. 13); and the omission and obfuscation of the meat production system more generally (Joy, 2011). Examples of research include how television advertisements articulate meat consumption as restoring hegemonic “primitive masculinities” (Rogers, 2008); filmic (non)-representation of death in the slaughterhouse (Gould, 2019); contradictory news media framings of “animal escape stories” (David & Stephens Griffin, 2021); and the gendered denigration of emotional concern for farmed animals in television cooking shows (Parry, 2010). The communicative and discursive processes of “othering” have also been examined, whereby alternatives to meat culture, especially veganism, are dismissed, vilified, or ridiculed in mainstream and social media, not least through prejudicial stereotypes (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Doyle, 2016).

Established media and wider cultural narratives, combined with material institutions and infrastructure, rituals, habits, and defence mechanisms (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017), make meaningfully unsettling meat culture, and entrenched carnist and speciesist ideologies, a daunting prospect. As Freeman summarizes, the campaigning work of animal rights and environmental organizations face “the discursive challenge of redefining accepted practices, such as farming and eating nonhuman-animals, into socially unacceptable practices” (2010, p. 163). An uphill struggle perhaps, but a burgeoning body of research critically engages with the complexities of communicating animal suffering and violence, challenging meat-eating practices, and the promotion of alternatives. Relevant studies have tended to focus on animal rights organizations and the framing of animal rights in rhetorical attempts to persuade people to eat less meat (Freeman, 2010); but other sites explored include online “viral video” animations (Wolfe, 2009); “Meatless Monday” social media campaigns (Singer, 2017); animal advocacy documentaries (Freeman, 2012); and the narratives and networks of animal advocacy philanthropists (Broad, 2018).

### **Moral shock & the meat paradox**

Alongside critique, several studies draw out lessons for more effective rhetorical and communicative animal advocacy strategies (Freeman, 2010; Taylor, 2016). Some defend the power of a “moral shock” conveyed by footage of farmed animal violence and suffering as an ethical and effective approach (Fernández, 2019). In fact, attempts to document and communicate the practices of animal agriculture and the scale of the violence and suffering involved have become increasingly sophisticated, exemplified in the campaigns of various charities and NGOs, adept at combining media and communication with the ability to share rapidly and widely through social media networks. Shock tactics stand in apparent tension with recent mainstream media culture coverage of veganism and “plant-based lifestyles”, where moral and ethical arguments are “routinely denied articulation” (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Doyle, 2016, p. 778) as they are considered too controversial, divisive or extreme compared to health and environmental reasoning. Mainstream advocacy of plant-based lifestyles also tends to “defined by an apolitical small-steps strategy”, as in “Meatless Monday” and “Veganuary” campaigns (Singer, 2017, p. 244), whereas moral shock brings politics, justice, and equality issues to the forefront.

Yet there appears to be a limit to the powers of more and more visceral disclosure alone to reach out beyond niche populations and influence collective demand for change. At the psychological level of narrative – in the intimacy of the stories we tell ourselves, Bastian and Loughnan’s account of the “meat paradox” rings true (2017): “whilst the majority of people the world over eat meat... many of these same people experience discomfort when the meat on their plate is linked to the

death of animals” (p. 278). Their counter-intuitive assertion that being confronted with the cause of this dissonance can amplify both one’s commitment to meat eating *and* displace hostility towards those drawing attention to the source of one’s discomfort might explain a proportion of individual inertia and resistance. This is not just a psychological issue. In the specific context of animal agriculture, the meat paradox contributes to a wider polarization of positions and can be routinely and unthinkingly “resolved” by the overdetermined dynamics of “meat culture”. As Potts argues in relation to carnism, “when an ideology is considered a universal truth, part of ‘mainstream’ lives, the ‘normal’ or ‘orthodox’ way to view things as better than all other ways; when it becomes entrenched, it becomes invisible” (2016, p. 19). Confronting us with the morally troublesome practice of eating meat can amplify discomfort, whereby we double down on dissonance reduction strategies, increasing our commitment to meat eating, an endorsement of speciesism, and a further polarization of pro- and anti- meat-eating positions. Further exposés of violence and suffering, whether subtle, visceral, or confrontational, are arguably limited in terms of their constructive and imaginative capacities, especially in the context of an already existing network of culturally canonical narratives and established customs and practices. Attempts to make individuals aware of the immorality of cherished behaviors are, in other words, “like a drop in the ocean when habits, institutions, and rituals provide a powerful anchor for people to avoid dissonance” (Bastian & Loughnan, 2017, p. 281).

If moral shock contains limited potential for change alone, ideological integrity and an appeal to shared values might win out over the longer term, as Freeman asserts with reference to historical rights movements. She asserts the need to “retain ideological integrity” and a “moral vision” (Freeman, 2010), whilst at the same time “appealing to culturally-accepted values and connecting them to the audience’s everyday life” (2010, p. 166). Bridging these requirements in animal advocacy campaigns demands a narrative focus on shared values of “freedom, life, respect, compassion, health, and environmental responsibility”. Accordingly, Freeman urges organizations to “construct vegan campaigns which not only convince people to avoid consuming any animal products but do so in ways that encourage people to respect other animals as fellow sentient beings with the right to live free of exploitation” (2010, p. 164).

In the shorter term, despite critical reservations, an emphasis on “mainstreaming” veganism through consumer, lifestyle, and celebrity discourses, could appeal to people who might otherwise disengage or get defensive in line with the meat paradox thesis. Perhaps a combination of all these strategies might plant the seeds later to be harvested in public demand for transformative change (Solnit, 2019). For now though, how to combine all these ingredients in an accessible and impactful mixture of effective animal advocacy can seem elusive. In terms of ambitious social change, there is an urgent need to generate social imaginaries beyond industry reform, in a culture where more radical approaches, such as abolitionism, are ideologically occluded. To that end, this article will examine a novel approach to “the possibilities of narrative to disturb and disclose cultural secrets of systemic violence” (Boyde, 2018, p. 9), locating them within a distinctive rhetorical strategy – a counterfactual narrative of a vegan utopian future.

## Counterfactual future narratives

There is an extant literature exploring the dynamics involved in forecasting, foresight and futures, as methodologies, genres, persuasive techniques and narratives (e.g. Booth et al., 2009; Fuller & Loogma, 2009; Van Hoeck et al., 2013). The focus here is purposefully specific – “counterfactual analysis” as a component of the study of “alternative futures” (Ferguson, 1999; Lewis, 1973; Sardar, 2010). In historical and speculative fiction counterfactual histories are narrative vehicles for speculating on alternative pasts, presents and futures had history gone differently (Evans, 2014; Ferguson, 1999; Gallagher, 2018); including a “a slew of contemporary writers, filmmakers ... driven primarily by climate breakdown” (Nixon, 2020). They are often spun out from specific moments, taking different fateful paths from what actually happened, such as if Hitler had successfully invaded

Britain (Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, 1992); or if Charles Lindbergh had won the 1940 election in the US (Timothy Roth's *Plot against America*, 2004). Whilst the detailed construction of "what if ..." scenarios are most prominent in historical and speculative fiction, they also feature in academic work (e.g. Ma & Jin, 2019; Smele, 2020; Tripathi & Srivastava, 2014); with Fogel's economic counterfactual history of an America in which railroads had never been built considered an important starting point (Fogel, 1964). More recently, Pargman et al's fascinating "Coalworld" project, still apparently underway, envisions an alternative present in which only half of the world's oil ever existed, and consequently, "the global peak in oil production ("peak oil") is a historical fact that happened decades ago" (2017, p. 170).<sup>3</sup>

The intention here is not so survey this literature but to explore Todorova and Gordon's specific take on it (Gordon & Todorova, 2019; Todorova, 2015; Todorova & Gordon, 2017), as the basis for considering the potential of "counterfactual futures" as a form of effective animal advocacy. Whilst imagining "probable, plausible, possible and preferable futures" *might* be a component of counterfactual historical narratives, Todorova offers "counterfactual construction" specifically as "a methodology for exploring the future" (Todorova, 2015, p. 30). If "counterfactual" is often taken to mean the same as "alternative history", her intention is to yoke systematic counterfactual analysis to risk and futures studies: "as a forecasting methodology particularly useful in helping to cope with uncertainty and aid in the identification of wild cards, black swans, and so on" (2015, p. 32). Stated as a question, if a "favourite counterfactual puzzle of historians and novelists is 'How would history have been different had Y happened instead of X?'" (Todorova & Gordon, 2017, p. 93); counterfactual constructions of the future might ask "How would the future be different had Y happened / if Y happens instead of X?"

Alternative history narratives are defended by their advocates as a defence against *hindsight bias* – the habit of "forgetting, as soon as we learn what happened, how unpredictable the world looked beforehand, and closing our minds to all the ways the course might have changed" (Tetlock et al. cited in Todorova & Gordon, 2017, p. 93). Todorova and Gordon suggest that methodological construction of alternative futures can similarly avoid a *foresight bias*, i.e. "preconceived ideas about how the future will or ought to evolve" (p. 94). This approach is presented more specifically as constructing counterfactual futures: i.e. "scenarios that start from the present or some point in history and explore different futures"; and "someday, [a] choice may be made or will have to be made, and in speculating about it, we form images of the future and imagine scenarios based on chains of causality stretching forward from the fork" (p. 93). In developing a methodology for constructing and exploring plausible alternative future scenarios, Todorova defines three specific aspects of counterfactuality – dormant facts, reinterpreted facts, and rumor. Identifying these in specific historical context, and building future scenarios on that basis, is claimed to strengthen the plausibility of those scenarios, increasing, in her words, the "prognostic potential" of forecasting methodologies and future-oriented planning and policy.

Dormant facts are accepted aspects of shared social realities, but they are latent, "sleeping" unless or until they become activated, in light of social, cultural and/or political changes. Todorova gives the example of the "frozen conflict" along ethnic and religious lines in the post-war Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), which after the 1989 disintegration of the SFRY, became "reactivated" as a presiding factor in the region, and subsequent war, genocide, and massacre. Reinterpreted or reinvented facts are existing truths, capable of being given new meanings, reoriented to reflect and facilitate political, shifting social, religious, or economic contexts. The final category of counterfactuals consists of rumors and hypotheses. These are not established facts, but possible truths. Whilst the veracity of rumors and hypotheses might be of secondary nature, they nonetheless have the power to shape futures, if they manage to circulate and take hold at the right time. Former US president Donald Trump's attempt to spread rumors of election fraud, for example, might yet be a platform for a future election campaign. In terms of method, Todorova and colleagues are interested in surveying experts in given fields to identify these various counterfactuals in

specific contexts then systematically synthesizing their prognoses in real-time computational modeling of possible events and future scenarios (Todorova & Gordon, 2017).

Whilst I do not doubt the potential of this approach in forecasting and futures studies, I am more interested in methods of constructing counterfactual futures at the intersection of academic research, art, and activism; the role such methods might play in effective animal advocacy communication and in challenging culturally embedded eating practices; and, finally, what a focus on counterfactual futures might add to environmental communication studies demonstrating addressing similar topics. As a relatively novel approach, the following section is concerned with demonstrating the potential of counterfactual future narratives via an illustrative example. I explore it here via a piece of work that is not explicitly offered as a counterfactual future, but one that, it will be argued, fits the bill exceptionally well nonetheless. The chosen example is the 2017 feature-length film *Carnage*, commissioned by and shown on the BBC in the UK. Whilst developed for computational modeling and quantitative analysis, some detail of Todorova and Gordon's analysis of the key tenets of counterfactual future is retained and incorporated as we proceed, and other examples of counterfactual futures incorporated in supporting roles.

### Imagining a vegan utopia

*Carnage* is best described as a “mockumentary” (i.e. depicting fictional events but presented as a factual documentary, often involving humor), written and directed by British comedian and writer Simon Amstell. The film intersperses life in the “present” (2067), depicted as a utopia in which humans have extended their capacity for empathy and compassion, and no longer raise animals for consumption, with a history of how the social transition from “carnism” to the present came about, stretching back to the mid-twentieth century. The initial focus is the “present day”, and a group of young people, comically represented in soft focus as remarkably caring and compassionate. The voiceover tells us that for young people today “the idea that human beings like them were once complicit in a bloodbath of unnecessary suffering is too absurd to imagine”. The film regularly switches between this group and a group therapy setting involving older adults, whom, we are told, are struggling with painful memories of their past eating habits. We observe group members haltingly discussing “the shame of carnism”. This might sound rather po-faced, but there is strong comedic element throughout. The footage of young people being caring and compassionate with each other, and their incredulous response to “past horrors” is exaggerated, sailing close to vegan stereotypes; whilst in the support groups, clients use the “safe space” to take it in turns to solemnly name cheeses they used to eat (“Stilton”, “Camembert” etc.).

Early on the voiceover establishes the key rhetorical ruse – we now live in a utopia defined by compassion for all human and nonhuman animals, but past horrors have been buried deep, and this film (presented as a documentary) “aims to finally break the silence and the shame around our animal eating past”, and asserting that “to fully understand the horror of the past we must go back”. This provides a narrative structure on which to peg the “carnist” details of our (the audience's) present as a future generation's shameful past. The film settles into a chronology it more or less sticks with, starting in 1944. Selected events on the timeline are portrayed via a mixture of genuine archive footage from the 1940s through to 2017 when the film was made (TV cookery and entertainment shows, news items, documentaries, advertising), and fictional scenes (presented as factual) documenting a divergent counterfactual future (from 2017 to 2067).<sup>4</sup> Archive footage includes the meat production process, various scenes of preparing and eating meat in action, some visceral depictions of animal slaughter, as well as early incarnations of the vegan movement.

We set off with a nice hint of what is to come “when we think of 1944, we tend to think of the establishment of the world's first vegan society”. This is a good example of the relevance of Todorova's conceptualization of the potential of “dormant facts” – “an existing situation or reality whose potential impact has remained unrecognized or unfulfilled” (2015, p. 31) – in her typology of counterfactuals. The significance the date comes to warrant reflects its effective “activation”, but here in a

very different context – the construction of a counterfactual utopian narrative. 1954, the end of fourteen years of meat rationing in Britain, is the gateway for industrial-scale production and consumption of meat, and ushers in the rise of the celebrity chef – “putting a dead pig on a plate and cutting it up” as mass entertainment. From here, the film frames much of the remainder of the twentieth century as a time in which meat became ubiquitously established in British (the exclusive focus of the film) diets, society, and culture. However, the arrival of diseases is represented as prompting some questioning of intensive animal agriculture first in nonhuman animals (BSE or “mad cow disease” in the late 1980s and early 1990s; foot and mouth disease in 2001); then in humans eating animals (cancer, heart disease, diabetes). Drawing attention to these issues in our recent past and sequencing them together in the narration from the future, sets the scene for a divergent future. They are “reinterpreted facts” in Todorova’s typology, their meaning reoriented from tragic historical happenstances to the harbingers of a radically altered future.

The early twenty-first century is portrayed as a kind of doubling down on meat culture in response. With deft use of archive footage, eating meat is presented as a taken-for-granted practice, a presiding cultural norm, tied especially to the performance of masculinity and social status. Advertising, politics and entertainment are presented as playing a key part in maintaining meat culture and making the realities of intensive animal agriculture invisible – “we were completely disconnected from the animals going into our mouths”. The fetishization of meat preparation is conveyed via the ubiquity of celebrity chefs: “What looks to us now like a documentary about a lunatic was in fact a hit show about cooking”. Vegan activism at this time is depicted as increasingly confrontational but ineffective, “confirm[ing] vegans as attention seeking loons”, though the rise of celebrity vegans (gently lampooned) eventually makes it “safe to talk about veganism”. A subsequent new wave of activism is spearheaded by Troy King Jones (a fictional character, played by an actor), the voice of a new generation now realizing that “exposing the meat and dairy industries was not enough” and that “the whole structure of British society had to be challenged”. Various facts are then granted prominence via footage and narration – continued suffering in factory farms and slaughterhouses; the role of the meat industry in causing the climate crisis, the rise of veganism. For the audience, it is possible that these facts reflect the status of “rumours and hypotheses” in Todorova’s typology, and in being given prominence here are “activated”, at least in terms of underpinning the future scenario that unfolds.

However, the film’s narrator tells us that these factors are largely ignored. As Pargman et al point out, key to any alternative history narrative is “the establishment of a divergence, i.e. the point in time at which the [alternative] history starts to differ from history as we know it”, followed by an exploration “of the ‘ripple effects’ of the imagined what if-question” (2017, p. 172). In constructing counterfactual futures, the same surely applies. In *Carnage*, the key moment of divergence is the rapid global spread of “super swine flu” in 2021, fatal for humans, soon after the audience’s present (2017, when the film was released). The pandemic pushes the NHS to breaking point and eerily prophetic (from a 2021 perspective) mock-ups of news bulletins document widespread chaos and mortality rates. The first “ripple effect” is the realization that “intensive farming was much more dangerous than the public had been led to believe”. New stricter animal welfare laws follow, whilst opposition and conflict are imagined as creating a period of confusion and polarization. The film then depicts further ripples – a shift towards greater cultural recognition of the injustices of animal agriculture, with vegan chefs, musicians and commentators becoming major celebrities, a hit musical about the life of a dairy farm cow; and a Eurovision Song Contest victory for Albania with “a vegan song” (remember this is a comedy). Opposition continues, represented in the formation of the Great British Meat League, and the assassination of Troy by one of its members.

In 2032 a scientific breakthrough heralds the invention of a machine “that could read the general thoughts and feelings of other animals”. With this device, there can no longer be any doubt that “animals like them had feelings” and a Bill of Animal Rights is passed into UK law, “criminalis[ing] the enslavement, breeding and killing of all animals as well as the manipulation or consumption of anything coming out of one”. The ripples have become a wave, or even a moment of further divergence. We then move forward in time fairly quickly to the film’s present day, 2067. We witness

a tour of an abattoir, now a museum (for me, the most genuinely poignant moment). We see tour groups in stunned horror as the tour guide explains what happened here; and see hundreds of cattle identification ear tags pinned on a wall (with clear visual echoes of Holocaust museums).

Finally, we return to the group therapy scene, featuring an older generation still “suffering the guilt of their carnivorous past”; and seeking to come to terms with that past. Again there is a clear comedic element in the psychotherapeutic framing of individuals emotionally struggling to “confess” partaking in practices we consider normal – eating a chicken’s egg or a beef burger, drinking cow’s milk. Yet in elaborating on experiences of guilt and remorse, this aspect of storytelling also reflects Todorova’s counterfactual element of “reinterpreting facts” (Todorova, 2015), whereby facts that once struggled to gain cultural purchase or legitimacy become “subject to reinterpretation ... and assume new meaning or content when political, social, religious, or economic contexts shift” (Todorova & Gordon, 2017, p. 31). Arguably such “facts” could be experiential, and in this case the guilt and denial associated with eating meat obscured by “meat culture” is “activated” for audiences through an ingenious and entertaining narrative vehicle.

### **(Comedic) counterfactual futures as effective animal advocacy?**

Understood as a piece of animal advocacy, *Carnage* faces the equivalent “discursive challenge” of that faced by animal rights and sustainability campaigns, introduced earlier: “redefining accepted practices, such as farming and eating nonhuman-animals, into socially unacceptable practices” (Freeman, 2010, p. 163). It meets that challenge utilizing some of the tools of animal advocacy developed and debated in environmental communication studies and related fields, outlined above. The film does not eschew the strategies of many campaign groups and the related emphasis of critical animal and communication studies scholarship – it has the disclosure of systemic and institutionalized violence, suffering and oppression directed towards farmed animals at its heart (Fernández, 2019; Taylor and Twine 2014); thus, countering the ongoing tendency for invisibility in mainstream media coverage and cinematic representation (Gould, 2019; Joy, 2011).

The very existence of *Carnage*, still widely available on a free-to-access streaming service (at time of writing), produced by a national public broadcaster, is itself a challenge to the role media and communication normally play “in building the public support needed to perpetuate the system of values that justifies what we do to other animals” (Almiron et al., 2018). It resists moderating ethical explanations for reducing meat consumption for example, found in some attempts to mainstream the message involved (Freeman, 2010). Despite ethical reasons being “routinely denied articulation in mainstream media culture” (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Doyle, 2016, p. 778), *Carnage* consistently emphasizes moral arguments through various key figures. Similarly, whilst celebrity vegans are depicted as important in gaining public support, the film avoids a trivializing focus on individual lifestyle or celebrity endorsement (Almiron et al., 2018; Doyle, 2016), or an apolitical focus on reduced consumption strategies (Singer, 2017). In using archive footage to illustrate how in advertising and packaging, the “animals we were consuming stopped looking like they’d ever been animals”, there are clear echoes of Adam’s “absent referent” (Adams, 2010). In adopting a counterfactual future narrative, the film certainly maintains a consistent focus on “long-term world-view transformation” (Freeman, 2010). The passing of the Bill of Animal Rights into law clearly reflects another related aspect of effective animal advocacy in Freeman’s analysis – the ideological linking of animal rights with human rights (Freeman, 2012); and extending “respect to other animals as fellow sentient beings with the right to live free of exploitation” (2010, p. 164); as does the overall framing of *Carnage* as the story “of how meat became people”.

The specific role of comedy in *Carnage* is more difficult to ascertain, a point made about the function of humor in communication more generally (Meyer, 2000). Communication scholarship suggests that comedically framed messages might be discounted as mere entertainment, underlying issues perceived as less serious, and the need for any meaningful response mitigated; but on balance, humor in general, and satire in particular, is claimed to function positively as a vehicle for

increasing public awareness of and engagement with social issues (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017), including climate change and environmental problems (Kaltenbacher & Drews, 2020).<sup>5</sup> This is explained in terms of humor's ability to attract attention, make narratives more relatable, make audiences less inclined to counterargue and therefore increasing receptivity to messages, identification with a communicator, willingness to learn more about an issue, and inclination to share with others. Humor can also break down social taboos, relieving tension and opening "up spaces of engagement that are otherwise not accessible" (Boykoff & Osnes, 2019, p. 161).

Reviews and media coverage suggest the film's use of humor attracted attention, and undoubtedly stood out from the usual "sombre" approach to environmental communication (Feldman & Borum Chattoo, 2019). It is possible that the use of comedy in *Carnage* encourages audiences to discount or downgrade the seriousness of the issues involved, but this seems unlikely, considering the fact that the broader seriousness of the message remains intact – integration of footage depicting suffering and violence, and the narrator's emphasis on "historical" shift to veganism on ethical, environmental and health grounds. It is interesting to note that the utopian imaginary itself is subjected to very little comedic framing, and despite a historically decisive intervention – the invention of a machine capable of translating animals thoughts into human language – being comically framed – the end result of nonhuman animal liberation is not satirized as undesirable or fanciful.

Does the use of humor in *Carnage* make vegans or veganism more relatable? The depiction of future vegans partially reproduces familiar stereotypes, where they are characterized as exaggeratedly sensitive and fey, possibly entrenching derogatory discourses and identity polarization as result (Cole & Morgan, 2011). However, poking fun at vegans also communicates self-deprecation (Amstell's tagline for *Carnage* is "I have written and directed a film about veganism. I'm sorry"), utilizing comedy's ability to connect with an audience via a shared sense of human fallibility (Meyer, 2000). In using self-deprecation perhaps *Carnage* also bypasses audience tendencies to trigger exaggerated and polarized representation of the "other" as defence mechanisms, conscious or otherwise, when difficult or taboo issues are raised, potentially creating a specific version of the "spaces of engagement" described above. The combination of comedic and counterfactual future narratives is also significant in framing an older generation as "now" (in 2067) coming to terms with guilt from past meat eating. This group are gently satirized through framing confession and remorse in exaggerated tones via therapeutic settings and language. Here the counterfactual *and* comedic framing permits audiences to "safely" navigate social taboos as communication literature suggests humor can. Repenting older characters serve as proxies, whereby, thanks to the comedic orientation, audiences can confront their own difficult emotions in a charitable spirit, avoiding provoking the defence mechanisms and counterarguments that can stem from feeling shamed, preached to or overwhelmed (DeLaure, 2011).

As a comedically framed counterfactual future, *Carnage* offers a unique example of mediated storytelling, pointing to potential routes for engaging publics in animal advocacy. However, any individual cultural artefact is still, to reiterate Amiot and Bastian's analogy, a drop in the ocean of dominant narratives and the routine obfuscation of animal suffering and institutionalized violence that belies the meat industry and meat culture. It is also only one component amongst many in problematic practices propping up carbon-intensive societies and a multi-factor climate crisis. Yet the example of *Carnage*, as analyzed here, can contribute something distinctive to research, scholarship and activism concerned with effective animal advocacy. But the uniqueness of the film as an "unexplored site" lies not so much in the extent to which it incorporates items from a communication studies checklist of effective animal advocacy, but in epitomizing a playful and sophisticated counterfactual construction of a utopian future; and it adds something more directly relevant to everyday practices than academic nonfiction engagements with anticipatory futures in the context of ethical and environmental debates relating to animal agriculture (Cullen, 2010; Oreskes & Conway, 2013). In doing so it contingently constructs an "external" and "safe" standpoint, from which we can bear witness to the normally tacit, invisible elements of "meat culture". These include the surfacing of difficult emotions that might otherwise be collective "dormant"

facts, which we routinely hold at bay with individual and socially sanctioned defence mechanisms. *Carnage* provides a brief opportunity to vicariously “try on” these emotions, and even the contexts in which they might be articulated – the confessional, counseling, and group therapy- all cushioned with humor.

*Carnage* also offers some hints of an advance on existing narrative methods in the humanities and social sciences intended to engage people’s imaginative capacities. As a methodology, Todorova and Gordon see the potential of the counterfactual construction of futures in quantitative data and survey methods. Via *Carnage*, we can also imagine their potential not just for appealing to an audience; but as a tool for engaging research participants in the qualitative, collaborative *generation* of hopeful future narratives, within which current practices can be reframed and re-evaluated, and emotional dimensions explored. Working backwards and forwards along a temporal line, incorporating one or multiple generations, perhaps utilizing Todorova and Gordon’s features of counterfactuals as ground rules, one can imagine the outline of a workable method in parallel with recent experimentation with future-oriented creative projects. Examples include *Dear Tomorrow* (2020) – (“a global climate storytelling project where people write climate messages to loved ones living in the future”); or engaging people in the process of creating speculative fiction within creative and participatory methodological parameters (e.g. Doyle, 2020; Haraway, 2016; Rousell et al., 2017).<sup>6</sup> A striking recent methodological example is the “Counter-Factual Worlds Generator”. Several globes are “generated” by a world generating “machine”, and randomly assigned to groups of research participants. Inside each globe “is a description of a world that is not ours but bears a relation to ours. One crucial aspect is different” (Light, 2019, p. 9).<sup>7</sup> The groups – all with different areas of expertise -then work collaboratively, familiarizing themselves with their specific world, considering the implications of living it, before storying that world in more detail – with a focus on design, or governance (the specific concern of Hillgren et al., 2020 and Light, 2019 respectively) as well as wider social, cultural, and political issues. In the final phases, specific future scenarios are developed from the counterfactual histories, framed by the researchers in a way intended to also appeal to civil servants, policymakers and practitioners.

A methodological emphasis on building counterfactual futures might also extend the focus of narrative inquiry in relation to the climate and environmental crisis more generally, where storytelling is being explored “as a way of understanding, communicating, and influencing others” (Moezzi et al., 2017, p. 1). A progressive goal of narrative research in this area, for Paschen and Ison, is not simply to categorize the narratives utilized by individuals and communities, or to design “better” forms of communication (“a passive-receptive view of narrative”); but to encourage, and be actively involved in, “dialogical and participatory knowledge production” (Paschen & Ison, 2014, p. 1085). If narrative research asserts that “how a community ‘stories’ its past experiences and actions ultimately determines how it understands and practices future adaptation” (ibid. p. 1084), how it “stories” its future is also important.

### Finally: narrative appeals from elsewhere

None of this is to suggest that the collective take up of some form of radical veganism is the ready-made answer to the multiple challenges posed by intersecting planetary crises. Even aside from its focus only on one country in isolation (the UK) *Carnage* irons out countless complexities involved in variations on a just, radical, global transition towards a more sustainable and ethical future. A focus on the abolition of meat does not fully account for the social, political and material complexities of veganism itself (Harper, 2010); asymmetries in terms of food production outside of animal agriculture; or the globally structured imbalances of power dramatically and unjustly dividing responsibility for, and the effects of, the climate and ecological crisis more widely. Whilst the film’s narrative makes some significant nods towards the intersectionality of speciesism, patriarchy and gender norms for example, it does not indelibly join the dots “between the logics of speciesism and global capitalism” (David and Stephens Griffin, 2021, p.90). The lessons learned from the

detailed, critical engagement of environmental communication and critical animal studies scholarship remain apposite.

There is, finally, something to be said about counterfactual futures that focus on positive, even utopian visions – a key aspect of *Carnage*. Todorova argues that identifying dormant facts, reinterpreted facts, and rumor can improve counterfactual future modeling in assisting the work of governments, think tanks, and universities to avoid future “turmoil” (Todorova, 2015). Environmental communication scholarship is understandably more familiar with ideological and discursive critique. More widely, in the context of burgeoning forms of postapocalyptic environmentalism and related visions of the future in climate activism, Cassegård and Thörn argue that utopian visions of the future can be empowering – “not in the sense of providing a blueprint for a better society but in the sense of providing a place from which to look at ourselves in a new light, thereby freeing us to think and act in new ways” (2018, p. 574). Reflecting on their counterfactual world-making research, Hillgren et al claim that “an important step to propel transformative change is to nurture our capacity for imagination and use this to re-think taken-for-granted worldviews that might otherwise prohibit alternative ideas to emerge” (Hillgren et al., 2020, p. 120; see also Light, 2019).

“Nurturing our capacity for imagination” – this is precisely what might be needed in a world where radical possibilities tend to get screened out by pervasive but taken-for-granted ideologies and practices of speciesism and human exceptionalism. There is something potentially liberating about not just observing, but participating in, “exploring the ‘ripple effects’ of the imagined ‘what if’ question”. It is akin to what narrative researcher Corinne Squire has to say about how narratives can produce important breaks from normative ways of existing, especially as we engage with the future, so I will leave the last word to her:

Through the possibilities of movement towards the future, in the sense of an opening of a new context, [narratives] register the particularity of difference, dissidence, and the hard-to-understand. Such narrative appeals from elsewhere, and from others, are not merely disruptive or fragmenting; they can be understood as moral appeals of the future. (Squire, 2012, p. 67)

## Notes

1. As reported by the Vegan Society; accessed here <https://www.vegansociety.com/news/media/statistics#worldwidestatistics>; and Statista, accessed here <https://www.statista.com/topics/3377/vegan-market/>.
2. These fields are not synonymous, the various names reflect differences in perspective and debate. Critical Animal Studies, for example, purposefully dispenses with the use of “human” to reflect its critical questioning of assumptions about human superiority over other species (see Almiron et al., 2018; Taylor and Twine, 2014 for detail of these debates); whilst Haraway is ambivalent about the philosophical, ethical and political stance of veganism (Giraud, 2013).
3. Their stated intention is to produce multi-method modelling of a permanent oil/energy crisis, mapping consequences in terms of natural resources, geopolitical implications and social and cultural scenarios.
4. *Carnage* is by no means the only example of this specific approach. *The Age of Stupid* (2009, Director: Franny Armstrong) is another well-known example, addressing the climate crisis, though it does not utilise comedy extensively, and its predominant emphasis is dystopian. *Carnage* is selected as the sole case study because to the author’s knowledge it is unique in its counterfactual construction combined with avowedly utopian and comedic approach.
5. Though the humour and comedy studied are mainly short form - jokes, cartoons, social media posts and memes, sketches, segments in satirical television news programs, posters - rather than feature films, documentaries (though see DeLaure, 2011), or mockumentaries.
6. For detail of Doyle’s approach see also <https://www.deartomorrow.org>.
7. By way of example, a description of a counterfactual history for a project set in Sweden is described as follows: “One of the worlds was based on the idea that Lars Laestadius (1800–1861), the Swedish Sámi who founded the Lutheran Laestadian pietist revival movement, had instead chosen the faith of his forebears and had a significant influence on religious developments in Sweden as a whole. Following from this, animism took hold in Swedish society, where things such as animals, plants, rocks, rivers, weather systems and human handiwork

were perceived as animated and alive. This world was designed with the rationale that taking the idea of animism seriously might trigger reflections regarding democracy and governance beyond the human world and put a greater stress on relational aspects of co-living” (Hillgren et al., 2020, p. 115).

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