

Talking Turkey: Visual Media and the Unraveling of Thanksgiving

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Standing at the core of American culture, Thanksgiving is an invented tradition celebrated by millions of Americans. This dissertation examines contemporary representations of Thanksgiving in “the media of everyday life”—including television, film, literature, comic strips, paintings, advertisements, and the Internet. After interrogating the myth of “First Thanksgiving” through vignettes that challenge its dubious history, this project shows that media representations of the holiday expose conflict and alienation at the meal that is supposed to signify harmony and inclusivity. In this embodied holiday, the turkey becomes compulsory, so that refusing to eat it threatens family cohesiveness. As a day of “intensified patriarchy,” the gendered division of labor encompasses all aspects of the holiday—from preparation and turkey carving to clean up and post-prandial activities. In some instances, the turkey undergoes processes of anthropomorphism and sexualization, revealing the influence of colonial ideology on both race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality. Along with subjectivity comes the desire of turkeys to live free from humans and their appetites. In “poultry-themed gallows humor,” turkeys discover the conspiracy of their lives, try to escape, and seek revenge. By probing these visual representations of turkeys, the murky underbelly of the holiday comes into focus, suggesting that—despite its nostalgic trappings—discord and violence inhere in Thanksgiving discourse. Some of these subversive elements create fissures in Thanksgiving ideology, in hopes of unraveling the holiday once and for all, and others seek broader themes of harvest, gratitude, and family togetherness to celebrate.