Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs* and Jonathan Demme's Film Adaptation: The Representation of Cannibalism in the Contemporary World

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Graham knew too well that he contained all the elements to make murder... He wondered if, in the great body of humankind, in the minds of men set on civilization, the vicious urges we control in ourselves and the dark instinctive knowledge of those urges function like the crippled virus the body arms against. (Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon*)

With these words Will Graham, the detective who was sent by Crawford to hunt Hannibal Lecter down, wonders whether there really is a difference between the killer and himself, between the criminal and the civilized. We are left wondering if civilization hides in a more subtle way what we consider savage and barbarous and if this supposed binary opposition between barbarism and civilization is in fact a false one.

Thomas Harris' novel *The Silence of the Lambs*, which continues to focus on Hannibal Lecter and the figure of a psychotic serial killer who flays the bodies of his victims, seems to suggest the same kind of affinity criminal-detective in the form of the relationship between Lecter and Clarice, and invites us to detect the significance of a growing interest in serial killers and forms of cannibalism at the present time.

The novel and the film adaptation of *The Silence of the Lambs*, on which this paper will focus, are in fact a parody of modern society and its methods as Lecter is the embodiment of the modern ego, whose crime, cannibalism, is a sign of more subtle and legalized forms of violence. Thus Lecter contradicts and goes beyond the Cartesian concept of man as pure thinkingness and is the representation of what Freud names the return of the repressed, a disturbing, subversive and uncanny presence which dominates over the other characters and escapes analysis.

Both the novel and the film are thus a denunciation of modern cannibalistic forms of communication and violence, like psychoanalysis and detective procedures which are ultimately associated to the figure and typicality of the serial killer as a product of modern institutions and ideology.
The Relationship Lecter-Clarice: a parody of the analyst-patient situation and an analogy of analyst-detective procedures

Conceived as a marginal character, Lecter turns to be more fascinating and uncannily interesting than any other figure. In describing the success of the film, Amy Taubin points out that his "chill blue, cobra hooded eyes dominated the news-stands replacing both Arnold-the-Terminator and his stand-in, Stormin' Norman, as reigning Ubermensch" (Taubin 1993: 14).

If his body, driven by an alienated mind, and his crime seem to suggest a similarity to his own ancestors, Frankenstein or Dr Jekyll, or to other machine-like beings devoid of human features, he is a true individual, a genius isolated by his own brilliance. Indeed, he escapes classification and seems the embodiment of binary oppositions – progress and regress, civilization and barbarism – which Will Graham already felt as apparent.

Unlike Chilton, the Director of the hospital for the criminal insane, he is a refined well-mannered gentleman who likes poetry, music and art. He is also a contributor to famous reviews of psychiatry and of international cuisine, an association which is not casual but significant of his cannibalistic attitude both metaphorically (as analyst) and literally (in relation to his victims). As Zizek points out, Lecter is the representation of the Lacanian analyst or in his own words "a desperate, ultimately failed attempt of the popular imagination to represent to itself the idea of a Lacanian analyst" (1993: 48). In this sense he expresses the paradox of the Kantian Sublime inasmuch as the correlation Lecter-Lacanian analyst "corresponds perfectly to the relation...which defines the experience of the dynamic sublime: the relation between wild, chaotic, untamed, raging nature and the suprasensible Idea of Reason beyond any natural constraints" (1993: 48). This paradox enables the reader and the viewer to perceive Lecter as a sublime figure which stimulates public fascination.

Lecter’s cannibalistic behaviour represents what, on a metaphorical level, the act of the analyst consists of: stealing the kernel of our being, the Lacanian object small a, the uncanny treasure. In The Silence of the Lambs Lecter is cannibalistic not only in relation to his victims, but especially in relation to Clarice. Theirs is the perfect representation of the classical relationship analyst-patient, in the sense that it is a parody of that relationship. Ignoring Crawford’s advice: "Whatever you do Clarice, don’t tell him anything about yourself", Clarice accepts the Quid pro Quo which enables Lecter to steal the kernel of her being in exchange for information on Buffalo Bill.

Interesting on a cinematic level is the way the viewer is guided through these scenes in a sequence of shots/countershots between Lecter and Clarice, in which the camera succeeds in capturing their emotions. Every time the camera moves from Clarice to Lecter the focus is even narrowed and our attention in
unavoidably and entirely directed to Lecter's eyes and mouth, to his small white
teeth, reminding us of his cannibalistic behaviour. A technique which in the
novel is achieved by long, rapid and exhilarating speeches and dialogues which
reduce Clarice to a passive patient. In one of the key scenes Lecter's
overwhelming presence is rendered with a cinematic procedure which aims at
condensing in the same shot the usual sequence shot/countershot. Lecter's
reflection on the glass of his cell appears behind Clarice as a hyperreal, ghostly
figure which gives body to the Lacanian object \( a \) and is at the same time
perceived as a shadowy double, an extention of Clarice's own body, the
materialization of her repressed uncanny past as a semblance of the subject prior
to the splitting.

These central scenes are also crucial as representation of the strong affinity
between Lecter and Clarice, an affinity which in the novel is also perceived as a
physical one: "He was small and sleek; in his hands and arms she saw wiry
strength like her own" (Harris 1991: 50). Lecter and Clarice are in fact
exchanging knowledge; their Quid pro Quo enables them to be analysts,
detectives, interpreters and patients at the same time. An analogy can in fact be
drawn between the analyst and the detective inasmuch as they use the same
strategies and procedures. They are interested in the meaning conveyed by words
and facts, in distinguishing the mere incidental details from the meaningful ones.
Both are concerned with the re-establishment of the lawful sequence of events, of
that "normality" which conceives of things in terms of unity. Lecter, in a
mocking way, succeeds in reuniting the fragmented parts of his victims inside
his own body. He sometimes conceives cannibalism as a way of putting an end
to "therapy" which "wasn't going anywhere" (Harris 1991: 57). His cannibalistic
act is thus a way of unveiling analysis as a more subtle, sophisticated and
legalized form of aggression to the self and the individual. It also appears as a
perverse version of Christian communion, as a means of combining human and
divine and achieving transcendence.

Like Billy, Lecter and Clarice aim at elevating themselves in order to
improve their condition. Whereas Lecter wants to be free and re-establish contact
with nature: "If I could have a view or at least see water", Clarice is desperately
trying to transcend her past and become an FBI agent. She succeeds in elevating
herself beyond the level of Billy's victims through forensic expertise and
professional detachment, which requires the objectification of the victims as
floaters.

This affinity between Lecter and Clarice is also reinforced in the ending. In
the novel Clarice's innocent sleep in the silence of the lambs is preceded by a
passage where Lecter writes to her: "I have no plans to call on you, Clarice, the
world being more interesting with you in it. Be sure you extend me the same
courtesy... Some of our stars are the same" (Harris 1991: 351). In the film
Clarice's graduation is interrupted by Lecter's phone call: "Have the lambs stop crying?" he asks, while his last words focus on Chilton as their common enemy: "I'll be having an old friend for dinner." The final image represents Lecter walking in a crowded street in Haiti and pursuing his nemesis.

Objectification and Self-Transcendence in Buffalo Bill

In the film our first encounter with Buffalo Bill, the psychopathic serial killer who flays the bodies of his victims, is at the opening scene in Crawford's office, when through Clarice's eyes we are allowed to wander in the room and finally stop on a board showing a tabloid headline "Bill skins Fifth" and pictures of the victims. His pathological motives and feelings will be gradually unveiled and explained, through the mediating figure of Lecter, on a psychoanalytical level as the result of an unhappy childhood. Billy is not a real transsexual. In fact, as the novel clearly shows, he is obsessed by the image of his mother and identifies with her. Every day he watches a video "filmed after the last time in his life that he ever got to really see her. Except in his mind, of course." As he tells to his little dog: "Tomorrow, Precious ... Mommy's gonna be so beautiful!", because in an inverted cannibalistic sequence he will finally put himself inside the skin vest using it as a fetishized symbol of his own renewed condition that he perceives as self-transcendence.

In the constitution of the Lacanian subject the transaction whereby the child makes the mother's meaning and desires its own is of crucial importance. This moment determines the subject's entry into the Symbolic and the replacement of the father as object of desire. The absence of this transaction determines psychosis and blocks the subject to the imaginary moments of its identification with the mother. Images and fantasies also play a crucial role in the construction of identity and desire and operate on one's sense of bodily mastery and integrity. Anything that threatens this bodily integrity is necessarily met with aggressivity which, according to Lacan, is motivated by "imagos of the fragmented body", namely "images of castration, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body" (1977: 11).

Billy's objectification of the victims' bodies can be explained as a response to what Bracher names "active anaclitic fantasy", which "involves possessing, as a means for one's own jouissance, the object a embodied in another person, thing, or activity" (Bracher 1993: 44). For Billy the girls' skin is a fetish object, the object a, that is the fantasmatic stuff of the I which can fill the lack of being with pure semblance. In other words Billy perceives the girls' skin vest as his own missing complement, as a symbol of his objectified sexual other which will allow his self-trascendence.
In the novel the description of the Senator's daughter, Catherine, as "a tall young woman, big-boned and well fleshed, nearly heavy" identifies her as Billy's next victim and anticipates the complete objectification of the girl in the killer's words and gestures which express satisfaction for having found a smooth skin for his vest, as if he had chosen a fine fabric in a shop. It is against this objectification that Catherine's mother is struggling when, hoping that Billy could watch her TV message, she tries to re-affirm her daughter's subjectivity by continuously pronouncing her name and showing photographs of her childhood.

The girls' skin is perceived as a borderline between self and other and his self-transcendence through it is a clearly mocking literalization of the schematic and conventional categories offered by modern society. His attempt to transcend conventional ideas of sexual difference, by literally making himself a girl suit out of real girls, is a parody of consumerist modern society which enables him to objectify the 'other' in order to render it attainable.

Change and rebirth are central themes in both the novel and the film, but they acquire a special significance for Billy. This idea of change and renewal is reinforced and symbolized by the moth he puts inside his victims' mouth and, in the film, by a close up after his death on a rotating wooden fan with a butterfly design. In the novel, in a passage where Lecter reminds the words of his patient Raspail, we are informed of the importance of the butterfly for Billy as the emblem of his renewal and self-transcendence: "He watched it pump up its wings. It was a big one, he said. Green. And he opened the window and it flew away and he felt so light, he said, and he knew what to do" (Harris 1991: 166). He breeds the Malaysian moths in his basement with extreme care, a care which, as Lecter words remind us in the film, was not given to Billy: "Our Billy wasn't born like this. He was made to be this way through years of systematic abuse."

The Blurring of Categories

In describing Hannibal Lecter, Chilton says he is a pure psychopath but Crawford's words remind us that classifying him is quite difficult: "I know he's a monster. Beyond that, nobody can say for sure" (Harris 1991: 6). Lecter himself rejects categorization and doesn't conform to the system; he rather mocks it. When Clarice asks him to fill the questionnaire in he promptly says: "Do you think you can dissect me with this blunt little tool?", reminding her that he had eaten the liver of a census taker, who wanted to quantify him, with fava beans and a big Amarone.

Unlike the other characters, who are categorized on the basis of historical, cultural and psychoanalytic models, Lecter's uncanny past remains hidden and cryptic, we have no access to his memory and cannot measure him through conventional methods of analysis. The psychoanalytic approach which he
himself uses and which enables him to exorcize Clarice's crying lambs or reduce Billy's murderous attitude to an unhappy childhood fails to analyse what seems a larger evil. Indeed, he suggests a subversion of good and evil, a condition beyond these categories as his own words clarify: "Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened... Can you stand to say I'm evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling?" (Harris 1991: 20).

As a parody of modern society and its methods *The Silence of the Lambs*, through the subversive and uncanny figure of Lecter as the embodiment of the return of the repressed, articulates a reading for events and problems typical of contemporary western culture. And although the happy and even romantic ending both in the novel and the film, as has been previously discussed, seems to demonstrate that the demons of the repressed have been successfully exorcized, we are left with a disturbing feeling. In other words we are left with a doubt deriving by the awareness that the demons and the repressed uncanny, far from having been exorcized, are now free and uncontrolled; they are materialized in the figure of Hannibal Lecter who somewhere is enjoying the freedom of his new identity. In the film, to a greater extent than in the novel, this doubt is reinforced by the very final image of Lecter in his light suit who is going to satisfy his cannibalistic appetite having "an old friend for dinner".

What is at stake here is not simply that Lecter, as a psychotic cannibal serial killer, can stand for all the serial killers in real life who haven't yet been caught, but that the image of the serial killer is, instead, the emblem of a less representable and institutionalized violence which seems to characterize the present society. In other words he is the emblem of what Jameson defines as the features of postmodern culture, namely the waning of affect, the breakdown of identity which is to be ascribed to the crisis of subjectivity and the consequent objectification, commodification and fetishization of the subject, the loss of history which has already been detected in the a-historical and timeless figure of Lecter. *The Silence of the Lambs* recalls what Jameson names "the 'death' of the subject itself: the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (1984: 63), and denounces the impossibility of maintaining that modern autonomy of the self precisely because there is, both on a psychological and a physical level, a breakdown of the boundaries of the self. As Jameson affirms in the same article the waning of affect doesn't imply a complete lack of feelings but rather that these postmodern 'intensities' "are now free-floating and impersonal, and tend to be dominated by a peculiar kind of euphoria" (1984: 64).

In a recent article Seltzer connects serial killing to the problem of the body in machine culture and to the inadequacy of the division between public and private:

The nominal division between public and private has in effect given way to the unfettered movements that ceaselessly mingle bodies and places: the stationery and homelike become strange and the freeway as
intimately personated as the violated and opened natural body... Serial killing... devolves in part on a violent literalization of the analogies between bodies and technologies, persons and landscapes, one identity and another, one body and another, one death and another (1995: 127).

This uncertainty of the limit of the body, of the limit between self and other is perfectly rendered in The Silence of the Lambs through the form of cannibalism both in a literal and metaphorical level. It stands as a metaphor for an extreme desire to familiarize what is stranger and eliminate difference, filling the gap by getting the outside in. In her analysis of metaphors of incorporation Kilgour makes a distinction between communion and cannibalism as "higher" and "lower" forms of incorporation, connected by the desire to sublimate and absorb the 'other' (1990: 16). Lecter tries to reunite the fragmented parts of his victims inside his own body whenever words are insufficient to analyze them as patients: cannibalism moves from the metaphorical level of psychoanalytic strategies, through the exorcization of their uncanny past, to the literal and "lower" level of incorporation. From this perspective, as Kilgour points out, cannibalism replaces conventional means of communication when words fail to be the ordinary medium. Violence seems thus the only possible way of communication as in the case of Billy, who is deprived of any contact with the outer world that he perceives as hostile. He blurs the boundaries of self and other, private and public, by objectifying his victims and fulfilling his self-transcendence. Billy's behaviour, as the figure of the serial killer in The Silence of the Lambs, is a parodic interpretation of binary oppositions: insider-outsider, heimlich-unheimlich, inasmuch as these oppositions are perceived as constructed. Like the behavioural traits of the soldier or fascist male, analized in Theweleit's Male Fantasies, who blur the traditional internal-external distinction and try to absorb what is alien through objectification, Billy's skin vest serves to disguise his fragmented ego saturated with aggression and prevent its disintegration (see Theweleit 1987).

The affinity between Lecter and Clarice, between criminal and detective, seems ultimately to suggest a blurring of categories, an eradication of good and evil in the Nietzschean sense and goes back to the concept of the individual as a result of conscious and unconscious repressed desires which come out always in different ways.
Bibliography


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