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Queering the Gaze with Some Fava Beans and a Nice Chianti

“Would you fuck me? I’d fuck me,” mutters Buffalo Bill, the main antagonist in Jonathon Demme’s 1991 psychological horror film *The Silence of the Lambs*, as he stares the camera down with his penis tucked between his legs and asserts a queer sexuality that is sure to disturb most movie-watching audiences. The film’s two serial killer characters, the intelligent and sophisticated former psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter and cross-dressing and kidnapping Buffalo Bill have entered the canon of popular culture, appearing alongside such murderous figures as Jason Voorhees from the *Friday the 13th* franchise and Leatherface from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Where these figures differ from other horror villains, however, is their subversion of traditional cinematic serial killer archetypes. Most killers use overwhelming, almost superhuman (and sometimes supernatural) adult male strength to brute force their way into murders. *The Silence of the Lambs*, instead, employs killers with more poise and relative delicateness: Hannibal is cultured and sophisticated, killing and eating his targets with surgical precision and metropolitan decorum, and Buffalo Bill flays women’s skins in order to sew himself a “female suit.” These approaches to horror villains “queer the gaze” of the movie going audience by subverting its typically masculine and heteronormative assumptions about film and supplanting them with queer alternatives. This, in turn, creates an “other” in the villains, informing a horror that goes beyond typical fight-or-flight violence and directly attacks the ideals of the viewers. *The Silence of the Lambs* queers the gaze of the audience by subverting the typical notions of

movie serial killers through Hannibal Lecter's suggested homoeroticism and comparative femininity via the nature of his murders and dealings with Clarice Starling, as well as its framing of Buffalo Bill's gender queerness through its famous "Goodbye Horses" scene.

The film first introduces Hannibal Lecter, and although the total of his appearances is brief (Anthony Hopkins won an Oscar for his portrayal of the character despite only appearing in the film for about sixteen minutes), much of the attention in the film centers around him. His first appearance is Laura Starling's meeting with him at his cell. In the beginning of this scene, Starling, portrayed by Jodie Foster, is immediately reduced by the male gaze to an object of desire: the male caretaker explicitly states that "he'll be watching" as she speaks with Lecter, and the prisoners she passes catcall her, with Lecter's neighbor, Miggs, stating that he can "smell her cunt." This voyeuristic exercise in masculine hypersexuality is broken as Starling reaches Lecter's cell. Hannibal Lecter shows upright poise in greeting Starling, his cell well-maintained and decorated with fine art; he starkly contrasts with the heteronormative ways of his fellow prisoners and exudes an empathy albeit unattraction toward the agent. The American conservatism of the 80's held strong into 1991, and Lecter's effete indulgence in the finer things in life, such as fine architectural drawings, wine and other semblances of higher culture, and a general proclivity towards cleanliness and organization would suggest to the audience a certain gentle femininity, a queerness seen among men. Starling and Lecter converse via close-up shot-reverse shots as each character speaks, with the opposite character's shoulder blurred in the immediately foreground. These mirrored shots elicit an equality in perception of the two characters: both are subjugated by their perceived feminine weakness. As they speak more and subconsciously compare their internalized oppression, the shots close in on their faces and their eyes pierce directly into the camera, queering the gaze of the audience by forcing them to

empathize as they share in their moment together. Lecter eventually overpowers her (because he is, after all, still male), and the medium shots of the characters look up at Lecter and down upon Starling; he is the victor because he is able to hide his queerness through his intellect, unlike Starling's, whose queerness is explicitly represented by her womanhood. While Lecter is still the dominant force in the scene, he queers the gaze by treating Starling as an equal rather than an object, as evidenced by the angles. According to Dubois, "conventionally, the woman who rejects her passive 'to-be-looked-at-ness' in order to become an active looker is a threat to patriarchy, and must be destroyed" (300). Lecter does not punish Starling for being an active looker; despite overwhelming her with a near-instantaneous psychological profile, he takes her survey. After Miggs (the heteronormative patriarchy) throws his semen at Starling, Lecter vows to make Starling happy and take revenge on Miggs, reversing the attack on her femininity. Lecter's mention of eating a census worker's "liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti" suggests a taste for higher culture that many male audiences of the time would not understand. Furthermore, this statement is coded with a homoerotic subtext in his oral consumption of another man, especially in his carnal enjoyment of an inner body organ. His proper approach to a crime against humanity elevates it from bloodsport to a forbidden game, making the audience feel a certain attraction to his actions, a more horrifying experience than simple prey-predator aggression. Thus, Hannibal Lecter queers the gaze by being an intimidating individual while exhibiting usually feminine or homosexual characteristics.

The Silence of the Lambs's other villain is the "transvestite" serial killer Jame Gumb, known by the public as Buffalo Bill. Bill's queering the gaze differs from Lecter's for its direct interface within the plot: the motivation for Bill's murders is to create a woman suit from overweight women's skins to satisfy their gender dysphoria after being rejected for gender

reassignment surgery. The profile given by Jack Crawford (the head of the FBI's Behavioral Science Unit, a straight-white-male organization giving labels to those the hegemony subjugates) states that Bill is not truly transsexual given their psychological profile; their dysphoria stands as a queering of traditional psychoanalysis, preferring feeling over staunch frameworks and spectrums over binaries. Their attacks on overweight women, which society generally deems as unattractive, queers the typical sexual gratification driving force for murderers. Through Bill's genderqueerness, they represent either a gay/sissy male or a trans female, both of which are equally terrifying to the male ego and find their horror in Freudian castration anxiety. Nearly everything about this character queers the typical expectations of a typical masculine villain, and this otherness makes their actions unpredictable and thus that much more terrifying to the non-queer audience; their first name, Jame, is a bastardization of the name James, resulting in a lack of identity and a subtle femininity in its "E" ending. Their planting of moth cocoons in their victims represent a hidden metamorphosis trans people go through: a moth hides away in a cocoon, transforming away prying eyes, just as trans people develop their feelings on gender psychologically before physical revelation. Perhaps the gaze is queered the most in the "Goodbye Horses" scene. The scene begins with dimly lit extreme close-ups of Bill applying makeup and fixing jewelry, intimate pastiches of female lavishness. These are intercut with the Senator's daughter attempting to pull his dog into her hole, a hijacking of "innocence" just as Bill had done to heteronormativity. They then set up a camera and looks directly into it, a literal translation of the voyeuristic nature of the cinema, forcing the audience's gaze queer as they witness Bill. The shot remains static as they dance for the camera, as if the audience is locked into its gaze, whether by fascination or by being forced into it. Bill reveals their nakedness as they sing "Goodbye Horses," ultimately tucking their penis and raising their arms as an affront

against the binds of the body holding their gender (or genderlessness) back. Their question “Would you fuck me? I’d fuck me,” introduces a self-attraction that breaks down our previous Freudian notions of transvestitism and its repulsion to femininity; by extension, we no longer see Bill’s case “as pathology, as aberrations of nature,” (Tharp 110), but something more human, peering directly into their thoughts and their perception of their own body and its changes. To see such a murderer in an empathetic light queers the gaze toward how the audience perceives a murderous villain and breaks down traditional constraints by deconstructing “psychology as sexist and heterosexist” (Tharp 110). Metatextual queering comes in the song choice for the scene. “Goodbye Horses” is performed by Q Lazzarus, a mysterious one-hit wonder whose deep voice is tinged with androgyny. Her stage name itself also suggests a genderqueerness: a single letter first name is not gendered, and Lazarus is the biblical figure of rebirth, suggesting a new life or birth from unliving after changing genders. The song’s lyrics refer to “the ability to lift one’s perspective above these physical limitations and to see beyond this limited Earthly perspective,” (Garvey) alluding to the breaking of traditional gender binaries. Even the use of an eerie synthesized track harkens to the synth’s prevalence in early dance music and its role in LGBT clubs, such as Larry Levan’s Paradise Garage.

The Silence of the Lambs takes a different approach to its depiction of serial killers compared to other films: rather than hypermasculine killing machines, Hannibal the Cannibal and Buffalo Bill are more refined and less physically threatening. The actual violence in this film is also much more implicit, creating a more psychologically twisting experience than surface level adrenaline-baiting. The horror of *The Silence of the Lambs* runs much deeper than typical films to a straight audience because it threatens to undermine what they know about the heteronormative hegemony; if such “sissy killers” can be so prolific and even charming, who

else could be, and can societal heteronormativity and patriarchy be flipped on itself? Thus, *The Silence of the Lambs* queers the gaze by attacking heteronormative audiences subconsciously by subverting the expectations of film murderers.

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