

A CANNIBAL'S SERMON:
HANNIBAL LECTER, SYMPATHETIC VILLAINY
AND MORAL REVALUATION

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If one does as God does enough times, one becomes as God is.

— HANNIBAL LECTER in *Manhunter* (1986)

A commonplace truism is that horror cinema provides a valuable — if not slightly risqué — opportunity for viewers to traffic in the perverse and the taboo. Specifically, one of horror's signature pleasures is its eagerness to give the devil his due. The monstrous, psychopathic, and altogether villainous are permitted to take center stage, and not always in the interests of the kind of homiletic instruction that is so instrumental to the melodramatic tradition. Instead, horror's distinct appeal is its promotion of our so-called identification with morally compromised, if not downright evil, characters. In an influential essay on our attachment to despicable individuals, Murray Smith advances the concept of *perverse allegiance* to describe our strange readiness to form sympathetic engagements with villainous fictional individuals. But unlike Smith — and many other aesthetic philosophers who have treated on the problem of attractive evil in fiction — I would like to advance the notion that viewers might occasionally form perverse allegiances with villainous characters in horror cinema *because of* — and not in spite of — their abhorrent natures.¹

It is profitable to consider the problem of perverse allegiance in horror cinema as a kind of moral paradox. Phrased as a question, we might ask how is it that we come to form an allegiance with an immoral individual, especially given the prohibitions against condoning behaviour one knows to be despicable? Breaking this paradox into three independently valid but collectively conflicting premises, it is understood: 1) *that a viewer feels sympathy for a character*; 2) *that the character in question is immoral*; and 3) *that the viewer ought not to sympathize with an immoral individual*. If we are to provide a solution to this paradox — that is, prove perverse allegiance to be a meritorious exercise in some way — we must demonstrate

that one of the above assumptions is a fallacy. For our purposes here, however, I would like to focus on the second premise and suggest that perverse allegiance with a villainous character can be a matter of *moral revaluation* — a term conceived by Friedrich Nietzsche to refer to the “hypermoral” reconfiguration of that which is consensually (and speciously) regarded as “good.”² In other words, revaluation implies a complete reworking of a conventionally moral framework by an individual who transcends those limited ethical strictures.

I would like to focus on a pair of wildly popular films whose horror explicitly treats on the moral bankruptcy of various paternalist institutions, and the readiness of our investment in the specious good of the value systems they propagate. *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Hannibal* (2001) are two films that represent an instructive relationship between an evil mastermind *par excellence*, Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), and a woman, Clarice Starling (Jodi Foster/Julianne Moore) who initially serves as a protégé but becomes something more like the villain’s peer. My suggestion is that these entries in the Lecter franchise invite a truly perverse allegiance with its popular villain — an engagement that implies an examination, even reconsideration, of our internalisation of dominant Judeo-Christian ethics.

I am deliberately singling out these two films even though Lecter makes other filmic and televisual appearances, including two subsequent filmic instalments — both of which serve as prequels to *Silence*. The first is *Red Dragon* (2002) — a “reboot” of the earlier adaptation of Thomas Harris 1981 novel, *Manhunter* (1986), that retroactively retains the narrative continuity established in Demme’s film (thus overwriting the previous incarnation of “Dr. Lektor” played by Brian Cox). The second is *Hannibal Rising* (2007), which features the criminal origins of a young Lecter (Gaspard Ulliel). The De Laurentiis Company also produces the ongoing *Hannibal* television series (2013-), in which Lecter is portrayed by Mads Mikkelsen and depicts the initial professional relationship between Lecter and *Red Dragon*’s protagonist, Special Investigator Will Graham. While each of these works are interesting in their own right — particularly the television series’ representation of Graham’s hyper-empathetic faculties as a debilitating psychic ailment — they arguably do not programmatically pursue the 1991 and 2001 films’ concentrated investment in moral revaluation and sadistic tutelage. And with their predominant focus on male characters, they also lack these films’ explicit investment in feminist challenges to the masculinist moral “good.” Therefore, the related but differing philosophical ambitions of the other instalments in the ongoing Lecter multimedia franchise are beyond the scope of this essay.³

HORROR AND REVALUATION

Perverse allegiance is the acceptance of the villain on his own terms. It is the affirmation of Milton's Lucifer: in making evil one's good, one finds gratification in the villain because of, and not in spite of, her immorality. It is essential to note that such revaluation is not undertaken in order to minimise villainy's reprehensibility or explain it away. By that rationale, "the more compelling the motive for evil behaviour, the less evil the act. Ergo, evil isn't a discrete variable. There are degrees of evil, and these degrees can be negotiated. The more logical the reasons behind the act, the more likely that it's a 'necessary evil' — something done for larger purposes."⁴ A villain's cruelty is not always an act of necessary evil, but it occasionally can be recognised as an important albeit neglected aspect of our conception of kindness.

In an enquiry into the potential "splendour" of evil, for example, Daniel Lyons investigates whether or not a villain may have admirable traits and concludes that there are occasions in which "aesthetic norms" ("the demands of honour" and "the code of achievement") might override moral norms ("the rules of decency" and "the code of beneficence").⁵ *I Saw the Devil* (*Akmareul boatda*, 2010) provides a rather spectacular illustration of this argument: here, bereaved NIS agent Soo-hyun (Lee Byung-hun) visits a terrible vengeance upon a serial killer, Kyung-chul (Choi Min-sik), who has murdered his fiancée. Soo-hyun systematically tortures the murderer over a period of several days before finally arranging Kyung-chul's beheading — an execution unwittingly carried out by the murderer's own parents and child. Determining the splendour of a villain (or in the case of *I Saw the Devil*, an anti-hero) becomes a matter of deciding whether or not a particular situation merits the prioritising of honour and/or achievement over decency and beneficence. And of course, while a text may prioritise aesthetic norms before moral norms, a viewer is certainly free to resist this assertion of priorities, or vice-versa.

Although Lyons does not make explicit reference to the moral philosophy of Nietzsche, his approach has definite affinities with Nietzsche's didactic assault on Christian values. Accusing Christian spirituality of a hopeless "decadence" — that is, of moral obsolescence in the present age — Nietzsche's ambition is to promote the revaluation of honour, pride, personal achievement, and self-prioritisation over the repressive values of Christian altruism, selflessness, unconditional love, and humility, which he regards as tantamount to self-denigration. Just as Lyons assesses whether or not a film's aesthetic norms of honour and

achievement outweigh the moral norms of decency and beneficence, so too does Nietzsche demand that his readers consider whether the latter should always be prized over the former. What is remarkable about Nietzsche's project is the means by which he strives to revalue these apparently "aesthetic" values in moral terms. As some of Nietzsche's role models include Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Goethe — all figures who he valorises for their lack of pity — it is clear that the Christian doctrines of meekness and unconditional love are not to be unilaterally celebrated.

At the same time, however, it is important to stress that Nietzsche is not promoting an all-out ruthlessness. In *The Will to Power*, he posits "the Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ" as the ultimate ideal for mankind — a synthesis of the most drastically incompatible antitheses.⁶ Before jumping to the easy conclusion that what Nietzsche is referring to is the need for the simultaneity of sympathy and hardness in individuals of power, and the sensible pursuit of "*Machtgefühl*" (the feeling of power that accompanies the prevailing over an obstacle), it must be remembered that Nietzsche describes Christ as an "idiot."⁷ This is not at all to say that Nietzsche deplores Christ; on the contrary, he accords Jesus a great (albeit qualified) measure of respect. Specifically, he esteems the martyr's absence of resentful hate for his persecutors — an exemplar of Nietzsche's idealised morality, which is self-affirming, and does not issue from a resentment of the powerful. Within its context, the term "idiot" is used as a reaction to Ernest Renan's claim of Christ's "genius," and as part of Nietzsche's larger criticism of Pauline Christianity, which he regarded as a gross corruption of Christ's lack of resentment. Nevertheless, for Nietzsche, Christ's idiocy is equated with a fundamental weakness. Christ is made into a "veritable Ideal Type of weakness to whom not merely moralistic aggressiveness, but anything else indicating strength, was totally foreign" — hardly an ideal guide for the moral candidate who seeks an adequate and positive way to express her will to power.⁸ Is it possible, then, for the tyrant and the weakling to converge within a single, venerable figure? What might such a figure be like?

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche proclaims that "what [a people] accounts as hard, it calls praiseworthy [...] and that which relieves the greatest need, the rare, the hardest of all — it glorifies as holy."⁹ And nothing can be more difficult than the rational and tempered realisation of the will to power. In a particularly concise aphorism, Nietzsche indicates the folly of equating goodness with a lack of ruthlessness: "I believe you capable of any evil: therefore I desire of you the good. In truth, I have often laughed at the weaklings who think themselves

good because their claws are blunt.”¹⁰ Interestingly, it is aphorisms such as these that are counter-intuitively valued by certain contemporary Christian philosophers for challenging “the mediocrity of ‘Christendom’” — in a manner not unlike Kierkegaard’s insistent restoration of courage and difficulty to a faith rendered complacent through its hegemonic institutionalization.¹¹ However, Nietzsche’s words here are also an admonishment to those who wield power — a demand for kindness from the powerful as their “final self-conquest.” For the oft-discussed *übermensch*, kindness is the greatest of difficulties as it involves the suppression of the noble individual’s will to power in the interests of mercy.¹²

It obviously would be untenable to suggest that horror cinema’s frequently merciless villains could ever qualify as Nietzschean *übermenschen*. But it is possible to discuss one’s perverse allegiance with them in accordance with the philosopher’s notion of *revaluation* — the transformation of values typically regarded as morally laudable. Revaluation is not simply moral interrogation, nor ethical revisionism; it is a complete reordering of one’s moral framework. “One thing is needful,” Nietzsche exclaims, “— To ‘give style’ to one’s character — a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye.”¹³ Similarly, Christopher Hamilton asserts that “one of the most important things [art] can do is allow us to see a person’s concrete, enacted attempt to achieve his own style,” and that this enacted example may provide a potential model for our own “stylistic” endeavours.¹⁴ “Style” is used here as a conflation of the character, quality and authenticity of one’s ideals. Revaluation is conceived in this regard as a kind of aesthetic enterprise in which even repellent qualities are recognised as integral aspects of character. In John D. Caputo’s words, Nietzsche is advocating for “a perverse totalization, an affirmation of the *whole* of life, of the position and the opposition, of creation and destruction, of joy and suffering, of pleasure and pain.”¹⁵ The goal of this “stylistic,” and “perversely totalizing” self-recognition is inward reconciliation and self-contentment.

Hannibal Lecter, whatever else he is, is a profoundly self-contented individual, for what better way to put one’s own demons to rest than by becoming one? As a demented aesthete, Lecter’s *raison d’être* seems to be “to give style” to his character in the Nietzschean sense. His preoccupation with the finer things is reflective of this constructive process. Through the revaluation of virtue, he fashions himself into a figure in which the disparate qualities of

“good” and “evil” are realigned and ultimately reintegrated. This is a process that removes him from the normal sphere of ethics, rather than one that places him in opposition to the good. Unlike the rebel-hero — whose heroism is predicated upon the defiance of a corrupt social order, but through moral means only — the Nietzschean villain transcends conventional morality altogether by restructuring the dominant value system itself.

What is at stake in forming an allegiance with such a character? If Hannibal’s actions are not motivated by a kind of moral sedition, might the pleasure we take from this character be a sign of some kind of rebelliousness on our part? In *Hannibal*, we are invited to ally ourselves with the film’s eponymous antihero as he attempts to evade both re-incarceration by the FBI, as well as kidnapping and execution by his only surviving victim. While the film’s textual indicators often delineate him as monstrous, various other textual strategies mitigate against us desiring both his capture and demise. I would like to argue that although the film prompts an intended perverse allegiance with a mass murderer, one might also fashion an unintended allegiance with Lecter that is even more “perverse” than the film’s intended ambitions. Ridley Scott has asserted that *Hannibal* strives to invite a sympathetic engagement with Lecter, to create a desire to share in “his culture,” until the psychotic antihero severs this attachment by revealing the depths of his depravities.¹⁶ Thus, the film still maintains a sharp distinction between instances of sympathetic investment and antipathetic retreat. Therefore, an allegiance that does not comply with the general attitudinal thrust of the Hannibal films involves responding with pleasure to the character’s reprehensible rather than “gentlemanly” qualities.

NOBLES AND SLAVES

Both *Silence* and *Hannibal* approach their representations of villainy through strategies of immersion — we are not kept at an ironic distance from the protagonists of these films. While it would be incorrect to assume that *Silence* and *Hannibal* intentionally share a wholly coherent moral vision (the films have different authors, separate circumstances of production and a decade spans their respective release dates), there is a certain amount of continuity between the two films. Principally, neither film shies away from the prospect of sympathetic allegiance with its principal sociopath. Indeed, *Hannibal*’s very aesthetic of presentation seems to be filtered

through the twisted sensibilities of its antihero. At the beginning of the film, a close-up on Lecter's iconic restraint mask — placed in a gift box and surrounded by tissue paper — announces a shift into his world. Throughout the opening credit montage, bizarre occurrences in Florence are captured by surveillance cameras: monuments appear out of thin air, pigeons appear to feast on flesh, and a flock of birds choreograph their amblings to form Lecter's face in the middle of a palazzo. All of these occurrences are captured in a series of jump cuts and in jerky time-lapse photography. The suggestion here is that the force of the principal character will be potent enough to overwrite the constraints of the moral law — allegorised as the all-seeing technological vision of the FBI. There is even a similar subtle clue as to where our allegiances should be placed at the beginning of *Silence of the Lambs* when Clarice (Jodi Foster) jogs past a series of signs on Quantico training grounds that read: "HURT AGONY PAIN LOVE IT." Could these signs serve as the recognition of illicit desires in the audience that the film wishes to tap into and release? Would sympathy for a mass murderer accomplish this goal?



Hannibal.

One way to approach this question might be to consider how the "noble" connotations of the villain's cruelty might actually represent humanity's reparations for the damage of a potentially life-denying Judeo-Christian morality. Such "nobility" is a reminder that alternative value systems that precede Christianity still exert residual (yet potent) influence. One of Nietzsche's most important contributions to moral philosophy is his determination to historicize ethical principles, which might otherwise run the risk of assuming universalist dimensions as "timeless" rules of conduct. Indeed, even certain contemporary Christian philosophers have come to value Nietzsche's efforts to reveal the occluded ideological valences within particular "transcendent" Christian values. John Caputo, for example, supports Nietzsche's argument "for the historical contingency of our constructions, the revisability and reformability of our

beliefs and practices, all of which [...] are ‘perspectives’ we take on the world and that have emerged in order to meet the needs of life.”¹⁷ In this light, *On the Genealogy of Morality* suggests that noble values were initially established to distinguish the “powerful, high-stationed and high-minded” from the “low-minded, common and plebeian.”¹⁸ Interestingly, these values were also without moral connotation, as they were not attributed to the efforts of personal agency. Thus, the “low-minded” individual is not immoral; unlike the noble, he is merely denied the means to exercise his will to power. Nietzsche describes this mode of valuation as *master morality*, from which naturally sprang the resentment of the ignoble or, more precisely, the weak and powerless. In *The Gay Science*, he speaks both of the cruelty and innocence of this master morality.¹⁹ However, “he did not tend to use the word *innocence* as the opposite of cruelty or as an incapacity of it, but as the absence of a bad conscience about it.”²⁰ Indeed, a noble may look on the weak with contempt, but without hate, whereas slave morality is born of hatred as it is a product of the envy of the powerless towards the empowered.

As a means of wresting power, the disenfranchised give birth to a new system of values in a gradual process of creative *ressentiment*. Thus, the origins of “slave morality” — which declares all that is proud, strong, and self-affirming to be “evil” — are inherently reactionary and hence, parasitical: “the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.”²¹ “Goodness” becomes just a euphemism for “weakness” and Christian values are exemplars of the slave morality Nietzsche has in mind (just as the values of Imperial Rome exemplify noble morality). “Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted,” he claims. “It has made an ideal out of *opposition* to the preservative instincts of strong life.”²²

The value system in both *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* is connotative of this noble/slave dichotomy, especially in its juxtaposition of Lecter with high-ranking officials in various institutions: Dr. Fredrick Chilton (Anthony Heald), Inspector Renaldo Pazzi (Giancarlo Giannini), and Paul Krendler (Ray Liotta) in particular. Each of these men hold prominent positions in publicly regarded organisations (the medical community, the Italian Police, and the FBI, respectively), but all of them are represented as ingratiating, overreaching, and/or sexist charlatans. Not only are they professionally incompetent or ineffectual, but their devotion to “illegitimate” institutions of power mark them as servants to facile gods (consider Lecter’s derisive attitude towards the “Eff-Bee-Eye,” and his dismissal of psychiatry, which he “doesn’t consider a science”). Each of the men attempts to match wits with Lecter and suf-

fer the consequences for their folly. And though their attitudes towards him are envy, fear, and ignorance respectively, Hannibal's malice towards them is not borne of hate. The cruelty with which he remorselessly dispatches them is "innocent" insofar as it is a product of contempt (as an indication of power) rather than spite. While each of them is killed in a spectacular or comic fashion, Hannibal undertakes their executions with a perfunctory attitude: he wears the same expression disembowelling Pazzi as he does whilst mincing parsley for Krendler's last supper.



Hannibal.

In the films' moral universes, then, the institutions of the specious "good" and their agents are clearly aligned with the "low-minded, common and plebeian." As with Nietzsche's provocative tribute to the noble's aggressive self-assurance, the films solicit our admiration of Lecter's elevated stature. And if our admiration is tempered by horror at the villain's ruthlessness, we may wish to consider the extent to which such a reaction is informed by our residual investment in the slavish values Nietzsche wishes to expose as a covert will to power.

Crucially, our perverse allegiance with Lecter along these grounds is instrumental to the films' feminist politics. As a patriarchal institution, the FBI is a frequent target of Lecter's ire, and the films' criticisms of its restrictive powers can be compared with Nietzsche's attack on the repressions of an equally patriarchal Church.²³ The Bureau is accorded the status of false god, especially in the importance Clarice places in her "legitimation" by this institution — both as a recruit in *Silence* and as a Special Agent in *Hannibal*. Certainly, both films are at pains to depict the FBI as an institution that will not ever credit her achievements, and moreover, exacts punitive measures against her in the interest of securing the Bureau's own infallibility. *Silence* establishes the Bureau as a glorified Boy's School: witness the shot which

places her in an elevator surrounded by towering male cadets, as well as her patronisation by Section Chief Jack Crawford (Scott Glen) during the autopsy sequence.

Subsequently, her suspension from active duty in *Hannibal* is not merely a result of Krendler's explicit misogyny, but is a decision that originates from a more fundamental hatred. Nietzsche argues that Christianity affects a diminishment of "militaristic" values, which even now maintain barbarous connotations: "Being a soldier, being a judge, being a patriot; defending oneself; preserving one's honour; desiring to seek one's advantage; being *proud* [...]. The practice of every hour, every instinct, every valuation which leads to *action* is today anti-Christian."²⁴ Clarice's desperate act of self-defence against EVELDA DRUMGO (she shoots the armed drug dealer who uses a baby for a shield), for example, becomes ammunition for her eventual censure and public disgrace. The film suggests that it is her fierce dedication to her vocation, her brilliance, and her success within a "man's" profession that has secured the envy of her "superiors." As with the fealty she accords to the memory of her father, the *pride* she would otherwise take in her work is suspended as she waits for words of accreditation that will never come. While her male colleagues too have their pride (in their status, efficiency, power, symbolic position), hers is of a different nature. Her pride emerges not from a privileged relational position within an institutionalized system of values; rather, it is the correlative of her self-sufficiency, self-assurance, resilience, and agency — qualities that gain considerable poignancy given patriarchy's concentrated historical efforts to disavow or undermine these very accomplishments when achieved by women. Thus, like the individual who pays fealty to the Christian ethic, Clarice suffers from the "seminal No" that "has become foundational to the economy of the contemporary psyche."²⁵ This "seminal No" describes the dominant values that discourage the individual — and women especially — from aspiring to self-satisfaction, perfection, even greatness.

STYLISH SADISM, TASTELESS TRANSGRESSION

However, is it feasible to place Lecter as the legitimate usurper of this restrictive economy? It is not simply that villains such as Lecter stand in as the embodiments of "noble" values, but their villainy may be revaluated as actions that aberrantly serve alternative aspects of a greater good. In this sense, intended perverse allegiance with the villain is often effected by a

softening of the character's reprehensible qualities. One method of softening villainy is to demonstrate it to be a form of dark poetic justice. As I have established, both *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* perpetuate horror cinema's familiar "moral" logic by suggesting that Lecter's "ignoble" victims are frequently deserving of their fate (see *Carrie* [1976], *Hostel* [2005], *Teeth* [2007], etc.). The assertion of his will to power over these individuals is made even more palatable by the blackly comic tone adopted during scenes of murderous *grand guignol*. Towards the film's conclusion, the good doctor scoops portions of Paul Krendler's lobotomised brain from his exposed skull, sautés them in a caper berry sauce, and serves them to his anaesthetised victim. "It is good," Krendler says, munching happily. Despite the horrific subject matter, the humour is not out of place in the scene as, again, Krendler is depicted as a misogynist ingrate who continually sabotages Clarice's career. Krendler's murder may remind us of the unfortunate inmate, Miggs (Stuart Rudin) in *Silence*, whom Lecter convinces to swallow his own tongue as castigation for hurling semen at Clarice as she passed by his cell. In dispatching these two cretins, Hannibal acts as Clarice's avenging angel.



Hannibal.

So, while horror films can invite our allegiance with an antihero who eliminates characters that embody ignoble values, a second reason that an intended allegiance with a murderous character might be formed is on the basis of his indirect support of an unimpeachable protagonist. The violence Lecter visits upon Krendler on Clarice's behalf, then, is doubly pleasurable: Clarice does not have to accept responsibility for such violent wish-fulfilment, while a viewer may potentially receive moral satisfaction from observing a swinish misogynist receive his comeuppance. As Dolf Zillman indicates, "negative affective dispositions [...] set us free to thoroughly enjoy punitive violence," even when said violence is excessive and especially when the (anti-)hero's deeds receive the "moral sanction" of the audience.²⁶

Moreover, it might also be said that his murders are often committed as acts of revaluative counter-art, as matters of *style*. The doctor is the consummate aesthete, and those whose philistinism affronts his sensibilities often find their way to his dinner plate. As Barney (Frankey Faison), his jailer claims in *Hannibal*, “Whenever feasible, he preferred to eat the rude.” Taste is everything, and the film promotes an alliance with a sophisticate whose aesthetic refinement actually informs his unusual morals. As suggested earlier the malignity of his aesthetic sensibilities seems to determine *Hannibal*’s formal logic and certain moments in the film overtly acknowledge a viewer’s propensity for appreciating perversion. As Clarice listens to a recording of her interviews with Lecter, the camera pans rapidly across a grisly photo-collage of mutilated corpses from various crime scenes. “Don’t you feel eyes moving over your body,” Lecter inquires in voiceover, “and don’t your eyes move over the things you want?” As viewers are caught in the process of moving their eyes over a series of disfigured bodies, his commentary suggests that for us the observance of these “things” is just what the doctor ordered.



Hannibal.

But although Lecter kills and provokes others to kill, both films still attempt to temper his villainy by ensuring that the most disturbing element of his psychosis — his cannibalism — is never graphically represented. It is worth noting that films often measure character’s moral behaviour in degrees of propriety, and employ comparative strategies essential to soliciting our allegiance.²⁷ The key here is relativity: we are asked to consider what the character is like *in relation* to other characters. Lecter’s potential for moral revaluation, then, is further buttressed by narrative strategies that place his tasteful villainy in contradistinction with two rather tasteless psychopaths: Jame Gumb (Ted Levine), a would-be transsexual who fashions himself a “woman suit” from the skin of his victims, and Mason Verger (Gary Oldman), a disfigured,

crippled paedophile. Neither of these monsters possesses the icy charisma of Lecter, which might otherwise offer a more “balanced” mania.²⁸ In fact, we only catch glimpses of Gumb throughout the first two thirds of *Silence* — no sign of an engaging subjectivity here.

However, I believe such comparative moral logic to be flawed if it is being used to mitigate against the abhorrence of a character’s actions, for morality is not always a quantifiable property. On the one hand, films *do* occasionally employ such a tactic — often to comedic effect. In *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), for example, the homicidal tendencies of two doddering spinsters are played for laughs, especially when compared to the sadism of their murderous nephew. On the other hand, once a certain degree of depravity is reached such a graduated moral range is rendered irrelevant. How might one go about formulating an ethical scale in which, say, flaying women alive or paedophilia are somehow “worse” than cannibalism? If we are to have a sympathetic response towards Lecter and an antipathetic response towards Gumb and Verger, we must agree with the films’ representation of the latter two characters’ villainy as the more repugnant — an ultimately specious agreement. There is a sense in *Silence* especially, that the psychosis of Gumb is overdetermined — even his bedsheets, with their prominent swastika patterns, are used as an alienating device. Although the judicial system is responsible for quantifying the seriousness of a legal transgression for the purposes of sentencing, viewers are in a less authoritative position to compare the “wrongness” of characters’ immorality. While *Silence* and *Hannibal* both encourage a (qualifiedly) positive response to Lecter, they do so according to a spurious moral comparison between characters.

Again, the only way it might make sense to compare degrees of villainy for the purposes of allegiance would be to assess the context of his motivations. For example, one may accord a certain degree of perverse altruism in the doctor’s murders. In *Hannibal*, Clarice remarks that Lecter believes he is performing a “public service” by wiping the uncultivated from existence.²⁹ In *Red Dragon*’s pre-credit sequence, he turns a flautist from a Philharmonic orchestra into sweetbreads with ragout for performing slightly off-pitch, and serves the dish to the unsuspecting leading members of the orchestra at a dinner party. While the doctor’s murderous obsession with cultural refinement is taken to absurd lengths, his actions are not indicative of the petty selfishness that motivates Gumb and Verger. The suffering they cause to their victims is Epicurean — in the interest of their own personal benefit — compared to the paradoxically philanthropic violence Lecter utilises.

But this psychotic snobbery is admittedly a flimsy foundation upon which to build a

perverse allegiance. It is not simply that Lecter's intellectualism and theatricality transcends the baseness and carnality of Gumb and Verger. Such mind/body distinctions remain culturally prominent and may influence the films' preferred evaluations of their pair's perversities, but this dualism is facile. Lecter's murderous proclivities are just as sensuously based as Gumb's and Verger's (recall the "thff-ff-ff" sound he utters after reminiscing on the census-taker's liver he ate "with fava beans and a nice Chianti"). Moreover, the sexual nature of Gumb and Verger's crimes are implicitly sublimated within Lecter's cannibalism. Verger and Lecter especially are linked through their sadism, which in both cases amounts to the defiling of innocence. We may smile knowingly when Lecter feeds a portion of Krendler's brain to a curious child on an airplane ("It's always important that we try new things"), until we recognise the gesture chimes with Verger's means of entrapping his young victims by offering them chocolate.

To put it simply, we cannot deny the fact that Lecter is, first and foremost, a sadist. As Verger himself remarks, "Lecter's object... has always been degradation and suffering," and in this observation he is quite accurate. As a way of distinguishing acts of true evil from those of mere immoral self-interest Georges Bataille offers the example of the sadist, for whom "the abyss of Evil is attractive independently of the profit to be gained by wicked actions — or at least by some of them."³⁰ That is, unlike his spiritual predecessor, the criminal mastermind, Dr. Mabuse (Rudolph Klein-Rogge), who profits financially from his manipulation of others in *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (*Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, 1922), Lecter manipulates and debases others simply because he can. The object of the sadist's attacks is a fundamentally ingrained value-structure: the desire to live. "What the sadist is primarily aiming at is the desire system of the victim — he wants to alter it from being pro-life to being anti-life. He does not primarily seek the death of the victim, only the victim's desire for his *own* death."³¹ Verger certainly has firsthand experience of this desire: in a flashback sequence, Lecter persuades a narcotised Verger to slice off his own face with broken glass and feed it to his dogs.

Moreover, the relationship between Lecter and Clarice is marked by a certain degree of sadism. Without question, the doctor's continued correspondence with Clarice is undertaken because he is fully aware of the distress he causes her. What is interesting about Lecter's sadism, however, is that in Clarice's case, it is employed in a paradoxically constructive fashion. Unlike the pure carnality of Verger's sadism towards his young victims, Hannibal's sadism towards Clarice is actually performed as an induction. It is true that sadists bring about

an alteration of their victim's value systems to that of anti-life, but the revaluation Lecter seeks from Clarice is that she bring about the virtual "death" of her commitment to her old ways of living.

To elaborate, we may identify here Lecter's disguised role as an *oppugner* — the villain who encourages us to question the merit of the hero's values. While he does enjoy the psychological anguish he causes to everyone with whom he comes in contact, Lecter's sadism is also a method by which to eradicate naiveté, crudity, and/or investment in a limited/limiting system of values. In a way, he *does* relish appropriating the role of God — not through murder, but rather in his separation of the wheat from the chaff. Richard Dyer claims that viewers are invited to admire Lecter's *power* and that "his whole persona, not the least his ineffable sarcasm, is founded on the supremacy of the powerful and the expendability of the weak, a glorification that sits easily with notions of masculinity."³² The glorification of power does seem to be part of the text's operation, but this power also rests in his distinctions between the irredeemable, whom Lecter eats, and the individuals he grants a modicum of respect through a re-education (or, "revaluation"). One might cite as examples his efforts to help Barney obtain a B.A., and his assumption of the role of Clarice's "mentor." In cases such as these he undoubtedly aids those individuals who cannot recognise their own potential. Even if we may prefer to ally ourselves with Clarice we must still concede that it is Lecter who provides her with the means to acknowledge her misplaced investment in various authority figures. Their relationship has as much to do with a mentor/pupil dynamic as it does with the degrading hierarchy of sadist/victim.



The Silence of the Lambs.



The Silence of the Lambs.

That the two characters are more closely related than is immediately apparent is also suggested by the “twinning” strategy evident in *Silence’s* first interview sequence, in which the characters meet. Parallels are immediately established between the two through a subtle formal symmetry: shots alternate between their respective point of views, and the characters perform strikingly similar actions whilst placed in the same positions within the frame. Curiously, the two are *never* framed in a two-shot together throughout the entire film (with the exception of that brief touch of fingers in their last scene), and their faces are joined but once in the glass partition that separates them. The potentially reflective nature of their relationship is thus underlined. The unsettling suggestion is that some unnamed quality belonging to Clarice is brought out by and mirrored within the image of her mentor-nemesis.³³

So, one may be tempted to argue that perverse allegiances are formed when we are able to overlook the more unsavoury aspects of their personality. Smith, for example, claims that our pleasurable engagement with Lecter does not have to do with the doctor’s cannibalistic

tendencies, but revolves around his more attractive qualities instead. “Any allegiance we form with Lecter,” he asserts, “is one that develops in spite of rather than because of his perversity.”³⁴ We are attracted to the gentleman, Smith claims, and overlook the monster.

But is Lecter’s charm and sophistication enough to transcend the truly fearsome aspects of his explicitly presented violence? Does his status as an *alloy* (or “rounded” character) somehow lessen the degree of his villainy in a manner not enjoyed by the other “less rounded” villains? Smith implies that our allegiance with an alloy will depend on whether or not the sum of the character’s positive qualities outweighs the sum of the negative ones.³⁵ Berys Gaut’s “merited response” to characters also has relevance here as establishing sympathy with a villain implies a similar “tallying up” of their immoral deeds.³⁶ But it must be asked at what point does a villain’s attractive qualities override their repugnant ones? Even if it were possible to gauge a character’s level of iniquity in this fashion, the conclusion reached is perhaps inaccurate. It is not that the two other aforementioned villains deflate Lecter’s unpleasantness; rather, *they pale in comparison to the doctor’s wickedness*. Instead of accepting them as worse than Lecter, a truly mutinous viewer would claim that they do not measure up to his standards of villainy. I have indicated that weighing degrees of depravity is fallacious, but if we change the nature of the scale, we can establish a transgressive hierarchy of a different order. That is to say, one might find Lecter’s villainy attractive because it possesses a grandeur that cannot be located in the “lesser” perversities of Gumb and Verger.

SUBLIME EVIL

If one is to respond in a truly perverse fashion to Lecter’s evaluation by both films, one must reject the notion that our allegiance will be sought *in spite* of his murderous appetites. Describing his actions as a form of “moral immoralism” as I have done is one possible perverse evaluation of Lecter’s villainy, but again, it still reduces the ferocity the doctor displays during moments of violence. To ally oneself with Lecter in a truly perverse fashion, it is necessary to *re-vilify* him — to use his status as an alloy against the attitudinal grain of the narrative. Although a villain might hold both repellent and attractive qualities, a perverse viewer would find him engaging not because the latter qualities mitigate against the former, but because they amplify the splendour of his evil. As a final move, I would like to shift the evaluative

emphasis to Lecter's more feral qualities, for it is these traits that promote rather than repel our allegiance. During moments of violence — especially random violence — he achieves a kind of magnificence that is awe-inspiring because it suggests that his evil is not containable.

How can one conceive of the representation of unmotivated violence as “awe-inspiring” without incurring the objection of moralists? One might turn again to Nietzsche for a solution. Throughout his work, Nietzsche argues for a need to retain certain aspects of what might be considered “evil” within one's notion of the holy. Indeed, the notion of “cruelty” is integral to Nietzsche's idealised value system. In *The Anti-Christ*, he argues that Christianity has watered down divinity by claiming God as the God of the good (read: weak). Such a reduction of the divine occurs “when everything strong, brave, masterful, proud is eliminated from the concept of God.”³⁷ An all-loving God is both incomprehensible and useless for Nietzsche; the god of a people who believe in themselves “must be able to be both useful and harmful, both friend and foe — he is admired in good and bad alike.”³⁸ Again, this is John Stuart Mill's morally inscrutable God, whose power evokes fear and trembling as well as love. But for Nietzsche God's fearsome nobility is reconceived as cruelty by Pauline Christianity, and thrust far away from our conception of Him.

At the same time, Christianity's “diluted” spirituality brings about the devaluation of evil. It is not even precise to say that the Christian reinvention of Satan was the means to conceptually house God's displaced “cruelty,” for even the Antichrist is stripped of majestic properties. Under Christianity, evil is equated with shame (in the form of sin) and weakness (of one's moral resolve). Before the ascendancy of Good, evil's suffering could be borne with pride. “Here the word ‘Devil’ was a blessing: one had an overwhelming and fearful enemy — one did not need to be ashamed of suffering at the hands of such an enemy.”³⁹ With the minimisation of evil, good actions are no longer morally difficult, and thus, no longer meritorious in any meaningful way nor cause for pride (which in itself is regarded as sinful). Moreover, the idea of divinity is excised of fearful connotations, and being godly is now equated with mere “selflessness.”

Hannibal's demonstrations of violence are a diabolical return of this repressed godliness: murder as the wilful imposition of the Self on another in the most brutal form. Hannibal's violence is pre-Christian in a sense and evocative of the ancient world. His cannibalism is not the sign of a subject who consumes his god (like the Catholic receiving communion), but of a god who devours his subject (like Cronos eating his children). There are only

four instances in both films in which the doctor's murderous actions are explicitly represented, and each of them are the most ferocious moments of onscreen violence: his bludgeoning of Sergeant Pembrey (Alex Coleman), allowing his escape in *Silence*; his dramatic disembowelment of Inspector Pazzi, his near-decapitation of Matteo Deogracias (Fabrizio Gifuni), and his unmotivated attack on a nurse in *Hannibal*. The dramatic weight of these scenes, the graphic force by which they are depicted, and the fact that viewers are confronted with a character who kills without compunction, without necessity and without provocation is enough to short-circuit any allegiance we might form on the basis of his "positive" traits. In fact, it may be that these sequences are the pivotal ones in evoking our sympathetic engagement with the character. It is worth looking at one of these instances in detail in order to outline briefly the formal mechanics that incite our engagement.

The second of the four represented attacks occurs in *Hannibal*, in which Clarice watches surveillance camera footage of Lecter mutilating a nurse in the Baltimore State Forensic Hospital. On the monitor, Clarice observes a black and white video image of a straitjacketed Hannibal standing next to a wall. The overhead medium shot captures the nurse as she walks into the frame and passes by the prisoner. Abruptly, the non-diegetic scores strikes a violent *sforzando* and an inhuman roar is heard on the soundtrack as Lecter lunges at the nurse and pushes her out of the frame. Animalistic growls and gibbering continue throughout the sequence: expressionistic noises attributed to the violence of the event itself. A cut to Clarice depicts her staring at the monitor transfixed — a double for our own viewing position. An eyeline match back to the previous video image reveals Hannibal pushing the nurse to the floor, straddling her, and then brutally savaging her face with his teeth.

Interestingly, the remainder of the brief sequence is then eclipsed by an imaginative reconstruction of the event. That is, the dispassionate eye of the surveillance camera (the clinical instrument of security and law enforcement) is displaced by the subjective eye of an agent who occupies a position outside the story world, and whose evaluative observation of the event colours its representation. Lecter's violence is no longer rendered in objective terms by the security camera, but instead, is focalised in moralistic terms by an extradiegetic narrator, who manipulates the film's mode of representation to amplify the ferocity of this violence. As the orderlies rush in to pull him off of the nurse, the camera suddenly tracks in to a close-up and pans upwards. Colour creeps into the image, and there is a subtle dissolve in the film stock from video to 35mm. Hannibal is yanked up in jerky slow motion and the violent

movement traces motion trails across the screen. His bloodied mouth is agape and his tongue waggles. Most awful of all are his eyes, which are absolutely savage. This hellish expression is caught in a freeze frame and the image is drained of colour and abruptly flares to an apocalyptic white. We cut back to a visibly shaken Clarice, who pauses the video, and the image on the monitor has been reframed back to its original overhead medium shot.



Hannibal.

It is debatable whether or not we should attribute this reflexive moment of overt stylisation to the narrational agency of Clarice. On the one hand, this formal manipulation might be an attempt to represent her imaginative reconstruction of the event, in which case, the final reaction shot of her troubled face cues our analogous response. On the other, it is more interesting to entertain the possibility that these strategies issue from a much more disturbingly ambiguous position within the narrational discourse. It is as if an unnamed narrator who sought to glorify the represented actions briefly directed the narration. The narration of violence is remarkable here because it seems to transcend the rules of the game in two important regards: 1) like the beating of Sgt. Pembrey in *Silence*, Lecter's expression suggests a demented pleasure in his actions; and 2) it is the only sequence in the entire series that does not provide or imply a motive behind Lecter's assault. Certainly his victims have done nothing to warrant the savageries to which they are subjected, and the violence visited upon them seems to exceed the bounds of the perverse moral "logic" discussed above. And yet, these sequences are somehow not forceful enough to guarantee the effective disruption of any allegiance we may have formed with the character. Therefore, the narrational strategies employed here do not problematize our allegiance with Lecter, but actually seek to strengthen it.



The Silence of the Lambs.



The Silence of the Lambs.

This imaginative reconstruction of the attack attributes to his violence an archetypal, almost mythic dimension. However suave and attractive he appears, such moments suggest that he is a figure that we must look upon with some measure of awe. And if we are to find a kind of dark majesty in Hannibal's unfettered savagery, then our typical moral attitudes towards murder are subjected to a reevaluation. Lecter commands fear, and fear is too primal an emotion to be assuaged by dressing up the bogeyman in gentleman's clothes. In fact, such a strategy can only make a monster more terrifying as it crawls from beneath the bed, straightening its mask of civility. The attraction of monsters is mesmerizing — they draw energy from the language-denying emotion that grips their victims upon their revelation. Such a moment is akin to staring into a solar eclipse, or being drawn into the orbit of a black hole. Etymologically, *monstrum* is "that which reveals, or warns," and when Lecter's true face emerges in moments of violence it is the revelation of a terrifying godhead.

We have seen this face before. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche understood the pleasure gleaned from tragedy to be an embodiment of the *Dionysian*: a condition in which the boundaries between the self and the world are broken down. During this moment of primordial unity in which the principal of individuation is dissolved, one may experience sensations of co-mingled ecstasy and terror because it is a state in which the familiar and grounding principles of form, rules, and order ("the Apollonian") disappear.⁴⁰ In these regards, to experience the calamity brought about by a villain's actions is to experience a state of Dionysian intoxication. The Dionysian experience of tragedy shares affinities with the terrifying and elevating experience of the Kantian sublime, as Nietzsche treats the sublime ex-

perience of tragedy “as the artistic taming of the horrible.”⁴¹ While neither *Silence* nor *Hannibal* can be regarded as tragedies proper, what seems clear is that in order to experience Lecter as a pleasurable character, and in order to form an allegiance with him on moral grounds, we must evaluate the aforementioned representational strategies as such an “artistic taming.” We may locate pleasure in the very act of Lecter’s “illegitimate” murders by allying our sensibilities with the narrational strategies that amplify (rather than soften) the character’s evil, for in moments such as these, he is elevated to a Nietzschean god of the cruel. An allegiance such as this is not idle demonolatry, but a re-embrace of a discarded conceptualisation of evil as a potent and awesome force. Therefore, a radically perverse allegiance with certain villains is a relationship that is akin to the worship of an ineffable force. Such an act can be perceived as “good” (or at least beneficial) in ways that do not immediately seem to be “moral” as the term is understood.

I have argued that an intended perverse allegiance with a villain can be formed by re-valuing his actions as serving a greater good — whether it be noble morality, poetic justice, or the principles of aesthetics and high culture. But I am also suggesting that perverse allegiance in the horror film can amount to allying oneself with the potential sublimity of an unfettered evil, rather than indulging in the safer pleasures of appreciating a murderous wit. Furthermore, the evil, monstrous characteristics of the alloy occasionally amplify rather than diminish the appeal of villainy. At the very least, such characters invite viewers to believe that the stigmatisation of arrogance, vanity, and selfishness as villainous qualities is effected at the expense of self-confidence, pride, and a productive egoism. At their most radical, the brutal murders represented in the Hannibal Lecter films are not only revalued as perversely altruistic, but are also regarded as signs of an aspect of the sacred (or, simply the good) that has long been exiled from popular theological and ethical fashion.

Finally, perverse allegiance is a valuable narrational strategy for those interested in making a claim for the progressive feminist politics of horror. Charismatic villainy can be a worthy rhetorical strategy when it prompts viewers to engage in moral revaluation. In the Lecter films, the doctor’s psychopathic preoccupation with aesthetics is administered as a cure-all for ignorance, misplaced values, rampant philistinism, and above all unchecked institutionalized misogyny. Thus, my proposed solution to the paradox of perverse allegiance in horror cinema suggests that sympathy for the villain is possible when the monster’s apparent immorality actually represents a revaluation of accepted moral norms. In its ability to prompt

audiences' to recognize and critique certain entrenched forms of sexism and self-abnegation, this oppugner's apparent "evil" can be reconceived as a necessary, and much needed good.

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1. Murray Smith, "Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes, or Apparently Perverse Allegiances," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (1882; Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 227.
 2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 232.
 3. As an indication of Lecter's prominence within the pantheon of film heavies — established solely on the basis of his appearance in *Silence of the Lambs* — one might refer to his position at the top of the American Film Institute's list of 100 Greatest Movie Villains (www.afi.com/100years/handv.aspx).
 4. John Stone, "Evil in the Early Cinema of Oliver Stone: *Platoon* and *Wall Street* as Modern Morality Plays," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 28.2 (2000): 84.
 5. Daniel Lyons, "The Spectre of the Splendid Villain," *International Journal of Moral and Social Studies* 4.2 (1989): 3-16.
 6. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (1910; New York: Vintage, 1967), 513.
 7. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (1895; London: Penguin, 1990), 153.
 8. John Andrew Bernstein, *Nietzsche's Moral Philosophy* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1987), 38.
 9. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (1883-85; London: Penguin Books, 1961), 84.
 10. *Ibid.*, 141.
 11. John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 52-53.
 12. See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*.
 13. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 232.
 14. Christopher Hamilton, "Art and Moral Education," in *Art and Morality*, ed. José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (London: Routledge, 2004), 54.
 15. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 51.
 16. Charlie Rose, "Ridley Scott on Ridley Scott," *60 Minutes*, 28 Jan. 2001, www.cbsnews.com/news/ridley-scott-on-ridley-scott/.
 17. Caputo, *On Religion*, 58.
 18. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (1887; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12.
 19. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 295.
 20. Bernstein, *Nietzsche's Moral Philosophy*, 71.
 21. Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 22.
 22. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (1886; London: Penguin, 1990), 129.
 23. It bears noting, however, that Nietzsche's own sexual politics are hardly progressive. Moreover, the intrinsic classism of his "noble" ethical system presupposes an institutionalized sexism. This means that our attempts to extend Nietzsche's revaluation to Christianity's paternalism can only be accomplished through a retroactively feminist appropriation of his methods.
 24. *Ibid.*, 162.
 25. Ruben Berrios and Aaron Ridley, "Nietzsche," in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (London: Routledge, 2001), 81.
 26. Dolf Zillman, "The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence," in *Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment*, ed. J. H. Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 202.
 27. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 188.
 28. Again, I am deliberately ignoring Lecter's appearance in *Manhunter*, as well as the remake, *Red Dragon* (2002). It is not that the character's role in both versions is minimal enough to be almost unnecessary, but because the films do not "use" the psychosis of the central villain, Francis Dollarhyde (Tom Noonan/Ralph Fiennes), to offset Lecter's. Indeed, the gradually sympathetic representation of Dollarhyde benefits from the relative detachment the films employ in depicting Lecter's megalomania.

29. Similarly, in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the two elderly aunties perform acts of poisonous “charity” on lonely, old men “who have nothing left to live for.”

30. Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*, trans. Alastair Hamilton (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973), 47.

31. Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 81.

32. Richard Dyer, “Kill and Kill Again,” in *Action/Spectacle Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. José Arroyo (London: BFI, 2000), 149.

33. It is also worth mentioning the denouement of *Hannibal’s* original literary source. Notoriously, Thomas Harris’ novel ends with Clarice’s decision to become Hannibal’s lover following her “re-education,” which includes the exhumation of her father’s corpse in order that she make a conclusive symbolic break from a repressive patriarchal regime.

34. Smith, “Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes,” “ 227.

35. Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 209.

36. Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art,” in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 196.

37. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 139.

38. *Ibid.*, 138.

39. *Ibid.*, 144.

40. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (1872; New York: Vintage, 1967), 60.

41. *Ibid.*