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## *Hannibal*: A Disturbing Feast for the Senses

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### Abstract

This essay analyses the television series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013 –) and argues that it is one of the most powerfully affect-driven shows to ever grace the television screen. *Hannibal* the series not only inflicts a cacophony of sensory assaults on the characters that inhabit its dark narrative universe, but also extends these assaults to the audience that participates in the world it has to offer. Providing a close reading of the episode ‘Hutamoto’ (2:6), it is argued that we become victims, both of Hannibal the character and *Hannibal* the television series’ masterful style and affective power.

### Keywords

affect • *Hannibal* • horror • senses • sound

The television series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013 –) is, without doubt, one of the most powerfully affect-driven shows to ever grace the television screen. *Hannibal* not only inflicts a cacophony of sensory assaults on the characters that inhabit its dark narrative universe, but also extends these assaults to the audience that participates in the world it has to offer. Showrunner Bryan Fuller understands the power that vision and sound have in orchestrating a synesthetic attack on the audience. The tastes synesthetically evoked by the spectacle of Hannibal’s decadent feasts; the array of corpses that are displayed like performance art pieces; the disturbing musical noises that haunt the mind of the viewer and compete with the refined sounds of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart – all collaboratively work to absorb the ‘viewer’ on the level of the sensorium. To experience *Hannibal* is to become immersed

in a disturbing feast of the senses that simultaneously makes us, as much as the show's characters, co-victims of Hannibal's machinations. As Noel Carroll (1990: 15–16) has famously argued about the horror genre in general, *Hannibal* the series is affect-driven. Carroll labels this affect 'art-horror', stating that its modus operandi include fear, visceral revulsion, and disgust which surface in the presence of a monster – in this instance Hannibal – that disturbs the natural order. The affective power of the show emphasizes the brutal themes and savage actions that are at the core of *Hannibal*, while also speaking to the character of Hannibal who is driven by a desire to experience – both intellectually and sensorially – every extreme state that life has to offer. To borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1983[1964]) term, Hannibal is both 'the raw and the cooked'. The savage and the cultured, the rotting and the cooked, the disgusting and the beautiful are no longer binary opposites but instead the extremes of both are thrust together in an experiment that is about testing the limits of human experience, the ultimate being those of life and death.

For Hannibal, the limits of human experience demand the active participation of all the senses, which he has fine-tuned and orchestrated to succumb to his will. He is a master of the human sensorium, and explores the most heightened possibilities of its expression. Hannibal's hands and mouth have touched and tasted things of his own creation that are the stuff of nightmares for the everyday individual. This is a man whose highly sensitized nose smelled the presence of cancer on his teacher at the ripe old age of 12 and again on Bella, the wife of FBI agent Jack Crawford years later ('Coquilles', 1:5). His vision is attuned to the refined beauty of art: the walls of his home are littered with Old Master prints and paintings, including François Boucher's erotic depiction of *Leda and the Swan* (Private Collection, c. 1740); his bedroom includes an exquisitely designed Edo-period samurai warrior armor piece; in his study hangs a triptych of ukiyo-e prints from early 19th-century Japan by Utagawa Kunisada that depict three kabuki actors performing in the play *Tales of Genji*.

Hannibal's vision and taste for art and aesthetics move beyond those of on-looker to active creator; we witness his artistic flair not only in the numerous sketches he draws, but also in the victims he transforms into artistic displays that announce to the world the virtuosic performances of Hannibal the serial killer, otherwise known as the Chesapeake Ripper. The actual embodiment of 'Wound Man' – a popular image of the 15th and 16th centuries that represented the fusion of art and science, and which showed the body pierced by a variety of weapons that a physician might have to treat – first appears in 'Entrée' (1:6). Miriam Lass, the trainee FBI agent, discovers one of Hannibal's sketches of a 'wound man' based on the actual murder of Jeremy Olmstead, one of Hannibal's previous patients and victims; and again, Hannibal repeats the 'wound man' creation in 'Yakimono' (2:7) when he frames the psychiatrist Dr Chilton as the Chesapeake Ripper. In 'Mukōzuke' (2:5), Hannibal experiments with contemporary art: the body of Beverly Katz, the crime lab scientist, is found dissected vertically into six pieces and displayed in glass cases in a composition reminiscent of Damien

Hirst's animal works, particularly *Mother and Child (Divided)* (Tate Gallery, 1993). More tellingly, perhaps, in 'Buffet Froid' (1:10) one of Hannibal's soon-to-be victims (and thanks to Hannibal's skills with hypnotism) transforms Hannibal's face into a distorted vision that is reminiscent of a Picasso portrait. It's no coincidence that his face recalls Picasso, for like Picasso, Hannibal is a bricoleur who deconstructs and reassembles the pieces he has to work with into reconfigured, unique objects that speak to the theatre of Hannibal's world. His killing and cannibalism are great creations that Hannibal perceives as pure acts of art that tell a story about art and the senses, death and life.

Consider the scenes that precede, and include the discovery of the victim crafted into a 'tree of life' ('Hutamono', 2:6). In the third scene of the episode we see Hannibal in his kitchen with Dr Alana Bloom as Hannibal slices into a heart. His hands and fingers caress the heart as each piece is splayed out onto the carving board. The sight of Hannibal's actions triggers in the audience a synesthetic connection to the sense of touch. Meanwhile, the scene is overlaid by the soft sounds of Mendelssohn's 'Songs Without Words' (Op. 85 No. 4 in D major). The music gently suggests that here we witness the cultured Hannibal, a Hannibal intent on displaying his advanced gastronomic skills. Cut to a close-up of Hannibal's face, which we also recognize as marking a shift to a new scene, and the knowing smirk that appears across his lips is further echoed by a shift to the dark, disturbing experimental music of the show's sound designer Brian Reitzell. An arrhythmic collection of bells ringing, clangs, bangs, and piano runs take over in a frenzied crescendo, wiping out the comfort of the lulling melodies of Mendelssohn. Hannibal's fingers flip through his rolodex which contains the business cards of his numerous victims. He stops at the card of Sheldon Isley, Councilor of the Baltimore City Council (who we later discover had ordered that a forest containing an endangered songbird be torn down and replaced by a parking lot), then he pulls out his recipe card for steak and kidney pie. A cut to an extreme close-up of Hannibal's eye reveals a reflection of a montage of flowers that open their blooms, accompanied by the sounds of Reitzell's frantic music. In *Sonic Warfare*, Steve Goodman (2012: 110) argues that 'sound has a seductive power to caress the skin, to immerse, to sooth, beckon, and heal', but it can also have the opposite effect of assaulting and disturbing the mind and body. Influenced by the experimental music of Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu (especially in season two), Reitzell's distressing, atonal scores are improvised in real time while watching and reacting to each episode in order to capture his 'first gut response' (see Burns, 2014). While Hannibal performs the role of cultured aesthete and aficionado of the high culture melodies of classical music, the savage Hannibal stripped of the theatricality of bourgeois taste is to be found in the discordant, wild rhythms of Reitzell's score.

As the camera zooms out, we realize that the flowers reflected in Hannibal's pupil no longer place Hannibal in his kitchen. The beauty of the unraveling blooms and their synesthetically induced scents continue to be paralleled by dissonant, abrasive noises that confuse the audience, but soon the dissonance

is resolved and the visual shifts to match the sonic. The camera zooms out further to reveal that the dazzling bouquet of flowers is embedded in a disemboweled corpse that's grafted onto a tree with blossoms in full bloom – a thing of troubling aesthetic beauty that recalls Van Gogh's famous tree blossom paintings. With only the lungs visible, it becomes clear that the heart has been replaced by *bella donna*, a chain of white oleander has transformed into the intestines, and ragwood now takes over the role of liver. The tree, it is revealed, is planted into the broken-up asphalt of an abandoned car park – presumably the car park built by Councilor Isley. Later we discover that the victim had been left standing in water for 48–72 hours, his lungs operating like a wet sponge that watered the poisonous bouquet and that also watered the tree roots that had been grafted into his body.

Whether it's Isley's internal organs that were reassembled into a form of fine art cuisine and consumed by Hannibal (and, presumably, Alana Bloom) as part of a steak and kidney pie, or the metamorphosis of the corpse of Isley into a breathtaking, diabolical art form that gives birth to a new form of hybrid life – a tree-man – for Hannibal it is all the same: he is the creator and this is his design.

Like all of Hannibal's perverse killer, cannibalistic and gastronomic delights, the tree of life is a performance about his presumed mastery over life and death. In his anthropological study on cannibalism, William Arens (1979: 17–18) outlines the different typologies of cannibalism 'according to motives for the act'. In addition to ritual cannibalism and survival cannibalism, gastronomic cannibalism – 'where human flesh is eaten for its taste and food value' – is the most prohibited and abominable, posing a threat to the social order. In the same episode Jack states that 'cannibalism is an act of dominance'; Hannibal's desire is to weaken the boundaries of the social order by creating new rules that test its boundaries.

Hannibal's art is an art that disgusts. Winfried Menninghaus (2003: 8) argues that the 'darkest of the senses' is disgust, which, he explains, not only 'figures as an extreme subspecies of a modern aesthetics of the "shocking"' but, for Nietzsche, represented the 'hallmark of metaphysical insight' (p. 9) – an insight in which Hannibal the character and *Hannibal* the series excel. Disgust invades the body by either directly or indirectly relying on what have traditionally been viewed as the 'lower' senses: taste, smell and touch. Unlike vision and hearing its presence forces proximity rather than distance.

In her study of the aesthetics of disgust, Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008) compares disgust to the state of the sublime, particularly as articulated by Edmund Burke (1999[1757]). She argues that the 'arousal of disgust seems to interrupt aesthetic thrall' that is typical of the sublime (p. 369). Rather than invoking states of fear, awe and wonder that distance the viewer from the sublime art object, 'disgust has an aesthetic counterpart of comparable intensity, importance, and meaning' (p. 369). This counterpart she calls 'the sublate'. While the sublime and the sublate both 'allude to death' in making the viewer ponder the nature of existence, disgust-arousing art also relies on a response of intense viscosity that is somatically 'grounded' and which

also stimulates that curious second look, a perverse dwelling on the properties of the object of disgust ... for the overwhelming affect of disgust is aversion. But it is aversion with a backward glance, lingering over and even savoring its object ... Disgust apprehends not just destruction but reduction – of the noblest life to decaying organic matter in which all traces of individuality are obliterated. (pp. 373–374)

And Korsmeyer concludes, ‘The counterpart to the sublime glimpse of cosmic power is the sublate confrontation with the vulnerability of material nature’ (p. 379). While captivated by what at first appears to be the sublime entity that is the tree-man, we are pulled back to the sublate as our gaze returns to the poisonous bouquet in the man’s chest, not wanting to see but seeing the lungs that peek out behind it. Reitzell’s music insists that we take ‘that curious second look’ that also makes us ponder on absence – the absence of organs that were consumed by Hannibal. More than any other character in the show, because of his empathic connection with the victims and dual ability to see through the eyes of the killer, Will Graham is powerfully seduced by the second look, and his inability to look away tests his own sanity. Will is often our doorway: his visions create horrorscapes that generate a dialogic relationship between the sublime and the sublate – both affective states being the outcome of Hannibal’s creations. In the universe that is *Hannibal* we, much like Will, are like the tree-man; we become victims, woven intricately into both Hannibal and *Hannibal’s* masterful style and affective power. This is Hannibal and *Hannibal’s* design.

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