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Assuming Identities: Gender, Sexuality, and Performativity in *The Silence of the Lambs*



Lynne Stahl

In the introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses the instability of the ignorance/knowledge binary, which generally equates the latter with power and the former with impotence. She argues that ignorance (or the appearance thereof) can be a tool of power as well, citing as an example the 1986 ruling by the United States Justice Department that employers “may freely fire persons with AIDS” provided that those employers “can claim to be ignorant of the medical fact, *quoted in the ruling*, that there is no known health danger in the workplace from the disease” (5). That this very fact was made explicit in the ruling itself preposterously encourages and makes advantageous *misknowledge* of the law with regard to AIDS, and it implicitly facilitates discrimination against homosexuals, who at the time of the case were (and to some extent, are still today) conceived of as promiscuous, selfish vectors of contagion, imposing their scourge upon the heterosexual world. The ruling essentially sets forth that ignorance is safer than information, at least for employers, and that they ought to limit themselves to knowing or assuming only what serves them. Such a privileging of assumption serves to “enforce discursive power” by discouraging anyone to look past stereotypes—if one

employs a gay man, evidently, it would be safest to presume not only that he has contracted HIV, but that he will also engage in behaviors that would put others at risk as well (6).

Written and released during the peak years of the United States AIDS panic, both Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and Jonathan Demme's cinematic adaptation (1991) take the form of a detective story, the quest for knowledge incarnated in a search for serial killer Buffalo Bill's identity. Every character, of course, has his or her unique background and methods, which in turn structure the way they handle knowledge and ignorance and their conceptions of not only Buffalo Bill's identity but also their own, the instability, performativity, and ambivalence of which manifest themselves throughout.

The movie presents endless chains of dichotomies both relational and conceptual, prompting the implied spectator to ask, "which?"—and the film invariably responds with, "some of both." The question driving the plot is that of Buffalo Bill's identity, an unresolved muddle of gender, sexuality, and the ambiguous link between the two, which sets up the implied audience to examine the complicated identities of Jame Gumb and the rest of the characters as they perform and function within the parallel real and diegetic worlds of 1991, both dictated by hegemonically-encouraged incomplete readings and self-servingly willful misinterpretations and oversimplifications.

Jame Gumb: "He *thinks* he is. He *tries* to be."

In *Silence*, the mass of confusions and contradictions that comprises Gumb serves to exemplify the performativity of identity and the hegemonic misreadings thereof. As Judith Halberstam writes in *Skinflick*, serial murders carry "something of a literary quality," taking place over a period of time with a plot, a motivation, a "consummate villain and an absolutely pure" victim, or at least one not guilty of any crimes against the killer, and most importantly,

they “demand explanation” (580). Though here Halberstam’s article is referring to Hannibal, the film establishes Jame Gumb as at once author, narrator, and main character. To describe him as “consummate” would be ironic and unfair, given his violently desperate quest for self-fulfillment, but like his jailed counterpart, he is undeniably “supremely qualified” for what he does, which demands a high level of proficiency not only in the entomological and sartorial arts but also entails a certain sense of imaginative flair as well (*OED*).

As an author, Jame Gumb constructs Buffalo Bill as the pro/antagonist, a Machiavellian but misunderstood underdog victimized by an oppressive society, whose goal is to overcome rejection and achieve his ends through the only means he has. He deliberately disrupts the *sjuzhet* of his story, a mangling that Clarice Starling notes as she and Ardelia Mapp pore over the trajectory of the murders. The former remarks that the order is “desperately random,” and observes that Buffalo Bill weighted down the first girl he killed before dumping her in a river so that she was the “first girl taken, third body found.” Finally unscrambling the chronological sequence of events, Clarice takes off to Belvedere, Ohio, the hometown of Fredrica Bimmel—said first girl—and tracks Gumb down from there.

Gumb’s narrative voice takes on a passive tone that belies the violence of the story it tells. When he talks to Catherine Martin, he does not address her, instead informing her famously that “It puts the lotion on its skin. It does this whenever it’s told.” This indirect, non-confrontational mandate works on multiple levels to convey Gumb’s convoluted personality: first, it dehumanizes Catherine, making her captivity and suffering less psychologically taxing for him. Second, it displays a kind of postgender political correctness, as the neutral pronoun does not assume anything about Catherine’s gender identification. Third, it elucidates his authorial vision for himself; instead of telling her explicitly what to do, he narrates with a

desperate sort of optimism the version of events that he wants to transpire as if it were already happening. Finally, and perhaps most poignantly, he refrains from using “you” because it implies an “I,” and he cannot bear to recognize his current condition as his identity. He avoids the second person pronoun with his dog, Precious, as well, using only her name and avoiding gendered terms as well. Gumb employs the second person only when his performance is disrupted by distress, for example when Catherine pulls the poodle down into the well and, most agonizingly, when he shouts “You don’t know what pain is!” at the senator’s daughter. Significantly, this scene is the only one in which Gumb appears upset; even when Starling points her gun at him in his kitchen, he merely gives a gleeful little wiggle and flounces away to go play hunter. Like his fellow orphan, he abhors the thought of an innocent animal suffering, and the film cements this parallel by accessorizing him with a breed of dog that strongly resembles a lamb.

Befitting of Buffalo Bill’s complicated narrative, Halberstam’s essay demands a nuanced reading of the film that transcends his individual misogyny and violence—not ignoring or excusing them, but situating them as apart of much larger, more insidious systems. Halberstam goes on to assert that serial killings “stand in need of interpretation and interpreters,” and this story has plenty of both, which are essential to achieving a productive reading of these systems (580). One of the latter, the *National Inquisitor* tabloid posted on the wall of Jack Crawford’s office, not only screams “BILL SKINS FIFTH,” but also features smaller headlines offering romantic advice and suggestions, demonstrating a strong societal link between sex and violence. Through the sensationalistic tabloid, the film also elucidates the common homophobic view that Buffalo Bill’s real problem (and a common anti-gay refrain) may be that he simply has not yet found the right woman—one headline advertises the tale of someone who was a “Wild Man Until [He] Met the Girl of [His] Dreams.”

Curiously, the tiny text under the serial killer's billing reveals itself on close inspection to be a story about Dr. Lecter (his name is legible, but the rest is too small to decipher), who has not yet been associated with Buffalo Bill or even mentioned as a character. This incongruence reinforces the film's warning against underreading and constitutes a reversal of Hannibal's position as a source of knowledge about Gumb, reasserting the volatility of identities and locations of power. The tabloid article appears here very early in the film and once more towards the end, this time on a bulletin board in Gumb's house directly after his death, and the print comes into slightly sharper focus here, revealing that the text below Buffalo Bill's headline is a report of Hannibal Lecter's indictment along with a brief biography of the doctor, who will soon be making his own headlines. Gumb has also clipped out, kept, and posted the "Wild Man" feature, demonstrating his belief that the completed woman suit would calm the savage demands of his unrealized identity.

Just as Bill's headline implies one story but tells another, Jame Gumb's popular nickname immediately establishes society's skewed perception of him. Starling tells Dr. Lecter that the moniker "started as a bad joke in Kansas City homicide. They said, 'This one likes to skin his humps.'" Clearly, however, these policemen have discarded even their own local history in favor of a popular, sensationalized misreading—according to the *Buffalo Bill Historical Center*, aside from hunting down bison, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody acted as "an early advocate of women's suffrage and the just treatment of American Indians" (*BBHC*). The historical Bill was more than a frenzied killing machine, as is the cinematic version, and if a nickname is to be worn like clothing, as Halberstam contends, "no one size fits all" (580).

Halberstam refers to Gumb's project as a "gender suit," but Judith Butler would more precisely argue that it is rather a *sex* suit, as gender consists of a performance that does not

necessarily (but sometimes seems to) bear any innate correspondence to anatomy (Halberstam 581). As Butler explains in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” signifiers of gender and sexuality depend upon performance: one must *act* masculine to be considered masculine; one must rely on a continued series of behaviors and actions that match the particular category’s criteria, and there always exists an insuperable “instability” to those classifications (Butler 308). Ted Levine’s performance of Jame Gumb’s multiple performances serves to deconstruct the fallacy of concrete, homogeneous identity categories, and Gumb’s choices of when to wear which identity speak volumes about the American “regulatory regime” that seeks so determinedly to fit its subjects into neat little boxes (308).

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler examines Foucault’s “politics of truth,” challenging the notion of the “knowability of the human” and questioning the social norms that “gover[n] its recognizability” (58). She brings up the same issues exposed by Jame Gumb’s existence in *Silence*, as there is no legitimated room for him “within the given regime of truth” (58). In Demme’s film, that regime consists of the FBI, the surgical clinics that have rejected Gumb, the tabloid society that reviles non-normative sexualities, and exegetically, the critics, reviewers, and real audiences who pigeonhole him as a freak, a monster, a sicko, or, just as inaccurately, a homosexual. Jame Gumb was denied sex reassignment surgery because, as Dr. Lecter advises Clarice in the novel, he would have failed the personality inventory tests in which “real” transsexuals consistently draw pleasantly domestic “rosy-future” homes complete with baby carriage, curtains, and flowers in the yard (Harris 165). This association presumptively links female anatomy inextricably and speciously to femininity and maternity, flattening all who self-report as transsexuals together as people who identify as *feminine* women and denying transsexuals the possibility of difference within their category—if one is going to alter one’s

anatomy, apparently, one must assume a gender identity that aligns with its prescribed social norms, a silly but sinister mandate that assumes all normal born females will enjoy the color pink, aspire to be mothers, and eschew pants in favor of aprons.

Evincing the mutability of Buffalo Bill's perceived gender, Demme first shows the be-goggled serial killer as a gazer at female objects (here Catherine Martin)—an indication of male heterosexuality. His costume befits an unremarkable man, working-class, definitively masculinized with a baseball cap, athletic jacket, and ubiquitous Converse sneakers. A desire for invisibility makes the killer's attire practical, and filling the masculine role may boost his sense of dominance on a mission that relies on his physical power to knock a sizable woman unconscious. Upon seeing his cast, which ironically serves as his weapon against her, Catherine comments that he "look[s] kinda handicapped," intimating that otherwise he would not need a woman's help. Buffalo Bill banks on her tendency to perform femininity—and her singalong to Tom Petty's "American Girl" has already established her normativity in that regard—accurately predicting a nurturing impulsion to assist the disadvantaged where she most likely would have hesitated to approach a fully capacitated man alone at night.

In a further testament to the slipperiness of gender signifiers, the film leaves Jame Gumb's sexual orientation perplexingly yet purposefully ambiguous throughout. The first indication of his erotic partnership is the late Benjamin Raspail, whose heavily made-up head Starling finds preserved in the aptly named Your Self Storage unit along with a mannequin in feminine clothing. Dr. Lecter informs Starling that Raspail's "romantic attachments ran to . . . the exotic," but to assume that he and Gumb were lovers would, as Crawford so smarmily puts it in the novel, "make an *ass* out of *u* and *me* both" (Harris 41).

Even if the two were romantically involved, it is impossible to know whether the make-up was applied before or after his death, whether Gumb applied it, as Dr. Lecter alleges, and whether the coitus that may or may not have preceded the mortis demonstrates in Gumb a desire for men or women. In fact, taken as evidence, Gumb's selection of a transvestite partner could not fairly be said to fit anywhere in the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy—in fact, it stands as a strong indicator of the speciousness and futility of such a binary. If Jame Gumb identifies as female, then having male partners would indicate heterosexuality and female partners would categorize her as a lesbian. On the other hand, if Gumb's body does not match Gumb's identified gender, how can one classify the sexuality therein? Ignorant of or apparently unwilling to employ any other discourse, critics and movie reviewers resort to invective—because Gumb's identity cannot be reduced to a socially condoned moniker (whereas recognition as a transsexual would occasion some degree of political correctness), apparently any slur becomes fair game. David Denby calls Gumb a “lunatic” with “bizarre sexual compulsions,” Rita Kempley regards him as a “sicko,” and J. Hoberman dramatically casts him as “the personification of evil” (Denby 61; Kempley 2; Hoberman 61). In “Right On, Girlfriend!”, Douglas Crimp remarks insightfully that Gumb's murder of Raspail, whose non-normative sexuality Dr. Lecter has already insinuated, actually indicates Gumb's own homophobia (a proposition that does not necessarily preclude the possibility of gayness, but makes it less probable), and in the novel an FBI agent explicitly refers to him as a documented “fag-basher” (Crimp 310; Harris 322). Intriguingly, both Ted Tally's screenplay and Harris's novel refer multiple times to Jame Gumb as *Mr.* Gumb, demonstrating an external imposition of a masculine title upon what would otherwise be a gender-indeterminate name.

Deprived of the medical means to self-actuate, Gumb takes the matter into his own sartorially adept hands. He sits naked at a sewing machine as the camera tracks from behind, but instead of seizing this vulnerable moment to examine him candidly, it veers off into the darker recesses of the house. Like the tabloids, the film anticipates that the audience will find his monstrous deeds infinitely more interesting than the reason behind them, his enactment of the process of identity being literally stitched together. Gumb's nudity attests to his self-conception: here in private he wears what for him represents the clothing, the costume—his male body. The room's décor also exposes the slipperiness of his identity; clippings on the wall include a pin-up calendar that features a scantily clad woman preening next to a motorcycle. While such an item would typically signify the subjection of women to the male gaze, the appearance of another poster with a female model, his one in Fredrica Bimmel's room, posits another possible complication: does Gumb want to have sex with that woman or, like Fredrica with her jewelry and glitter, to *be* her? This dual possibility reflects the conflicting desires at play throughout the film and highlights precisely the ambivalence and nuance that defy facile categorizations.

The mise-en-scène of Gumb's room at home—his closet, so to speak, fails to elucidate anything but more ambiguity. His nipples are shaved to appear more female, yet he has declined to depilate his armpits; we might thus see Gumb as a feminist who objects to that particular patriarchal demand on the female body. The tattoo of bloody incisions below his right pectoral serves as a reminder of the denied surgeries that could have given him the breasts he so covets, but the necklace that sits between them features a relatively masculine design, contrasting the wistfulness expressed by the body art with a chosen signifier of manliness—his social and institutional rejection has muddled his self-perception to the point of turning him into the transgendered monster who embodies a phobic society's sexual anxieties.

Gumb's room features several female mannequins (is it accurate to call such anatomically vague bodies female?) wearing glamorous dresses, frozen in struck poses in front of mirrors. Although Gumb himself is never shown looking into a mirror, the cinematic use of extreme close-up reproduces the effect of a reflective surface, a sensation that positions the implied spectator as his reflection and invites the spectator to identify with Gumb even when he himself does not—we are constructed as his reflection, but while we can see him, he does not register us. He has set up a video camera to record his sashaying dance, a decision that reveals the duality of his desires. Instead of looking into a mirror, which would entail self-acknowledgement and self-recognition, he films himself dressed in feminine garb, vamping lustily for the audience (he—or perhaps she—is his own intended audience), then tucking back his genitals and striking a lepidopterous pose in an exaggerated demonstration of gender's performativity: he wants *to be gazed at*. Mere exhibitionism will not satisfy him, however, and he will presumably watch the footage later, because he also wants *to gaze*. This paradoxical predilection is confirmed by the words he speaks while dabbing on lipstick: "I'd fuck me. I'd fuck me hard." With him/herself as his/her unattainable object choice, Gumb's difference from sex and gender norms performs its own violence upon him, and this devastation becomes externalized through his grotesque, murderous acts.

When Dr. Lecter alludes to Buffalo Bill's transsexual motive, Starling draws on her book-learning to refute that possibility, protesting that "there's no correlation in the literature about transsexualism and violence. Transsexuals are very passive." In relying so heavily on the educational canon she would have studied in the psychology department of the University of Virginia—founded by Thomas Jefferson, a quintessential icon of rich, white, male, America—she blinds herself temporarily by neglecting to question such studied but manifestly problematic

categorizations, although when replaced with another less pathologized identity category, minority or not, the statement reads like an absurdly obsolete and racist textbook¹ classifying indigenous peoples as savage and uncivilized.

Ultimately, the key to the killer's identity (his location, for Starling's purposes) lies precisely where Butler would have proposed looking—in his *actions*, not his ontology. It is Starling's realization, fittingly made when she looks into a closet, that marginalized space of deviance and queerness, that Buffalo Bill *sews*—a typically feminine activity—which provides the final clue and leads her to the deceased Mrs. Lippman's address. As Dr. Lecter points out, Buffalo Bill's acts of murder are incidental; he kills women for their skins, piecing together “the illusion of a seamless identity” by repeating abductions, flayings, and stitchings (Butler 315).

A character of Jeffersonian privilege, Jack Crawford attempts to find Buffalo Bill through his perceived sexuality and turns up a name but little more than a false lead. By examining Gumb's institutionally-determined “failed” transsexualism, by essentially outing him, Crawford only gains access to a “different region of opacity” (Butler 309). He now believes that he knows how to categorize Gumb or what to call him, but he plainly still does not “know what that means,” following a fruitless clue to an empty house (309). From Fredrica Bimmel's home in Ohio, Starling tells him excitedly that “he's making a suit of women,” but Crawford ignores the significance of Buffalo Bill's actions, preferring instead to rely on institutional information and, as a result of his incomplete reading, leaving Starling to confront the killer alone.

When Starling arrives at the late Mrs. Lippman's house, Gumb answers the door in men's clothing, interrupting the repetition of his identity in order to pass himself off as a typical heterosexual male. This slippage exemplifies what Butler calls an “interval between the acts” constitutive of the serial killer/would-be transsexual's identity, and it in turn produces a “risk and

excess” to that identity, so when Starling glimpses the moth and the spools of thread—which stand out simultaneously as inconsistencies to this man’s self-presentation and reminders of Buffalo Bill’s *actions*—she realizes who he is in the same instant that he realizes his attempt at playing it straight, as it were, has failed (317).

Clarice Starling: One Bright Bird

On a larger scale in which Gumb’s mutable identity slips from author/narrator to character/performer, the film constructs a narratological hierarchy that features Crawford as the narrator of the hegemonic FBI’s implied authorship. As a representative of the regulatory body, he echoes Halberstam’s hypothesis of serial killing’s “literary quality,” and he works to solve the case by installing none other than Clarice Starling as his narrative audience.² The lower-class woman’s marginalized social status enhances the scope of her sight; located simultaneously within and outside of the discursive center (as embodied by the FBI) and having grown up in the nation’s ignored periphery, she possesses an insider’s view as well as the wisdom not to discard facts that appear negligible. Helped along by Dr. Chilton’s insinuations and Crawford’s subsequent admission of his agenda, she also becomes aware of her exploited position, an apprehension that allows her view to encompass Crawford’s as well, further widening the scope of her perception and leading her to a method of seeing that ultimately permits her sufficiently thorough, if not complete, reading of Jame Gumb’s actions. By presenting so many polarizations, (rich/poor, masculine/feminine, oppressor/oppressed, ruthless/compassionate), the film suggests that Starling’s willingness to admit complication within these dichotomies—inhabiting the space between opposed terms locates her in a more mobile position with a more inclusive field of vision than either of the two extremes would afford her, as abstraction yields more knowledge than concretion.

From the opening scene, the film establishes FBI trainee Starling as a sexual minority in a man's world. Her first interaction, a brief summons from an older male FBI agent, shows her in a bowed position, bent over with exhaustion from her training; from the outset, the film confirms her subjugation to males as she immediately alters her schedule at their behest. When she meets with Jack Crawford, their conversation reveals her long-term obligation to pleasing him for the sake of her career:

CRAWFORD. It says here once you graduate you want to come work for me in Behavioral Science.

STARLING. Yes, very much, sir. Very much.

The film leaves an ambiguity as to whether the document he is referring to says specifically that she wants to work for *him*, rather than simply in the department he happens to head. Regardless, he interprets the situation to his advantage, narcissistically presuming that his presence is key to her desire to work there. Saying no more on the subject, he merely nods and moves on to the task at hand, but he has strategically and tacitly established the constrictive impression that she really ought to accept this mission so as not to displease a potential boss and jeopardize her occupational future.

But other than his knowledge of what boils down to her inability to say no to him, what motivates Crawford to choose this particular trainee? Her main distinguishing factor thus far in the movie, as established by the horde of men dwarfing her in the elevator, is her sex and its rarity within the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Impressive résumés must be fairly common at such an elite institution, and Crawford's memory lapse about the grade he gave her makes it hard to believe that her academic prowess stands foremost in his mind. His rhetoric certainly reveals a strong reluctance to include her in such a high profile case—he first tells her that “a job's come

up,” but quickly diminishes her mission to “more of an interesting errand.” This verbal diminution linguistically downgrades her position, and it suggests a demotion of her even as he gives her an opportunity for advancement, as does his “misremembrance” of her grade, which forces her to acknowledge that he has apparently found fault with her in the past. This debasing “promotion” reveals his strategy—that is, enacting a Beauty and the Beast-type story in the hope that her female allure will manage to extract some information that Crawford’s other agents cannot.

Indeed, the film establishes Starling’s sexual desirability in the same frames that emphasize her sexual *difference* from the male norm. As she and Ardelia jog along the training course, they cross paths with a group of male trainees who leer at them from behind, establishing the women as outnumbered minorities and subjects of the male gaze and locating them in a vulnerable, objectified position even (or especially) within the “justice”-seeking FBI. Having undertaken Crawford’s charge, Starling travels alone to the Baltimore State Forensic Hospital, standing in front of the unequivocally sleazy Dr. Frederick Chilton to explain her assignment while he sits and ogles her. Chilton remarks on her good looks, smirking that “Crawford’s clever, isn’t he? Using . . . a pretty young woman to turn [Hannibal] on.” Stung by his interpretation of her superior’s strategy, Starling icily refutes the insinuation, but it clearly strikes a nerve. Later, her sarcastically flirtatious jab at the already bruised masculinity of Chilton’s ego reveals her self-conscious refusal to conform to her prescribed gender role.

The next affront targets her biological sexuality as the prisoner Miggs hisses, “I can smell your cunt.” His casual use of such an abrasive term indicates the film’s eagerness to discomfit the implied spectator, and violations of linguistic etiquette are among the tamest issues that it addresses. The crude anatomical epithet, though it does not particularly daunt her, emphatically

separates Starling's sex from her gender by affirming her female physiology so soon after her self-parodic charade of coquettish femininity for Chilton. Although Hannibal himself claims that he cannot detect the odor, he invokes the heteronormative flavor of high school socialization and recognizes her dissatisfaction with "all those tedious sticky fumblings" that posed a simultaneous obstruction and vehicle for her "dream[s] of getting out." To avoid all such interactions might provoke allegations of homosexuality or other "otherness" leading to ostracism. On the other hand, the risk of a pregnancy would almost certainly obliterate her occupational ambitions, not to mention the encroachment it would impose upon her personal desires. The dilemma of acceptable feminine sexual behavior requires maintaining a balance between perceived virginal frigidity and sluttish promiscuity, establishing Starling's aptitude for finding middle ground.

Crawford continues to wield Starling's sexuality—or more aptly Starling's perceived gender and its appeal to the sexuality of other men—throughout the film. When the two travel to West Virginia to examine one of Buffalo Bill's victims, the local sheriff's terse demeanor reveals his resentment at the elite outside presence of the FBI on his jurisdiction, and Crawford does not hesitate to sacrifice his female counterpart in order to bridge the class gap with him, murmuring that "this type of sex crime has certain aspects I'd just as soon discuss in private, you know what I mean?" He indicates Starling with a jerk of his head, tacitly excluding her in deference to the sheriff's expectations of gender roles (a chauvinism that here passes itself off as Southern courtesy), regardless of the fact that Starling's rural West Virginia roots would most likely make her better able to relate to the local authorities, as Crawford has little more in common with them than his anatomy. Like Starling, the implied spectator is denied access to the big boys' conversation, left to share in her fidgeting discomfort among openly staring male deputies.

Starling, though subtler than Gumb, also understands that identity is a performance that tends to be reduced and reified by those in power. Once inside the examining room, she takes a leaf from Crawford's book in order to communicate with the locals, performing her Southern country identity by letting her accent thicken and invoking the nurturing feminine side they expect of women. She subverts his assertion of male privilege to her advantage by playing up the role to which he subjugates her and managing to silence and clear the room with little more than a "Go on now, y'all," while he struggles to hear the telephone operator over the din. Starling's subsequent analysis of the corpse's adornments—thrice-pierced ears and glittery nail polish—attest to her heightened awareness of city/town differences, and the film further highlights Crawford's ignorance of rural life when he misidentifies the moth cocoon as a seed pod.

The car ride back reflects Starling's lingering sense of wrongful displacement, as she remains in the backseat while Crawford and the driver—another incidental male like the sheriff—occupy the privileged positions. The former makes a weak effort to appease her anger, blowing the blatant discrimination off as "just smoke," but she refuses to buy it, citing his position as a highly visible example of behavior to his subordinates. He mutters "Point taken," and goes to sleep as Starling continues to work, making it hard to believe that he has in fact taken her words to heart. Starling recognizes the validity of Laura Mulvey's assertion that the male "bearer of the look" (in this instance the look of the West Virginia deputies) is the figure with whom they identify, while his display of power "as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look" (Mulvey 204). This film, however, also presents the power of the *other* side of the look, giving the implied spectator both views as the camera first follows the sheriff's eyeline to Starling before switching to her panning point-of-view and enduring the stare of the deputies. The camera lingers close to her face, conveying the evolution of this initial unease into

calm resolve, and as her thoughts turn inward to her memories, displaying her ability to disregard and function under the male gaze while tolerating it—she becomes more than just a passive subject.

Despite—or because of—the repeated allusions to and invocations of her sexuality, Starling deliberately maintains an air of opacity around her romantic inclinations, and her successfully obfuscating efforts render any attempts at bracketing her sexuality as presumptuous and invalid as trying to classify Gumb. When Dr. Lecter first intimates that she and Crawford share an erotic affinity for each other, she claims that she “never thought about it.” Given her general perspicacity and self-consciousness about her sex, this denial rings hollow both to the implied spectator and the psychiatrist, who bluntly asks if Crawford “wants [her] sexually” or “visualizes . . . fucking [her].” She replies, “That doesn’t interest me, Doctor,” and her strategic ambiguity of the pronoun’s antecedent manages to obscure exactly *what* doesn’t interest her—Crawford? Fucking men? Fucking in general? If nothing else, the deliberate vagueness communicates both her unwillingness to gratify Dr. Lecter with a discussion of her personal life and her refusal to be reduced to her sexuality.

Later, the entomologist Pilcher raises such questions as well, though much more tactfully than other characters. Starling is friendly and courteous to him but shows no more inclination to share “cheeseburgers and beer” with him than human liver, fava beans, and Chianti with her other would-be suitor. In fact, the spectator never sees her partake of any food in the movie, not even the FBI-themed cake (Crawford’s symbolic culinary offering) at her graduation ceremony, and her sexual orientation remains as unresolved—and, moreover, irrelevant—as her preferred dietary regimen. Indeed, her abstention from the cake and her final exchange with Crawford demonstrate that she has subverted and overcome his exploitation of her sex, a decentering of his

hegemonic power that occurs, significantly, long before the film's end. Where he once used his superior position to steer her sexuality as a vehicle to Hannibal, she takes control by driving to Belvedere. After crossing this literal and figurative bridge, she remains at the wheel as he becomes a shrinking reflection in the rearview mirror and finally disappears through a side exit at her graduation ceremony.

Hannibalism: The Art of Brutality

While Dr. Hannibal Lecter also leaves Crawford far behind, his method of transit is much flashier than Starling's, but every bit as characteristic of his identity as her humble Ford Pinto is of hers. The film constructs Dr. Lecter as a paragon of insight, knowledge, and wisdom, a figure who achieves near omniscience in spite of his maximum-security imprisonment, or at least as someone who knows how to perform an effective illusion thereof. The first time Starling—or "Clarice," as he prefers to drawl—goes to visit him in the Baltimore hospital, she comes only with hearsay knowledge of his gory reputation, which Chilton gleefully enhances by showing her a photograph of a nurse mutilated by Lecter—to our knowledge his only female victim. The camera tracks Starling's face as she walks down the hall to the final cell, when it cuts over to her point of view. Unsettlingly to Starling as well as to the spectator, Hannibal is already looking straight into the camera as it approaches, suggesting not only that he heard Clarice's steps but that he is also somehow aware of the recording apparatus—and indeed he is, as he undoubtedly understands on a diegetic level that he is under perpetual video surveillance.

By preempting the camera's gaze, he disrupts what Mulvey refers to as the scopophilic spectator's "illusion of looking on in a private world" (Mulvey 201). If Hannibal can gaze back at us, the audience, can he cannibalize us as well, at least symbolically? Despite the inmate's amoral character, the implied spectator finds identification with him less unpleasant than the risk

of being eaten by him that a distancing from him would seem to entail, and his violation of the audience's "voyeuristic separation" thus makes him all the more threatening (201). By forcing identification with a convicted serial killer initially introduced to us as a "monster," the film compels the implied spectator to read him more thoroughly instead of merely discarding him as a savagely savvy sadist.

Dr. Lecter's cell also distinguishes him from the other prisoners—a clear barrier keeps him locked up, but the transparent wall does not carry the visual reassurance of traditional iron bars, making his incarceration appear less secure than that of the other prisoners. Indeed, he displays an agency within the prison that suggests it hardly constitutes a constraint for him—he coerces Miggs into suicide just by "whispering to him all afternoon," managing vicarious homicide in a location of supposed order and disempowerment. The motive behind this crime perversely endears him to the viewer; he murders Miggs as revenge for his discourtesy (to put it mildly) to Starling.

However, Hannibal's wrath may have been provoked by more than simple manners and benevolent concern for Starling's well-being; by splattering her with his seminal fluid, Miggs makes an encroachment upon a woman whom Dr. Lecter masculinely considers "his"—his patient, his reading material, and the eventual object of his twisted respect and affection. In fact, even as Starling deceives Hannibal with a fabricated offer from Senator Martin, he gains access to deeper truths about her, penetrating her psyche until the camera ceases to separate the two: his translucent reflection appears in the glass barrier overlapping her—the implied spectator is now sharing Hannibal's view from within the cell, and he has gotten inside her head so that the film links the two visually through his reflected image even when the camera turns away from Lecter.

All his insight and ingenuity notwithstanding, Hannibal is no innovator, and his tendency to imitate shows through from his first appearance to the closing scene of the movie. He decorates his cell with a drawing of the Duomo in Florence, the recreation of a sight he has already seen and a tribute to the classicism of the Renaissance. He possesses an unknown amount of prior knowledge of Jame Gumb only because he happened to treat Benjamin Raspail, who associated with and was ultimately murdered by Gumb. Dr. Lecter also draws a Madonna-esque portrait of Clarice clutching a lamb, tapping into her painful story as a source of inspiration for art. His most stunning feat, escape from the heavy guard of the Memphis prison, is yet another adaptation, this one a bloody perversion of Buffalo Bill's tendency to flay his victims. With the *Goldberg Variations*—funeral music—playing in the background, he kills the two police officers and peels off Sergeant Pembry's face to use as a disguise for himself. Having butchered his way to freedom with a scheme inspired by the now late Jame Gumb, he flees to the Bahamas (in the novel he undergoes cosmetic surgery to mask his identity, an irony whose injustice would have infuriated the rejected candidate for reassignment), donning a wig whose uncharacteristic gaudiness would be surprising if not for its resemblance to Gumb's long blond locks.

Hannibal's imitative tendencies indicate his calculated performance toward an aesthetic standard; the identity he strives for is that of a cultural connoisseur, paying artistic homage to the classics, courteously downplaying Clarice's embarrassment at Miggs's crassness, and, stuck in a cell devoid of books, feeding greedily on the literature of her mind. This "brutal dandyism," as Adrienne Donald writes in "Working for Oneself," entails the "deliberate cultivation of a sense of self," in Dr. Lecter's case a gentlemanly, sophisticated intellectual forced to endure the tacky Gothicism of the Baltimore hospital and the "petty torments" of its crude warden (Donald 69). Dr. Lecter plays the urbane aesthete to Clarice's ambitious redneck, painfully but purposefully

reminding her of her humble roots and indirectly establishing their indispensability—her understanding of the lower half of the rich/poor binary (specifically Gumb and the Bimmel family) becomes central, and it is no coincidence that the trailer-park bleakness of Belvedere, Ohio, bears a strong resemblance to the West Virginia setting of her flashbacks.

Dr. Chilton explicitly calls Hannibal a monster, and the squalid premises of his confinement affirm his diagnosis of insanity. The cerebral criminal obliges these classifications, playing splendidly to such expectations all while maintaining his own chilling air of gentility. His utter competence enchants the implied spectator, making his bloody escape from Memphis all the more jolting and terrifying. He attacks the policemen with a shocking savagery, pulling away from Boyle's face with blood smeared on his own like spaghetti sauce. He proceeds to club the downed Pembry with the sergeant's own weapon, aiming his methodical blows directly toward the camera and evoking further pained cringes from the implied audience.

After incapacitating both policemen, he takes a moment to compose himself, making a bloodstained show of savoring the strains of Bach and leaving the viewer appalled yet somehow sympathetic, as if having witnessed a guest at a highbrow dinner party eat his salad with the wrong fork. That implied spectator's previous identification with Dr. Lecter is violated by the rudeness (a trait he claims to loathe) of the murder of the affable would-be enforcers and the disruption of identity constituted by that deviation from habit. The visual corroboration of his storied ferocity also attests to the depth of Starling's fortitude, as she has already seen and known all along its results in Chilton's photograph of the mutilated nurse.

The last face-to-face exchange between Dr. Lecter and Clarice, just before his departure, fulfills Crawford's intent, as Starling's desire to find Buffalo Bill and save Catherine and herself compels her to play the sacrificial role, and Hannibal obliges with relish. Acquiescing to the part

that Crawford has constructed for him, he laps up the sad story of her youth and the ovine nightmares that still haunt her, relishing Starling's psychic wounds as her compulsion to succeed drives her to submit to Hannibal's sadistic violation.

Bad Guys or “Bad” Guise?

For all his undeniable malice, the film refuses to write Dr. Lecter off as an unredeemable beast. In the end, he is the last male with whom Clarice speaks, calling her on the phone with the assurance that he intends her no harm, and, indirectly, disclosing his plans to eat the despicable (though partially redeemed, as discussed later) Dr. Chilton. His audacious confidence in telephoning her at the Academy and his manifest respect are endearing, but more importantly, in displaying his regard for her he supplants whatever remaining affection she holds for the uninterested Crawford, who ducks out of the reception after offering her no more than a terse felicitation.

As unflatteringly as the film depicts Starling's ruthlessly manipulative boss, it positions him incontrovertibly as an integral, if robotic, component in the pursuit of justice—a problematized justice, but a necessary one nonetheless. In a subtle defense of him that few actual viewers probably note, Gumb's location in Belvedere, Ohio, reveals that Crawford has in fact been asking the right questions from the beginning. In their first conversation, he tells Starling to pay attention to what Hannibal has been sketching, and the drawing she inquires about turns out to be “the Duomo, seen from the Belvedere.” The Belvedere is a 500-year-old fort in Florence, and in architectural terms, a belvedere is a structure sited strategically so as to “command a fine view” (*Britannica*). Whether or not all of Crawford's methods are ethical, he employs them in service of the proverbial American people, a characterization that includes the implied audience and therefore expects that audience to accord him a certain respect. However, even with all the

information Starling gives him—the Belvedere’s “fine view” included—he ultimately still fails to read that information correctly.

Once more repudiating the notion of one-dimensional personalities and offering the implied spectator a new perspective at literally the last minute, the film makes an argument even in Chilton’s defense despite his apparent lack of any redeeming qualities except for one: precisely his redeemability. The implied audience enjoys detesting him from his first sleazy pass at Starling to his officious mandate that she remove herself from Lecter’s room in Memphis, but regardless of his pomp and bombast, the fact remains that he is a human being, and in many senses a better one than either Hannibal or Buffalo Bill—he has never murdered anyone, after all, and the last moments of the movie betray his pitiable fear as he lands in the Bahamas and asks whether the security system is in place. Answered in the affirmative, he fervently thanks the black official where earlier he would have snapped at Barney, conveying a mortified realization that his deeds may catch up to him. Up to this point, Chilton has stood out as the blatant heel, but in keeping with its refusal to pigeonhole identities, the film supports the notion that even the most ostensibly obnoxious identities are complicated.

Audience as Performer

The Silence of the Lambs does not permit even the implied spectator’s identity performance to escape uninterrupted or uncomplicated. Generally positioned to identify with Starling and often following her point-of-view, it deviates at key points to emphasize the volatile performativity and instability of the audience’s identity. The film’s opening shot tracks along the training course with Starling, gazing at her from various angles that encourage the implied spectator to subjectify her: in this movie, she is to be the primary focus of our attention, though we soon come to identify with her as well and even, on occasion, see from her perspective. The

film also distances the implied spectator from Starling during her first flashback, in which the camera pans away from her and bounces up into the cloudy sky, denying us complete knowledge of her character and warning us away from overanalyzing her psyche—that is Dr. Lecter’s prerogative.

One other instance of distancing from Starling not only violates the implied spectator’s expectations of identification but also throws the identity of the film itself into question. Many elements of *Silence* correspond with Carol Clover’s slasher movie criteria: Clarice possesses the “smartness, gravity, [and] competence” of the Final Girl; Buffalo Bill is the killer whose “masculinity is severely qualified,” and his basement serves as the “Terrible Place” that houses evidence of the “human crimes and perversions that have transpired there” (31-47). However, Demme’s film inverts Clover’s analysis of the climactic scene, in which the implied spectator’s “closeness” to the killer typically decreases as proximity to the Final Girl increases and the proffered “point of view is hers” (45).

In Jame Gumb’s lair, on the other hand, we return to the predatory sensation of the spectator’s persistent gaze in the opening shot as the camera stalks her through Buffalo Bill’s infrared goggles. The film has made us care for Clarice Starling, and now it is making us threaten her; we feel the terrifying pain of being arbitrarily forced into an identity we abhor—our cinematographic body does not fit and *we want out*. After one hundred eternal seconds of such agony, our would-be prey liberates us from this tortured performance, and the implied audience returns to the comfortably constitutive act of watching, but we have been made aware of the universal instability of identity, from the movie’s defiance of generic expectations to our intense figurative unseating as spectators.

“Straight”jackets: Heterosexual Imposition and Homophobic Interpretation

The film's problematized genre plays on its awareness of the implied audience's tendency to impose its own beliefs and assumptions upon movies, and Demme's exposure of the fallacy of generic classification parallels his illumination of the audience's heterosexual presumption. Although many scenes thrum with sexual tension, the film is devoid of overtly sexual contact or interaction. The one exception is the byproduct of Miggs's masturbation, but even that signifies an act of violence more than of eroticism or communion. Indeed, sexuality manifests itself primarily in the forms of insinuation, negation, denial, and unfulfillment rather than unified categories. Much of this erotic phantasmagoria stems from Dr. Lecter, who whispers smirking intimations about "tedious sticky fumbings," Crawford's carnality, and the possibility of the rancher sodomizing Clarice. Crawford, too, purports to locate eroticism where it is not, referring to Fredrica Bimmel's death as a "sex crime" in order to establish an exclusive intimacy with the sheriff, despite no hint of sexual violation in any of Buffalo Bill's victims. Heterosexuality in the film originates in between the text and its reception, fostered by the movie's anticipation of the implied audience's heteronormatizing presumption, another example of hegemonic misreading—as Dr. Lecter so perceptively tells Starling, "People will say we're in love."

While *The Silence of the Lambs* has provoked in actual audiences both allegations and manifestations of homophobia, the film exhibits an acute awareness of society's aversion to non-normative sexuality on real, narrative, and implied levels of spectatorship. Crimp quotes gay rights activist Larry Kramer's sarcastic complaint: "There's going to be [an AIDS] benefit screening of a movie called *Silence of the Lambs* [*sic*]. The villain is a gay man who mass murders people. Thanks a lot . . ." (301). Crimp describes his observations of queer aversion in actual audiences as well, asserting that the tension of the Buffalo Bill/Starling hunt is frequently

broken “not by Clarice’s gunshots, but by an often-remarked male spectator’s shout in the dark: ‘Shoot the fucking faggot!’” (310). Sedgwick’s anecdote about AIDS firings suggests that Kramer’s misgivings are not unfounded, yet he wrongly assumes that his own glib plot description is sufficient (indeed, “gay man” is hardly an apt label for Gumb). *Silence* positions Hannibal Lecter as an effete foil to Gumb, but viewers consistently and curiously overlook the former’s stereotypically gay mannerisms. During Hannibal’s conference with Senator Martin, he names “Louis Friend” as the killer, adding the expository detail that Friend and Raspail “were lovers, you see,” anticipating the credibility such an allegation would lend in the face of the narrative audience’s homophobia. Hannibal terminates the conversation with a flamboyant, “Love your suit,” a remark that Crimp points out no “straight man would get off” (310). As the implied audience understands, however, Dr. Lecter is a skilled mimic, and his use of the stereotypical utterance directly after his brutal display of sadism satirizes the link he knows the senator and her entourage (as well as much of the real audience) have already forged: homosexuality is not only a pathology but a malignance. The real spectators may not perceive Hannibal’s tongue-in-cheek commentary on their homophobia, as the same reviewers that find Gumb disgusting are quick to admire, or at least acknowledge, the “brilliant,” “urbane,” and “cultured,” (if “sociopathic”) psychiatrist’s “quicksilver cunning” and “wicked skill” (Denby, Hoberman, Howe, Kempsey).

As the critical slurs against Dr. Lecter’s criminal counterpart corroborate, many real spectators find the thought of identification with Gumb and the commonality insinuated therein repugnant, but the camera imposes it on the implied audience nevertheless. In his cross-dressing scene, the camera shows him donning his femininity and acts as a mirror rather than a lens with extreme close-ups of Gumb painstakingly applying makeup to his eyes even as flayed, frayed

flesh from his scalped wig dangles grotesquely over his eyebrow. This grimly humorous moment encapsulates the fearful unease with which the actual homophobic society regards queer people—as much as one tries to cast queers as laughably “mincing,” effeminate cupcakes, there remains some deadly threat to masculinity (Kempley 2). Indeed, this duality is exactly what makes the idea of a fully realized Jame Gumb a more potentially menacing conception than the merely psychopathic Buffalo Bill; as the serial killer he would still be a white, home-owning, physically-able male exerting psychological and bodily dominance over women, his victims, but Jame Gumb as Jame Gumb strives to be would terrify any privileged male: an ambitiously female person who matches up not only in race, religion (hinted at by a crucifix on the wall of his house), and economic standing, but also in physical strength.

The movie’s climactic scene ends in Gumb’s death at the trembling hands of Starling, her gunshots flooding the basement with light. Her triumph over the murderer brings an immediate sense of rightful closure, but Gumb’s death also constitutes a loss of potential knowledge that his testimony could have provided—and, therein, a critique of psychological diagnostics. Though his identity is revealed, the film leaves his self-conception unresolved, showing his corpse rigid on the floor with blood splattered on, but not completely covering, his mouth like lipstick, a testament to the presence and paradox of this feminizing biological make-up. The diegetic closure of Jame Gumb’s death and Clarice’s triumphant ascent into the FBI notwithstanding, the penultimate scene raises many more questions than it answers, reiterating the perpetual elusiveness of black and white truths, with an uncertainty further reinforced by Hannibal Lecter’s freedom. This profound ambivalence manifests itself through virtually every character. Catherine Martin is physically safe, but surely scarred by her traumatic experience. Pilcher (whose unflattering surname denotes “a person considered worthless, contemptible, or insignificant”)

reappears at Starling's celebration, but does he exemplify the underdog's victory, or is the ambiguous nature of his presence just another trap for the audience's heteronormative presumption—is he still pursuing Clarice? (*OED*). Ardelia, who has aided Starling on the case, remains caught in the double bind of black womanhood, still taking Clarice's phone calls at the end.³ Certainly Clarice herself is left with no small dilemma: Hannibal calls to ask whether the lambs have stopped screaming, as well as to inform her that he will not hunt her down. He requests the same courtesy from her, leaving the FBI agent torn between her legal duty and the killer's politics of politeness. The film presents no resolution but trauma and death for those who, like Gumb, fail to meet hegemonic standards of identity, yet as an FBI agent, Starling has been afforded the opportunity to heal her own psychic wounds through her position of authority. These imbalances and ambivalences underscore the film's implicit insistence—that to reify identity is to limit oneself and others; there are no concretions, only acts, performances, and interpretations and complications. Ultimately, *The Silence of the Lambs* does precisely that at which Sedgwick has excelled: it catches audiences in their own prejudices and warned against the practice of assumption, it reveals blind spots—willful and otherwise—and upsets the conventional good/evil opposition of the horror story through Sedgwick's own reconsideration of the relationship between knowledge and ignorance. Arriving as it did alongside a heightened scrutiny of homosexuality during the AIDS crisis and concurrently with newly emerging theories of gender and sexuality, the film offers and affirms an assiduous queer reading practice that allows for and even demands difference, ambiguity, and the dissolution of normative assumptions

Endnotes

¹ To a parallel point, Sandy Stone first presented *The "Empire" Strikes back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto* in 1988, three years before the release of *Silence*. Her essay refutes 1970s conception of transsexuality, particularly the abrasive view of Janice Raymond, who had declared that "all transsexuals rape women's bodies by reducing the female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves" (from *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male*, qtd. in Stone). The film also predates Leslie Feinberg's 1992 designation of the term "transgender" as, in Susan Stryker's words, an adjective to describe "all individuals who were marginalized or oppressed due to their difference from social norms of gendered embodiment" (Stryker 4). The screenwriters, then, would not have been able to slip this adjective, which certainly applies to Gumb, into the characters' vocabulary.

² In *Truth and Fiction*, Peter Rabinowitz defines a narrator as "generally an imitation of an author. He writes for an imitation audience [the narrative audience] which also possesses particular knowledge" (214). Here, Starling's social position provides her that "particular knowledge," which the film makes key to solving the case.

³ Starling's roommate first receives the telephone call about Dr. Lecter's escape from Memphis, and the film shows her sprinting down the hall to inform its intended recipient. At the graduation ceremony, it is again Ardelia who tells Starling that a phone call awaits her.

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