

Things That Go Bump in the Night: Our Fascination with Horror

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*Abstract: Watching a horror movie or a psychological thriller is an event in itself. Picture a rainy evening, camped out on the couch with a good friend and some popcorn, about to watch Jonathan Demme's masterpiece: *The Silence of the Lambs*. Everything is going smoothly, with a few startling moments keeping you on the edge of your seat. Before you know it, the movie is over, and the friend has gone home. It's not until late at night, when you're alone, that you start to hear creaks in the floorboards and the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. Maybe watching the movie wasn't such a good idea. Why we watch horror movies in the first place is an interesting phenomenon; it's shocking that we would want to subject ourselves to such fear. However, we are drawn in by the morbid fascination that comes with psychologically thrilling movies. There is more than meets the eye when it comes to serial killers, and the ultimate example of that is *The Silence of the Lambs*. The viewer fears and yet at the same time hangs on the chilling words, "Hello, Clarice." The horror film is our own worst nightmare—it is an exploration about punishment and damnation, and in each one of us, there is that fear and fascination. Yet, we keep coming back for more.*

The Silence of the Lambs opens with a young woman Clarice Starling, played by Jodie Foster, running and climbing through an obstacle course in the woods. She passes a tree with three signs attached to it that read: "HURT-AGONY-PAIN-LOVE IT, and, barely visible beneath the imperative statement, PRIDE." (Greven 92) This simple start to a cinematic classic symbolizes people in today's society. We are always running: running towards something, running away from something, running to overcome something, running because we do not know what we want or what else to do. Our society teaches us to run when we feel trapped—to escape by any and all means necessary. Our society teaches us to punish ourselves—and not only do we buy into it,

but we like it. Even if we are not actually running, we can escape reality through our minds, dreams, and fantasies, because according to Freud, “All fantasies initially possess a quality of seeming real,” (Merkur 33). This underlying meaning towards running and escape in the film is subtle and overlooked by many but it affects audiences as much, if not more than any other message in the film.

The question that comes about is: what is each individual running to or from? The motive varies from person to person, but is typically a combination of fear and passion. The average young woman is running away from being looked down upon as a female and toward her promising career. As a result, when watching the film, “It becomes clear that we are not watching some ‘damsel in distress’ but a competent and powerful woman running an obstacle course,” (Phillips 156). The murderer she is trying to catch is running from the cops while running in circles around his own identity. Dr. Lecter runs through people’s minds and internally attacks them until they collapse into their own insecurities. Whether each character is running toward or away from something, fear is the centralized fuel behind every move in the film.

Here is a movie involving not only cannibalism and the skinning of people, but also kidnapping, being trapped in the bottom of a well, decomposing corpses, large insects, being lost in the dark, being tracked by someone you cannot see, not being able to get people to believe you, creatures who jump from the shadows, people who know your deepest secrets, doors that slam shut behind you, beheadings, bizarre sexual perversions, and being a short woman in an elevator full of tall men (Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun Times*)

The movie embodies our deepest, darkest fears and forces us to watch them unfold on screen. We run away from our fears in reality, and yet we are drawn to them in a fictional sense, clinging to the notion that they cannot truly harm us on the screen.

While running away is the typical response to a horrific event, there is an even stronger force that causes humans to turn and run right back: vengeance. *The Silence of the Lambs* is a psychological thriller that also engages a revenge motif. This revenge is pitted against

everyone in different ways. Colin McGinn’s theory on revenge plots is that “the weak are abused, made victims of unjust violence, but they, or their no-name savior, in the end visit righteous retribution on the evildoers.”(McGinn 131) In *Silence*, this concept is turned upside down and inside out, and could be applied to many of the characters in multiple ways; it all depends on perspective. If a viewer considers Lecter to be the protagonist, his righteous retribution is escape, but if Clarice is considered the protagonist, her retribution is catching Buffalo Bill. Lecter’s revenge for being locked up is mentally manipulating anyone who comes close to him or manages to escape him. Buffalo Bill takes his identity confusion out on innocent young women, and Clarice proves to everyone who doubted her that she is capable of being a stellar FBI agent. Frequently, what people are running away from is the very thing they want revenge against. Relating to individual motives, Freud points out that, “Psychoanalytic theory has no criteria for differentiating the moral and the immoral, nor for explaining how the human psyche can do so. Psychoanalysts regard morality as an integral part of human nature.”(Merkur 54). If psychoanalysts have no definition of morality, it is unclear how they can help patients distinguish right from wrong. Perhaps every person has a different innate sense of morals. Lecter considers his crimes completely normal, as a primal instinct of his nature like morals are an instinct of nature to “normal” people. This nightmarish catch-22 haunts the dreams of many, because people fear what they are unfamiliar with, and sometimes, both the fight and flight response kicks in at the same time. Like dreams, movies allow us to live out this paradox, because we are safe in the theater or in our beds, but the reactions and emotions of fear and bravery are very real.

What makes dreams even more daunting is that they can revisit a person relentlessly. In Freudian theory, this means that the dream has an underlying psychological significance. According to Freud, in cinema there is often a “scene in which the protagonist’s recurring nightmare is present to the viewers” (Roth 154), which brings us to Clarice’s continuum of fears that span a lifetime. From flashbacks of her dead

father to her fears of Lecter and failing as an agent, Clarice's fright is palpable. The audience's eyes are opened to Clarice's pain as "the face on screen, in particular, becomes charged with emotional significance, so that every flicker of an eyelash carries affective weight." (McGinn 104) The undeniable cinematic brilliance in the film is that the audience can so readily feel the emotions of the protagonist. Clarice's father becomes our father, and Hannibal becomes our worst nightmare.

Consequently, *The Silence of the Lambs* becomes the manifestation of a dream onscreen. Everyone has, at some point, wished someone he or she despised was out of the picture. Similarly, everyone has someone they consider "the bad guy". Perhaps one admires Lecter so much because he had the guts to kill whom he pleases, and therefore one lives vicariously through him. Although an unnatural entity, the love of horror represents how "horror's pleasures stand in need of explanation," (Hills 2). Audiences cannot necessarily put their fingers on what exactly they like about being scared or watching terrors on screen. One empathizes with Dr. Lecter's inability to consider himself the bad guy. This empathy comes from our inability to consider ourselves the villain. Because of first person perspective, one assumes without a doubt that one is the protagonist, and the other guy is the antagonist. In dreams, unlike reality, one is far more brutal in carrying out revenge tactics, cruelty not being a consideration since *you* are the good guy. When it comes to revenge, "You may do a fair amount of damage in your dreams, in overcoming the bad guys—it's not always pretty." (McGinn 131). Dreams and fear relate and morph into a monstrous entity that we refer to as a nightmare. The frightening thing about bad dreams is that no one knows for sure what the root of them is. One may speculate, but it's never clear whether a nightmare is the result of an outside influence, or rather an unconscious desire to do harm.

As a result, *The Silence of the Lambs* is a horrifying manifestation of both thriller and revenge. The movie confuses our senses of right and wrong, and the lines of morality are blurred with ambiguity. According to Freud's concepts of dreams, they are a

representation of our unconscious: "Dreams are the royal road to the unconscious" (American Psychoanalytic Association). If a person was to have a nightmare about *The Silence of the Lambs*, Freud would wonder what the person is afraid of in relation to the film: do they fear a crime being committed against them or do they fear the capability of their savage urges to commit such evil crimes? As humans, we have urges we must control, whether they are violent, sexual, or flat out inappropriate. Society expects us to keep ourselves under control and even "religious groups and charity organizations had long played this role of "disciplining the population" (Foucault 330). The fact that a film is able to provoke such depth of perception on a psychoanalytical level is incredibly profound. For that reason, when we watch a film like *The Silence of the Lambs*, what we discover is how "the ability of the cinema to imitate the sensory/affective fusion of dreams is a large part of its power over the viewer's mind—its power to engage and penetrate the viewer's consciousness. Dreams reach our deepest emotions by means of sensory representations; and so do movies" (McGinn 105). The lasting effects of a film on the minds of its viewers are what make the film legendary and able to withstand the tests of time. This movie is still prevalent in popular culture today, not only because of its cinematic genius, but because of the audience reaction it provokes time and time again.

Therefore in context of Freudian theory, the film breaks down several boundaries and lets loose a slew of taboos. The mind may react to *Silence* or its own withheld desires in a way that triggers an unknown response. Typically, people behave on the Ego level on Freud's tripartite of the psyche, a middle ground between good and bad. The ego is "that part of the "id," which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world" (Merkur 56). Basically, the ego is a balance between two polar extremities of the self. However, there may be a demon inside us all, just waiting to cut loose as Hannibal did. Our "id" could run wild at any minute. "[*Silence*] exposes a world where explosive violence touches everyone, where security is illusory, and where art is

expressed through brutality” (Fahy 1). No one can escape the tension of opposites that plagues the minds of humanity. In perfect paradox with Lecter’s addicting aura of danger is his unfaltering control. He has found equilibrium between sanity and insanity, and although audiences can only relate to a small extent, they cannot get enough—our darkest desires are the things we fear the most. In the words of Hannibal, “We begin by coveting what we see every day. Don’t you feel eyes moving over your body, Clarice? And don’t your eyes seek out the things you want?” (IMDB). Aside from Anthony Hopkins’ character being a dream hero to us moviegoers, his influence goes much further. His legacy has carried over two decades, playing a role in countless movies and TV shows that reference *Silence*. We as a culture love villains, and we are drawn to the bad guy who is so beautifully haunting to people.

The definition of a sociopath according to dictionary.reference.com is a person with antisocial behavior that is often criminal and who lacks a sense of moral responsibility or social conscience. In her book on the portrayal of mental illness in Hollywood, *People Like Ourselves*, Jacqueline Noll Zimmerman argues that the criminals in *Silence* are one dimensional and “presented entirely in terms of their psychopathic, violent behavior; nor is there any meaningful effort to explain the nature, cause, or development of their illnesses” (Zimmerman 133) While it is true that there is little to no background of neither Buffalo Bill nor Hannibal’s illnesses, that is part of the enrapturing mystery of the film. It is addicting to watch the movie and empathize with one (or both) of the cold-blooded killers. The audience knows nothing of their sick pasts, and yet they feel a strong sense of attachment and fear toward the characters. Under Freud’s outlook, “American audiences do want to see stories about mental distress, about socially inappropriate behavior and strange ways of relating to others” (Roth 154). This complex is not only to horrify us, but also to make us feel better about our own insecurities and shortcomings. The audience is purposely kept in the dark about why Lecter and Gumb are the way that they are, so they find themselves in that guilt-ridden attachment with no reason as to why. The famous Lecter

quote, “A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice chianti” (IMDB), is infinitely more spine-tingling when we are not supplemented with excuses or rationale. Whereas a criminal background explanation would give everyone a reason to “understand”—we aren’t supposed to understand. In a study of “The Uncanny” by Freud, he mentions Jenstch’s theory:

In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton; and to do it in such a way that his attention is not directly focused upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be urged to go into the matter and clear it up immediately, since that, as we have said, would quickly dissipate the peculiar emotional effect of the thing. (Freud 5)

Demme was spot-on with his lack of a psychological profile to justify Lecter and Gumb’s actions. The impact of horror is far greater when the audience is left to decide whether the criminal is simply an ordinary man gone astray or a true monster.

While the boundaries of psychoses aren’t always crystal clear, Dr. Lecter treats everyone in the film with a kind of condescending disdain that only a sophisticated psycho could muster. He sees people as less-than-intelligent, useless pieces of meat. He is selfish and clearly has mental issues due to the fact that he is capable of eating a living human. There is no conceivable way that a person who is one hundred percent sane could tear off a man’s cheek with his teeth. Diagnosing Hannibal could not have been a linear task, although “sociopath” seems to be a reasonable conclusion. He has all of the traits of any old ordinary sociopath. In a TV Guide critical review, it is accurately explained that, “Hopkins plays the cannibalistic doctor with a quiet, controlled erudition, lacing his performance with moments of black humor. Lecter is a sort of satanic Sherlock Holmes whose spasms of violence are all the more terrifying because they erupt from beneath such an intelligent and refined mask,” (TV Guide). However, we must consider the source that this analysis came from: Dr. Chilton. Lecter considers Chilton to be

his nemesis, but does Lecter only hate Chilton because of his diagnosis? Causation is important here, because we cannot know for sure whether or not Dr. Chilton's medical judgment is reputable. This fire against Dr. Chilton is further fueled when the audience witnesses how he treats Clarice. He makes advances toward her, and when she turns him down, he writes her off. He attempts to belittle her authority while intimidating her at the same time: "A pretty young woman to turn him on. I don't believe Lecter's even seen a woman in eight years, and oh, are you ever his taste. So to speak" (IMDB). The audience cannot trust Hannibal's doctor before we even meet the patient, and thus we are already on the side of a serial killer before he is ever introduced in the film.

Furthermore, once Hannibal meets Clarice, all seems to go according to the characteristic Lecter Sociopathic Agenda. It is not until Miggs, another patient, throws semen and inappropriate slurs towards Clarice that we see Hannibal's walls begin to break down. Dr. Lecter calls Clarice back and gives her a hint to facilitate solving the crimes of Buffalo Bill. Throughout the movie, we see Clarice breaching Lecter's soft side. Although he comes off as crazy, he treats her with more respect than just about any other man in the film. Hannibal Lecter's complex cannibalistic, sociopathic behavior is not what everyone thought—it may be conditional. This is because I speculate that Dr. Lecter began to fall in love with Clarice Starling, giving audiences yet another reason to fall in love with the serial killer himself. Lecter dryly and yet charmingly taunts Clarice, "People will say we're in love" (IMDB). While just a speculation, simple gestures and mannerisms suggest that Lecter's feelings toward Starling possess a unique affection that he fails to show anyone else.

Along with this twisted portrayal of a psychotic killer in love, the release of *Silence* stirred up a frenzy of horror, feminism, and social reaction. It was well-received by audiences and is referred to as a fresh psychological thriller. The film changed up the gender politics of horror and all movies in general: the female lead, Clarice, fights for her role. Her peers and superiors undermine her solely because she is a woman.

She is just as, if not more capable at her job than any male FBI agent. Despite more screen time, she is up against the ultimate male macho serial killer for the lead role. Many critics have claimed that, "Clarice is a female version of the archetypal male hero on a quest" (Greven 111), but the true question is whether she was simply trying to overcome miniscule female expectations: was Clarice trying to be a man or a strong woman? Toward the end of the film, the feminist issue is tossed in the air in a one-step-forward, one-step-back movement. While Clarice proves herself by catching Buffalo Bill, she also seems to let go of the fact that Hannibal escaped and is now at large. Whether or not this makes Clarice a failure is up for interpretation, but Freud argues, "the psychoanalytic portrait of the female as a failed male has been accepted as the deepest analysis available of the effects of patriarchy [...] on men's attitudes toward women and women's attitudes toward themselves" (Young-Breuhl 41). The only male in the film who seems to rattle her strong exterior at all is Lecter. "Lecter's interrogation is clearly devastating for Starling," (Phillips 155). This opens up an entirely new question of Lecter's feelings for Clarice. Is he in love with her or is he simply manipulating her as he manipulated everyone? Does he truly want to know when her lambs stop screaming?

When people categorize things as guilty pleasures, they're typically referring to something they enjoy that they are ashamed or embarrassed of, even if mildly so. This guilty pleasure could be anything from a food that others find unappealing, a song that hasn't been popular since its heyday long ago, or in this case, taking a liking to a sociopathic murderer. While Lecter may be in love with Clarice, it is important to explore why we are in love with Lecter himself and morbid drama in general. It is not often that people are gushing and murmuring over good news on the front page. We thrive on negativity and rest on the cushion that it isn't happening to us. We feel safe watching the horror from the comfort of our own homes, however part of Lecter's strategy is to lure his prey in with his charm. "Civility and propriety, as evident in his educated tastes, manicured dress, and refined speech, are merely tools for

lulling his victims, as well as the audience, into a false sense of security. They are a smokescreen for his explosive violence and rage” (Fahy 3). While this is a true claim, it is only true to an extent. Dr. Lecter’s dual persona of class and wrath are equal parts of his whole being. One does not disguise the other, but rather they balance each other out. This technique does allow victims to be lured in, but he does not hide his fury, he only balances it long enough to intrigue his prey and make audiences fall in love with him. Such honesty is appealing to crowds while at the same time terrifying them. This ongoing paradoxical theme throughout the film is one of the main reasons we are in love with the horror genre, namely psychological thrillers such as *Silence*. It is an engaging mental challenge to follow the emotional rollercoaster that the film provokes.

On the other hand, while we are resting easy that the horror remains on screen, a biting reality sneaks up on us: this horror *could* happen to us. While the crimes in horror films are so outlandish and outrageous, they always seem to happen to ordinary people in ordinary towns. An example of this terror is discussed in Foucault’s Panoptical, in which he speaks of an average town under strict surveillance during a plague outbreak, “Each street is placed under the authority of a syndic, who keeps it under surveillance; if he leaves the street, he will be condemned to death” (Foucault 314). The citizens became prisoners in their own homes due to something out of their control: a great majority of the American population consists of ordinary people living in ordinary towns, and what is so unsettling about the environment in which the film takes place is that it is quite dull. We watch these movies to spice up our commonplace lives, and where the true horror lies is that what is happening on the screen could just as easily happen to an acquaintance, or worse, it could happen to you. A review by Peter Travers captures the sensation the moviegoer experiences during the film, but with a realistic bite. “The superbly crafted suspense thriller...slams you like a sudden blast of bone-chilling, pulse-pounding terror” (Peter Travers, Rolling Stone). The setting is a small, dreary town called Quantico, Virginia. What churns the stomach is that if such grisly crimes could take place in

this mundane suburb, could it happen in our own hometown?

Environment is a crucial note in the film, because although the town seems quaint and familiar on the surface, the surface tension breathes a desire to escape. The setting seems to be a harmless enough place, and yet it simply cannot constrain such explosive psychopathic personalities as Bill and Hannibal. Clarice herself can’t get enough air. What would be charming about any other hometown instead suffocates her, and this alternate motif of escape balances out revenge. Audiences clearly see the message of escape through Buffalo Bill’s hostage, Virginia Senator Martin’s daughter, Catherine. Catherine is the visual epitome of this hometown horror. Her piercing cries to escape her literal hellhole go unseen and unheard to the rest of the humdrum neighborhood.

Serial killers in real life use Lecter as an Adonis; Hannibal is the once in a lifetime killer that psychopaths are desperate to duplicate. He is feared and loved in a way that is unfathomable yet undeniably true. He is held to the highest standard of sophisticated murder, all the while being delightfully savage. He is James Bond with a twist of Tarzan: suave in the most primal sense. For example, Clifford Olson, the “British Beast of Columbia”, was a murderer who saw Dr. Lecter as his role model. The taking of lives was something he took great pride in, but he believed that since he was real and Hannibal was fictional, he was “something far bigger and better. He was the ultimate serial killer” (Levin 39). Lecter’s Plexiglas cell was made to keep an eye on him, to watch his every move, to protect the outside world from this cannibal. As the film points out, “you don’t want Hannibal Lecter inside your head” (IMDB). Foucault’s stance on prisoner surveillance applies to Lecter only to a degree: While the world is surveilling Hannibal, what they don’t realize is that Hannibal is surveilling them too. “He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault 319). He is perched atop the Belvedere, keeping all eyes on the Palazzo Vecchio, the Duomo, and the audience. He is everywhere, and even locked up in chains and shackles, his influence cannot be ignored. It is possible that either Olson was born with the mental and physical capacity to commit

murder, or *The Silence of the Lambs* inspired him to take on a gruesome career of killing. Just how far the influence of Dr. Hannibal Lecter reached is impossible to know, but with this influence comes power to his character. Lecter is a leader in his own right. We hate that we love him and at the same time, we fear him. This confusion gives him even more power over us.

There is no one purpose behind audiences continuing to seek out thrills and chills from horror films—it is a different reason based on each individual. As far as *The Silence of the Lambs* goes, it is not a marvel concept that everyone falls under Hannibal Lecter’s spell and identifies with one or more characters in the film, evil or not. People crave psychological thrillers for entertainment, security, to be shaken up, or to live vicariously through. When the credits roll, however, the fantasy has ended, and the effects of the film stay with the audience. The nightmares prevail, and in the end, Hannibal got away. The boogeyman is still out there, and our worst fears are manifested within our deepest desires. This confusing network of genres, pleasures, and terrors produce an audience reaction not available anywhere else. As much as our society in general craves certainty, it is the spice of uncertainty of our own fears that keeps life interesting. Horror films keep people on their toes, alert for what is coming up around the corner.

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