Becoming Unknown: *Hannibal* and Queer Epistemology

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1 In the fifth episode of *Hannibal*'s first season, "Coquilles," Hannibal Lecter (Mads Mikkelsen), an elegant psychiatrist by day, cannibalistic serial killer by night, leans over and smells the neck of his patient, FBI profiler Will Graham (Hugh Dancy). This moment of intimacy follows a lengthy series of shots emphasizing a diagonal tie between the two men, Will Graham placed in the foreground, moving nervously back and forth while discussing the perversions of his latest criminal assignment. Hannibal stays grounded, in the background of the shots, moving in and out of focus. His presence is felt as an enormous weight, a vague binding grasp around Will Graham. The men only appear side by side in one shot when Hannibal finally moves, walking forward to slowly, sensuously inhale Will's scent. "Did you just smell me?" Will asks, perturbed. "Difficult to avoid" Hannibal quickly answers, redirecting conversation to the gauche stench of Will's aftershave. A queer moment has been activated, fully demonstrated, and then 'resolved' within the text. (Figures 1 - 4)

2 No matter how libidinously the moment is played by Hannibal's portrayer Mads Mikkelsen, the added contextual baggage of Hannibal's cannibalism complicates the image of Hannibal smelling Will. The blurry mystification of boundaries between carnal and carnivorous desire is a primary tool in *Hannibal*'s arsenal, used throughout the show's three-season run on NBC (2013 – 2015). And it all happens inside the closet. The queerness of Hannibal and Will's cannibalistic courtship was instantly archived by fans of the series, resulting in a prodigious well of fan-fiction and fan-art literalizing the queer flirtation of the show. The series avoided a direct verbal allocation of romance within Hannibal and Will's tortured relationship, at least until its penultimate episode, when Will Graham trepidatiously

asks psychiatrist Bedelia Du Maurier (Gillian Anderson) "Is Hannibal…in love with me?," to the collective "OBVIOUSLY!" of *Hannibal*'s viewing public.

3 This closet romance marks *Hannibal* as an especially Gothic outlier to how American television engages queer topics in the 2010s. In a moment when liberal audiences put television under increasing pressure to nourish openly LGBTQ characters, *Hannibal* relies on antique methods of queer coding to hide its central romance in plain sight. This narrative choice runs contrary to the spirit of post-marriage equality LGBTQ inclusion in American television, favoring 'positive representation' of queer individuals that too often results in incorporative normative models of family, gender, and sexuality. In this article I will prove shows like *Modern Family* advocate an open transparency of queer characters that is never as liberating as it may appear. *Hannibal* demonstrates queer anxiety over forms of representation, an awareness that sexual freedom can never come from simply 'opening' the closet, a closet queerness never had any role in creating.

4 In this article I analyze the show's re-appropriation of queer textual motifs throughout film history, in service of several guiding questions: what does it mean to be 'known' as queer on television, what are the political stakes of such knowledge, and why is a show about a decadent cannibal so comfortably queer? To contrast with the show's 'silence' on clearly marked identities, I focus on the visual expressiveness of *Hannibal,* and how its insistence on elaborate displays of murder performs the series' foundational anxiety of knowing. Ultimately this form of ambivalent un-knowing becomes a kind of resistance to the normative incorporation of LGBTQ cultures. *Hannibal* centers on the glamor and mystery of queer villainy to proudly defy a rhetoric of knowable normativity.

5 *Hannibal* is the television incarnation, under the creative direction of Bryan Fuller, of a substantial corpus of characters and plotlines, introduced in novels by Thomas Harris, and

later transferred to cinematic adaptation, most notably Jonathan Demme's 1991 film of the second novel, *The Silence of the Lambs,* which found immense success critically and at the box office.[1] The television series' first and second seasons act as a prequel to the first novel *Red Dragon,* depicting events within the chronology of Harris' established canon with a few minor alterations. In the television series, Will Graham is an FBI profiler, working on cases of eccentric serial killers, all the while becoming increasingly suspicious of the elegant Dr. Lecter. Hannibal's murders are presented alongside Will's investigations, as are both men's relationships with Will's FBI superior Jack Crawford (Laurence Fishburne), and psychiatrists Alana Bloom (Caroline Dhavernas) and Bedelia Du Maurier. Bedelia, Hannibal's therapist with dark desires of her own, was an invention for the series, while Alana took on various roles within the show's universe, often relegated to the position of a love interest, first for Will, and later for Hannibal. The third season of the show was no longer a prequel, completely covering the ground of *Red Dragon* as well as re-contextualizing the plot of the third novel, titled, like the show, *Hannibal.*

6 Although Bryan Fuller and the rest of *Hannibal*'s writers and directors elevate and valorize the queer potential of its characters, the franchise has always been marked by locating its horror within the transgression of normative gender and sexuality. *The Silence of the Lambs* flaunts a central villain, the male serial killer Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine), that makes dresses out of women's skin to wear in an act of gender transformation, without Harris' novel nor Demme's film ever specifying an exact gender identity category for the character.

[1] The novels are *Red Dragon* (1981), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), *Hannibal* (1999), and a prequel depicting the early years of Hannibal Lecter, *Hannibal Rising* (2006). All were later adapted into films: *Manhunter* (adaptation of *Red Dragon,* Michael Mann, 1986), *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001), a second attempt at *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner, 2002), and *Hannibal Rising* (Peter Webber, 2007).

The Silence of the Lambs, particularly its film adaptation, has been a site of useful gendered ingenuity for some critics. Jack Halberstam[2] writes of the film's display of gender horror:

> Buffalo Bill, of course, has become Frederika just as Frederika has become Buffalo Bill – he wears her, she is upon him, he is inside her. Victim and murderer are folded into each other as Starling enters gun in hand to attempt to fix boundaries once and for all...Not simply murderer-monster, Buffalo Bill challenges the heterosexist and misogynist constructions of humanness, the naturalness, the interiority of gender even as he is victimized by them. He rips gender apart and remakes it as a mask, a suit, a costume. Gender identity for Buffalo Bill is not the transcendent signifier of humanity, it is its most efficient technology. (582)

This potential innovation of the film was lost on a 90s culture wars audience that was more immediately concerned with the film's connection to negative stereotypes about LGBTQ populations than any philosophies of gender. Both *Silence of the Lambs* and the thriller *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), with its threateningly queer femme fatale Catherine Tramell (Sharon Stone) were subject to wide protests from gay rights groups at their initial release (Weir). But Halberstam's awareness of the gender-based horror of the Hannibal Lecter franchise, and its queer vitality as a text for thinking through gender and sexuality, reads like a foundational totem for the televisual *Hannibal.* The language of gendered and sexualized extremity emerging from the Hannibal Lecter transmedial corpus found its use for Halberstam interpreting the 90s just as it evolved to serve different ends in the 2010s.

Out on Television in the 2010s

7 Queer cinema in the 2010s is faced with the unique dilemma of facing out against a changing political landscape wherein threats to queer sovereignty take on new forms. Whereas previous generations of activists praised the mere increase in positive LGBT

[2] The article, "Skinflick: Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs,*" was published prior to the author's gender transition, under the name Judith Halberstam.

representation on screen, retreating from the feared negatives of *The Silence of the Lambs* or *Basic Instinct,* the contemporary moment necessitates a more nuanced and analytical approach to the stakes and implications of such representation. Queer cinema in the 2010s finds itself concerned with, to quote Jodi Brooks' article on *The Kids Are All Right,* sifting through "the losses and gains of inhabiting privileged social institutions and cultural forms" (117). To be 'out on television' is to affirm a television that takes as its directive showcasing an inclusive and multi-cultural portrayal of gender and sexuality, celebrating rather than parading simply to mock or vilify. The egalitarian spirit often verbalizes this inclusivity as 'the same, but new.' Open. These are the supposed gains: access and space granted to LGBT individuals that exceeds what has come before.

8 But there is an undertow of loss. The dimensions of LGBT representation in contemporary television frequently take the form of absorption, queerness being shaped and structured specifically to fall in line with heteronormative standards. I find no better place to look at this phenomenon than in *Modern Family,* an immensely successful program stressing its modernization of antique institutions in its very title. *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009 - present) traces across three sub-branches of one big family that includes the lives of two gay men, Cameron (Eric Stonestreet) and Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), and their adopted children. The gay plotline of the season three premiere "Dude Ranch" introduces the couples' plans to adopt a second child, a boy. The extended Pritchett family takes a family vacation to a dude ranch in Wyoming. Surrounded by icons of a traditional masculinity, Mitchell's own gay shame and self-loathing brings him to a kind of panic, concerned he will not be masculine enough to raise a son. He says direct-to-camera, "I realized if I was going to raise a boy, I needed to butch up my life! I wanted to be able to teach my son all the things my dad taught Claire [Mitchell's sister]!" The moment is played as one of ironic comedy, but not satire.

Mitchell is complicit in this bizarre erasure of his own queer identity: no matter how Mitchell diverges from traditional gender stereotypes, the familial institution he is attempting to grow must be one of heteronormative values. Mitchell and Cameron may be a gay male couple, but their theoretical child can only be produced to enter a field of predetermined patriarchal gender narratives, their own queerness a blip on a generational radar that quickly reorganizes to maintain a normative status quo. Queer representation in shows such as *Modern Family* seeks to incorporate and devour queerness: surrounding it in normativity structures and, ultimately, destroying it. The show is every bit the polemical extreme of "reproductive futurism" defined by Lee Edelman in his landmark work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), in which he argues that the rhetorical figure of the child in culture becomes a means of solidifying heteronormative stability, as well as Lisa Duggan's model of homonormativity.

9 It is telling that the only children to appear in *Hannibal* are murderers. In season one's fourth episode "Oeuf"[3], child would-be assassins gather around a powerful mother figure, kill their birth parents, and claim loyalty to a coerced redefinition of family. In the horizon of LGBT possibility stressed by GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), there has been a clear and expressed effort to support programs like *Modern Family* and its more unchallenging 'inclusive' representation. To do so is to uphold a closet of reproductive futurism that does nothing to liberate queerness on television. Lacking a free closet to jump out of, *Hannibal* slinks back into the grave, a grave of queer representation's history with criminals and villainy.

[3] This episode was never aired on American television. NBC and Bryan Fuller jointly made the decision, out of cultural sensitivity related to the Boston Marathon bombing, which occurred days before the episode was slated to air, and the lingering trauma over the school shooting at Sandy Hook, particularly relevant for "Oeuf" given the association between children and violence (Marechal).

The Glamour of Queer Villainy

10 Villains, outlaws to the bitter end, are always sexier. As a rhetorical position, the romance and thrill of fenceless transgression, swallowing up all manner of dangerous activity in conflation with queer sexuality, is undeniable. Michele Aaron, writing on the dynamics of "Cinema's Queer Couples Who Kill" particularly in lesbian cinema, writes:

> These filmic lesbians with their deadly potential yet passionate desires – their frenzied, almost joyful acts of murder – embody the simplest perilous pleasure that the films have on offer. Yet it is not only the characters who own such pleasures, for identification with the women of spectatorial enjoyment of the diegesis immediately implicates the spectator within these dangerous desires. The cultural desire for these representations, evidenced in their coming so closely together and in their popularity as well as their cultural context, speaks of more pervasive, more generally risky or risqué delights being indulged by these films. (71-72)

And this form of brazen, anti-normative villainy is the legacy *Hannibal* lives within, repurposing its icons for the 21st century. In *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (1997), Harry M. Benshoff argues that the portrayal of villainy in American horror cinema is thoroughly aligned with queer characters and queer subject matter. His argument is totalizing and historically expansive, defining a paradigm of rules that outline queer horror representation: the "monster queer" constitutes either a threat to the individual, a threat to others, or a threat to community/culture (1). The monster queer deviates away from traditional gender norms, and ravenously displays a homoerotic attachment to the (usually male) protagonist (2-3). Queer sexuality is positioned as something threatening, capable of engulfing heterosexual people who do not stay vigilant against its creeping embrace. In films like *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), Benshoff analyzes the depiction of queer villains as coercive, manipulative masters threatening to fool good, honest, typically white civilians into their lifestyles (66-70). The studio horror films of James Whale from the 1930s, such as *The Old Dark House* (1932), are some of his primary case studies.

11 Benshoff's analysis falls victim to a Culture War mentality structuring his arguments around heteronormative culture fearing and destroying queer deviance. Dreaming for the potential future of LGBTQ inclusion defangs the queer villain, and making them the misunderstood monster that *would* partake in all the normative world has to offer, if only that world would allow it. Even when discussing monster queers in a context where the villainy has deliberate political stakes, such as New Queer Cinema's *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992*)* or *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), Benshoff remains more concerned with the reactions of a theoretical mainstream heterosexual viewer. He writes, "even when the films themselves problematize these figures by linking them to social oppression […] they nonetheless still reaffirm for uncritical audiences the semiotic overlap of the homosexual and the violent killer" (232). It is inarguable that queerness has been conflated with villainy in normative cinema to bolster and solidify heteropatriarchal institutions, but Benshoff is, to a fault, unconcerned with queer power and direction over the icons previously used to disempower and stigmatize.

12 More recent critical texts engage differently with the postmodern deployment of the queer villain. In his article on *True Blood,* Darren Elliot-Smith acknowledges the post-modern saturation of queer horror archetypes, how a show like *True Blood* complicates the topic by placing openly queer characters next to a metaphorical system equating the vampire to queerness. Elliot-Smith takes the critical discourse of queer horror out of simple closeting schematic, one rooted in queer people demonized by heteronormative visual narrative culture. Elliot-Smith, additionally, has a more complicated understanding of queer spectatorship strategies than Benshoff. Elliot-Smith writes, "configuring the queer vampire in heteronormative narratives can be considered a temporary reveling in the frisson of alternative sexuality, only for it to be disavowed and destroyed in their destruction" (145). It

is not purely about heteronormative destruction of queer lifestyles: the spectacle of horror has its own qualities of power and glamour attributed to the queer villain. Benshoff describes the demons in the film *Fear No Evil* (Frank LaLoggia, 1981) as "fabulous," yet this admission of pleasure does not affect his larger analysis of the film (238). The tendency to disavow the grandeur of the queerly horrific – often draped in fantastic clothes, powerfully posed, holding the camera in full loving command – is rooted in shame and culpability to a politics of representation utterly refused by the contemporary queer filmmaker.

13 A larger historical canvas of the queerly horrific informs *Hannibal*'s cultural archive. The show relies on existing tropes of queer men associated with the high arts and aestheticism, grounded historically in the late Victorian era, in aestheticism, decadence, and Oscar Wilde. Thomas Waugh argues Victorian innovations in painting and sculpture codified a queer male sensibility of representing the queerly sexualized body in the discreet underside of high-class art, only barely concealed by little more than politeness and institutional heteronormativity (26). Maria Ionita, one of the first scholars to analyze *Hannibal,* discusses Hannibal Lecter as the ultimate aesthete:

> It's a reflection of Lecter's refined tastes, but also a subliminal echo of his obsession with transformation through artifice. Lecter's highly dissimulative nature is predicated on the sublimation of violence into art. From murder to sophisticated dish or artful death *tableau*, his concern is primarily with the creation of emotion through extravagant spectacle. He is conceived as a deadly variation on the 19th century *dandy*, an artist whose sole creation is his very existence. (27)

The queer danger posed by Hannibal has historical roots and calling cards, tracing the viewer back to patterns of Victorian aestheticism. Oscar Wilde's use of the Gothic in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1980) brought a distinctly queer gaze to power dynamics between men, and in its erotic over-stylized queer masculinities feels like an indisputable influence on *Hannibal.* George E. Haggerty affirms the queerness of Gothic literary work such as *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray in his 2006 book *Queer Gothic,* citing the genre as "a historical model of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to the dominant ideology" (2). Gothic horror, with its cauldron of aestheticism and sexualized power dynamics, produces the elegant menace of the queer villain.

14 The iconography of queer villainy, often taking form in dangerous, coercive seduction, defines *Hannibal*'s textuality in essential ways. *Hannibal* retreats back to this stylistic register, in loving, elegiac pattern, crowning Mads Mikkelsen's well-dressed cannibal as a queer villain of old, disjunctive against an 'out' television landscape warmly receptive to openly queer characters. Antique queer villainy returns to reactivate a position of dangerous queerness increasingly chased out of homonormative television.

Policing Queer Artistry

15 Within its first few episodes, *Hannibal* looked to be every bit the procedural crime series with which network television was well familiar. Standing out from other procedurals, the show boasted a prodigious archive of material related to its central villain, and an eccentric display of visual expressiveness that, over the duration of the show, grows more and more overpowering to the series' diegesis. The costuming is always impeccable, with well-tailored suits and dresses in deep bold colors. This assembly of high-class pretense interacts disjunctively with the grim realities of the show's subject matter; a strategy of disgusting brutality dressed in ornate exteriors of high-class opulence. Tension between this visual spectacle and procedural justice is a fulcral dynamic in *Hannibal,* destabilizing the viewer's direct response to both. *Hannibal* provides an example of how the crime procedural genre might be queered: with a prideful procession of style over substance, and a tactful obstruction of traditionally normative concepts of 'justice.'

16 If any television genre speaks to coherency and a clean, easy acquisition of knowledge it is the crime procedural. Shows like *C.S.I., Law & Order,* and *NCIS*[4] thrive on the establishment of clear narrative patterns that emphasize crime and its attendant diegetic roles: victim vs. aggressor, police vs. criminal. These shows also triumph clear resolutions that satisfy the detection work preceding them. Mapping out the textual effects of the traditional crime procedural structure, Michael Arntfield argues that crime in these programs provides "the material evidence not only of a crime but of the city's inherent dangers," setting off a chain reaction in the episode's narrative signaling "the shift from the individual to the state, from the human to the machine, as the police are summoned and we see the assembly line activated and production set into motion" (88). Crime procedurals work to highlight a taxonomic process; the 'machine' is always the star of the show, functioning to ensure proper police response to a recognizable crime, usually one 'ripped from the headlines.' Artnfield writes that the typical detective-protagonist "is doggedly followed by interpersonal complexities that simultaneously subvert the reliability of the human and exalt the supremacy of the machine" (89). In this context, *Hannibal* eventually reveals itself to be in very convincing crime procedural drag. Will Graham cannot be the procedural's dream of a rational detective-protagonist. Where other characters are buoyed by the strength of their faith (and the show's faith) in processes of police detection, Will is colored submissively, willfully enchanted by the decadent source of historic queer villainy he has supposedly been tasked with blotting out of the world for good.

17 While the show initially sports a structure one could describe as 'serial killer of the week,' pairing Hannibal's storyline with a one-off showcase of an eccentric killer Will

[4] *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (CBS, 2000 - 2015); *Law & Order* (NBC, 1990 - 2010); *NCIS* (CBS, 2003 - present). Both *CSI* and *Law & Order* have produced many spin-offs.

Graham can more easily bring to justice, this approach gradually disappears from the show during *Hannibal*'s second season. In the early episodes of season two, 'serial killer of the week' sideshows stop having any autonomous function within *Hannibal*, existing entirely to underscore long-term character plotlines. In season two's fourth episode, "Takiawase," an acupuncturist lobotomizes patients she believes to be suffering, a serial killer methodology tied intimately to another storyline in the episode, Jack's cancer-stricken wife Bella attempting to kill herself with an overdose of morphine. In season two's eighth episode "Su-zakana," the final time the 'serial killer of the week' device is utilized, the side killer is a social worker who pins his murders on a vulnerable client, evocative of the twisted psychiatrist/patient relationship of Hannibal and Will.

18 The 'serial killer of the week' elected to fill the first two episodes of *Hannibal*'s second season, ambitious artist James Gray (Patrick Garrow), creates a spectacle utterly essential to *Hannibal*'s concepts of epistemology and art, an abomination that, following FBI agent Beverly Katz's (Hettienne Park) keen descriptor, I will call the human color palette. The gruesome evidence of Gray's murderous handiwork consists of meticulously arranged victims in a perfectly coordinated spiral, the bodies painfully sewn to each other with needle and thread. The spiral is based on gradations of skin color: the darkest bodies are in the center, spiraling outward to bodies of lighter skin tones (Figure 5). For all its grotesquerie, the human color palette is the work of an artist, and Hannibal, predictably, has a very intimate reaction to the serial killer's design. Season two begins with Hannibal serving as a replacement for Will on the FBI's team, albeit not a very responsible one. In response to Beverly Katz correctly guessing the killer's color palette intentions, Hannibal remarks, "The color of our skin is so often politicized. It would almost be refreshing to see someone revel in aesthetics for aesthetics' sake...if it weren't so horrific." Hannibal's comment on "aesthetics

for aesthetics' sake" is a direct reference to Oscar Wilde, summoning late Victorian artistic bravado.

19 The forensic researchers of *Hannibal* (accompanied by the eponymous cannibal) gather around a medical table where an escaped body, with visible tears from the mural, is under examination. The visual vocabulary is very structured and efficient, favoring bird's eye view shots over the entire body, even shots at the foot of the examining table getting every character in frame, and extreme close-ups to specific body parts as they come up in the character's forensic discussion. The taxonomic structure of the cinematic language contrasts profoundly with the absurdity of the crime, forensic research against the art-minded ambition of *Hannibal*'s serial killers. As Wilde himself writes in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

> The artist is the creator of beautiful things./To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim./[...]We can forgive a man for making a useful thing as long as he does not admire it. The only excuse for making a useless thing is that one admires it intensely./All art is quite useless (3-4).

Wilde's vision of a decadent, and ultimately queer, artistry, unfettered art for art's sake, boldly runs against any doctrine of 'usefulness' that dominates the traditional crime procedural. In this way, *Hannibal*'s emphasis on visual expression is both a reference to a moment of great historical queer vitality, and a reaction to the sterility of the traditional police procedural. This is a rare scene to find Hannibal's presence treated as an awkward intrusion, as he finds himself blocking the path of doctors and researchers, a romantic aesthete clumsy and incongruous in such a dispassionate setting[5].

[5] A similar example would be in the seventh episode of season one, "Sorbet," which cuts from a cold briefing a the FBI Academy to a stylized operatic performance. *Hannibal* is forever aware of the juxtaposition of taxonomic analysis against artistic excess.

20 Hannibal sneaks off to do his own investigating, finding the human color palette in a silo surrounded by a field of wheat. He looks in from the hole at the top, getting a perfect view of the spiral. Here the image is explicitly compared to the human eye, the image of the spiral reflected in Hannibal's eye as it widens to take in the sight, while a grand classical chorus sings on the soundtrack. Darker skin tones fill in a pupil in the center of the frame, with lighter skin tones spiraling outwards along the edge. Hannibal's earlier comment feels like a brazen moment of self-awareness for *Hannibal,* which traffics in a form of "aesthetics for aesthetics' sake." His words are a polarized exaggeration of an aesthetic worldview: all of humanity reduced to color and form. And yet, while Hannibal idealizes art as an indulgence free from the burden of representation, *Hannibal* has no such agenda, layering meaning in its lavish wealth of design.

21 Even beyond the show's clear deconstruction and exhaustion of the procedural format, its base use of the form never fits with Arntfield's prescribed values. If the procedural uses crimes, recognizable and clearly legible crimes, to highlight a well-oiled machine serving a public good, the absurd, extravagant crimes of *Hannibal* confound any political use to police process. Hannibal and the other serial killers of *Hannibal* work at an artistic extreme, their crimes resulting in ludicrous displays of artistic bombast. Killers that construct human color palettes are not pressing concerns of public safety. It is *Hannibal*'s insistence on visual spectacle that most separates it from the crime procedural format: the unapologetically lavish spectacles wrung from the grotesque murders serve to undermine clear crime-solving process, as if to evade knowledge and clarity when there is beauty to be had. *Hannibal* exists within a television genre often used to pay idolizing tribute to the public

service of the police, a body habitually aggressive towards queer populations[6]. Bowing out of incorporative acquiescence, *Hannibal* occupies the crime procedural only to confound and derail it.

"I Let You Know Me…"

22 In addition to its high-attention placement in the season two premiere, James Gray's human color palette gives significant attention to the victims of *Hannibal*'s aestheticized carnage. It's the first time in which the series follows a victim, Roland Umber (Ryan Field) from his last moments of freedom, through his capture, attempted escape, and final arrival as a corpse to be analyzed. In a whimsical touch, both the characters created for this plotline have last names that are also colors. This attention to the individual contrasts directly with the killer's aim, Gray's color palette as a vision of a human unity, different skin tones sewn together like options in a ghastly crayon box, differentiated within in a controlled oneness. One of the close-ups of the victim's body lingers on the seared patch of flesh formerly fused with other bodies in the color palette, rendering the tear of an imposed unity brutally clear.

23 This aspect of the human color palette – a mass of bodies subject to the violence of a totalizing definition – is *Hannibal*'s visual emphasis of queer theory railing against essentialist concepts of knowledge produced in heteronormative patriarchy. In her 1993 article "Privilege of Unknowing: Diderot's *The Nun,*" Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "Knowledge is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with it in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons" (23). This obsession with knowledge creating a strict code of the human relates intimately to the

[6] For a brief overview, see "Reclaiming Our Lineage: Organized Queer, Gender-Nonconforming, and Transgender Resistance to Police Violence" by Che Gossett, Reina Gossett, and AJ Lewis, included in the Works Cited page.

history of sexuality. The text first establishing Sedgwick as a instrumental thinker in queer theory, 1990's *Epistemology of the Closet,* reveals the representational structures at work in articulating queer sexuality. Sedgwick uses the widely-circulated metaphor "coming out of the closet" to reflect a representation eternally constructed by a dominant culture, a "closet" that one can never control. She uses the instructional phrase "definitional stranglehold" to emphasize the corrosive effects of insisting upon essentialist knowledge to confirm such a nebulous category as identity (92). Sedgwick writes of the nature of sexual definition:

> What these proliferating categories and especially their indissoluble contradictions do unflaggingly sustain, however, is the establishment of the spectacle of the homosexual closet as a presiding guarantor of rhetorical community, of authority–someone else's authority–over world-making discursive terrain that extends vastly beyond the ostensible question of the homosexual (230).

Heterosexuality and homosexuality, terms coined around the same time, strictly to oppose one another, lay over the inscrutable realm of human sexuality and cast a definitional net that confines more than it makes tangible. The social realities of these definitional signposts are coercive and not subject to individual ownership. The closet is a structural device that results in the devouring of a queer subject under the boundaries of established identities and established knowledge.

24 Sedgwick's "Privilege of Unknowing" – a less canonical work but no less profound – considers power as a construction of knowledge that is not permanent, formed by heteropatriarchal dimensions of "knowing." She further analyzes how such a construction can be manipulated for queer gain. Discussing the 1780 novel *The Nun* by Denis Diderot, Sedgwick reads the lesbian sadomasochistic relationship acted out between Suzanne and her mother superior as motivated by plausible deniability at its most passive, and outright denial at its most assertive. Sedgwick quotes the text, a line from Suzanne perfectly illustrating the strange ambivalence of knowledge as it is attached to sexuality: "I know nothing, and I

would rather know nothing than acquire knowledge which might make me unhappier than I am now. I have no desires, and I don't want to discover any I couldn't satisfy" (38). Trying to determine what Suzanne exactly *does* know, what she is repressing willfully, and what her subconscious suggests is hazy and intermingled together in one milieu of knowledge. Sedgwick writes of Suzanne, "The situation that Suzanne through her ignorance finally manages to create is one in which there is, as there has been from the start, a question of her own legitimacy, formulated – this time – as the legitimacy of her desires and sensations" (40). The ambivalence of insisting upon a lack of knowledge – refusing to outright label her relationship with the mother superior as sexual abuse, but also refusing not to – results in a continuation of queer affect and sexual activity that hides under a blanket of ignorance, un-represented in a patriarchal vocabulary. This despite endlessly hovering over the sex and its supposed significance, as Sedgwick goes on to write:

> Not only has she both seen and experienced orgasmic sensations with the Mother Superior, but she has repeatedly mused on whether they might be prohibited, how prohibited they might be, reasons why they might be prohibited; in the process of actively repelling sexual "knowledge," she has done a thorough survey of the territory where that "knowledge" might live, and only her refusal to ever allow anyone to attach a name to anything differentiates her state from that of the most deeply endued initiation. (45)

In this outlined paradigm of the erotic use of queer unknowing, Sedgwick moves through the concept of gender melancholia outlined by Judith Butler – heteronormative regret and nostalgia for the possibilities closed off by normative definition (57) – and raises it to a kind of kink, the unspoken presumption of heteronormative innocence when the queer is actually fully explored – just not sufficiently "known."

25 *Hannibal* generates this time warp for viewers: a Gothic vocabulary of queer deviance blissfully unaware of the time in which it has been released. In a show about detection, Will Graham is moving ever closer to unlocking the key to Hannibal Lecter's brutality and put

him behind bars. But under this guise of building knowledge, the show luxuriates in a radically unknowing detective-protagonist, blurring labels of good and evil, romanticizing a villain, and avoiding a decisive labeling of homoerotic infatuation to let it continue for an endless horizon of serial narrative. *Hannibal* queers the basic nature of the police procedural and accentuates its every factor with opulent spectacle. In doing so, the show generates a kind of queer unknowing, a refusal to occupy traditional knowledge structures uncritically, steadfast in enjoying a precious moment of queer un-knowledge, uncorrupted and unknown.

26 The second season of *Hannibal* opens with a human color palette that is revealed as a monument to sight and artistic authority. It ends with a specific reference to the cunning power of seeing as knowledge in the season finale "Mizumono." Everyone has underestimated Hannibal Lecter. The plans to bring him to justice have failed miserably, as most of the principal cast lies bleeding in Hannibal's stately mansion. After stroking Will's hair one last time, Hannibal stabs him through the stomach with a knife and the two men enter a warped, morbid embrace. Faced with Will's betrayal of his trust, Hannibal laments with a quiet, sad fury "I let you know me....see me. I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it." This is the only way *Hannibal* could represent a breakup speech, complete with an enactment of phallic penetration. Once again Hannibal's words are telling: underneath the confident performativity of the murder art pieces, *Hannibal* has an almost pathological fear of being known. Clear-cut links to being known become the most dangerous thing in the *Hannibal* universe. Sight and feeling exchanged person to person, from Hannibal to Will, becomes a precious gift, the chance at connection and intimacy rendered difficult in a world overrun by the coercive, often coded and invisible powers of heteronormativity.

27 To return to the scene I mentioned briefly at the start of this article, *Hannibal* builds a vast milieu of queerness – in its deployment of villainy, in its visual expressiveness with

historical links to aestheticism, in its interrogation of knowledge structures, and its cannibalistic intimacies – only for Will Graham to ask, in disbelief, in the series' penultimate episode "Is Hannibal...in love with me?" Will's question, to which the entirety of *Hannibal* has been providing the answer for thirty-seven episodes, finally attempts to verbalize a romantic language the show had long been flirting with, and broadcasting visually. Anticipating the end, *Hannibal*'s third season forms some cracks into the closet door concealing the show's queerness, most demonstrably in an entirely different zone than the gay love between Hannibal and Will, in the relationship between Alana Bloom and Margot Verger (Katherine Isabelle).

28 Margot was previously referenced as queer in *Hannibal*'s second season, but her sexuality was never fully exhibited on the show, and her only sexual encounter was with a man, Will[7]. Alana's representation on the show was even more of an issue, one actively admitted by Bryan Fuller, who lamented the character's reduction to "girlfriend fodder" in the second season, and saw the third season as an opportunity to "rectify" Alana (Goldman). For both characters a relationship presented a calculated opportunity to course-correct where the show had failed in the past, as well as a chance to expand the gendered dimensions of *Hannibal*'s queerness. Alana and Margot's love affair includes a decadent and gorgeously filmed sex scene in the episode "Dolce," complete with vaginal imagery and face morph effects, everything a queer sex scene would be in the baroque den of iniquity that is *Hannibal.* The couple also receives the closest thing to a conventionally happy ending of any of the

[7] Margot's queer sexuality is adapted directly from Thomas Harris' original 1999 novel *Hannibal.* In the book, Margot is in a committed relationship with a woman named Judy and is desperate to obtain her brother's sperm in order to have a child with her, a plotline also adapted to the television series with Alana in place of Judy. The character of Margot in the written text is a grotesque caricature of lesbians reflecting patriarchal fears of butch women. Margot in the novel is a body-builder, and the text is so overt with its castration fears she is frequently shown cracking two walnuts in her hand. Margot was entirely re-written for the television series in a more respectful characterization, but the shift to a more feminine-presenting character does strangely suggest a more butch Margot couldn't fit within *Hannibal*'s narrative universe.

show's characters – escaping Hannibal's wrath by helicopter, as a happy family with the son Alana conceived from the sperm of Margot's monstrous twin brother[8]. The gendered difference in how *Hannibal* presents queerness is curiously proportioned: a male couple is given an entire series' length of time to explore sexual attraction, albeit in a closeted and elliptical manner, while a female couple has only a slim fraction of the time, but is presented with more immediacy. For a show that bases its largest exploration of queerness in concealment and unknowing, the treatment Alana and Margot receive ultimately looks like something of a divergent consolation prize.

29 Yet this spirit of making queerness more literal in *Hannibal's* final season does extend to Hannibal and Will in a different form, their coupledom sealing itself with a kiss, fully emphasizing the romantic end its subtext demanded. The final scene takes place at a secluded home atop a cliff. In a slow-motion onslaught of violence, Hannibal and Will team up to physically overpower the serial killer the Red Dragon, to the croning of an elegiac torch song written for the show – fittingly titled "Love Crime," by Siouxsie Sioux. After a close-up exchange between the two blood-drenched men – Hannibal: "This is all I ever wanted for you Will...for both of us," Will: "It's beautiful" – an embrace from Will to Hannibal culminates in the FBI profiler willfully toppling both of them off the side of the cliff to the depths below, an effective reversal of the season two finale, previously described, where an embrace between the two men indicates violence from Hannibal towards Will. The camera inches forward, swiftly panning down off the edge of the cliff where Hannibal and Will fell. But any move for closure once again is thwarted, the camera catching no final

[8] Margot's brother Mason is a queerly sexualized villain in the 1999 Harris novel *Hannibal.* When describing his first meeting with Hannibal to FBI agent Claire Starling, Mason recounts wearing a risqué leather ensemble, and describing his cherished act of autoerotic asphyxiation. Hannibal then commands "Show me," and Mason follows suit (Harris 61-62). In the television series, Mason's monstrosity is sexual but does not stand out as queer compared to the rest of the show, and such a masturbation scene never occurs.

breaths of life from either protagonist. No bodies anywhere, just the crashing dark tides against the cliffs, the credits rolling over the image. In its final statement, save for an elegant post-credits self-mutilation from Bedelia, *Hannibal* prioritizes the unknowable fantasy of oblique queer presentation over any code of secure identity.

30 *Hannibal* is a unique portrait of queer fantasy, appearing at a time when the crossover potential of queer cinemas and heteronormative media forms is at its most hopeful. The gothic drama of a cannibal, cloaking its queer romance in silent, unknowable identifiers, but enjoying every bit of its intoxicating essence, presents an aesthetic of anxiety over LGBTQ representation, romanticizing a position of villainy when obedience to heteronormative standards is growing more and more invisibly coercive.

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Appendix

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5