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**Hannibal’s Escape: The Role of the Violence**

For the purposes of this paper I will be treating the sequence from when the tape player starts until the words “Ready when you are, Sergeant Pembry” as a separate scene from the remainder of his escape. While the two can be treated as one scene, there is a significant shift of perspective between the two, which warrants their separate consideration. Together, they easily comprise the most exciting action sequence in the movie, and the first part, especially, serves as a necessary catharsis to the verbal foreshadowing of violence throughout Starling and Lecter’s scenes; if the movie can be divided into two plots, i.e., the story of Buffalo Bill and the story of Hannibal Lecter, then this scene is the climax of the latter.

Lecter, in his essence, or at least insofar as the persona he embodies, can only come into his own when wielding an abundance of power. Even in captivity, his masterful manipulation hints to the true Hannibal, but only in the same muted resonance whereby a caged lion projects a certain ferociousness. This scene unleashes the lion, and viscerally informs the audience that years behind bars have failed to temper any of Lecter’s brutality; for, he acts not on rage, not on a drive for retribution, but on pure and unabated instinct. Finally, we see Lecter in his element, free and thriving. And, although this may elicit terror in audiences, once overcome, there is a certain fleeting relief and beauty to a predator unleashed. As much as we, the swimmers, would rather a beached shark than a great white among us, a sense of doomed glory is inevitable as a uniquely efficient monster returns in his full being.

The beginning of the scene, however, shows us the other side of Lecter, also to the greatest amplitude so far. The scene starts by panning over some of Lecter’s belongings, first a cassette player. The first Aria from Bach’s Goldberg variations, a calm and pleasant melody, softly echoes through the room, setting the stage for an equally vicious battle to come. Beside the player is a sketch of Starling holding a lamb, a reference to the previous scene, where Starling tells Lecter the story of a screaming lamb she tried to save from the slaughter as a child. Lecter’s other sketches are also among them, as well as what seems to be a copy of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Especially the sketch of Starling depicts both her and the lamb’s face meticulously, both holding austere, almost idealized expressions. These items are of equal importance to Lecter’s characterization, and emblematic of his outlook and rationalization. On his own terms, Hannibal is no sadist, but an aesthete, one who finds beauty in all things. He seeks to revel completely in every taste known to man, and without moral inhibition, can bathe in the tranquility of Bach as passionately as he can in the blood of fellow man.

As ridden with philosophical undertone as “The Silence of the Lambs” is, it is, to its core, a thriller. In this vein, in this climactic scene especially, the filmmakers successfully oscillate the tension up to its vicious release. As two guards approach Hannibal’s cell, one mocks his request for a second dinner, “lamb-chops, extra-rare.” This serves two purposes: first, it creates a sense of dramatic irony, as the knowledge of their impending doom continues to be foreshadowed with increasingly obvious hints of his escape. Second, it relieves some tension with the morbid humor of Lecter having requested lamb (once again referring to the previous scene), and extra rare at that (referring to his not-necessarily-cooked cannibalism). We then return to a close-up of Lecter, where he proceeds to pull a small pin out of his mouth. While the guards handcuff him to the cage and prepare to serve him, Hannibal maintains a perfectly stoic countenance, all the while distracting them just long enough to un-cuff himself. Finally, the moment a guard reaches for the tray he had placed beside Lecter, in a jump-scare moment, he handcuffs the guard to the cell, as the music shifts from the in-scene Bach to a much more dramatic, edited-in classical track (*“Lecter Escapes,”* Howard Shore).

After giving the guard an utterly predatory yet emotionless stare, Hannibal breaks his stoic demeanor for the first time in the scene. This is our first taste of Hannibal’s true brutality, which might as well have been a wives’ tale until now. With a scream, he knocks the door into the one guard, and lunges at the other, mouth-open, with the ferocity of a starved lion. He tears and mangles one side of the guard’s mouth, as his prey’s eyes show only a terrified surrender. Once he has had enough blood, he withdraws, and generously discharges a bottle of pepper-spray (the role of which was foreshadowed in an earlier close-up on one of the guards’ belts) on his eyes. In a Catch-22 between gruesome violence and amounting anguish, the camera repeatedly cuts from Hannibal’s teeth mangling one guard’s face to the other hopelessly trying to free himself of his handcuffs. Then Lecter turns his attention to the other guard, his snout painted in blood. As he clubs the man’s head in, we only see Lecter swinging, the camera slowly zooming in on his mouth. With each swing and consequent spurt of blood, Lecter heaves a mix of euphoria and exhaustion, almost suggestive of a sexual pleasure, but all in the motif of a Bronze Age warrior. Then the violence stops, and with it the dramatic theme.

These thirty seconds perhaps most thoroughly encompass Hannibal’s spiritual being, as previously described. His long-restrained thirst for brutality has finally been quenched, but brutality is only an equal component of his uninhibited self. He delights no more in the company of bestial brutes, as evinced by his distaste of his fellow inmates earlier in the film, than a lion does among hyenas. His senses of grandiosity and beauty are just as central to his identity, and just as he is willing to risk death and incarceration to kill, no urgency can deprive him from savoring a moment of Bach before proceeding with the escape.

As to the cinematic role of this scene, in a movie to this point comprised almost solely of psychological drama (Buffalo Bill’s kidnapping scene being one notable exception), this actualization of looming violence drastically changes the viewing experience. Along with the continuation of his escape, this scene also allows the film to return to its slow investigation sequences; in fact, they almost come as a relief. Where such a pacing could be criticized in some films (i.e., a climactic action sequence followed by over 15 minutes of quietude before the final climax ensues), Hannibal’s over-the-top violence demands a counteracting lack of suspense during which audiences can recover. Immediately after his escape, the movie effectively assures viewers this will be the case, when Starling convincingly intuits that “he won’t come after [her].”