

BECOME THE BEAST: HOW “HANNIBAL” MANIPULATES THE AUDIENCE

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Content Warning: Descriptions and images of cannibalism, murder and gore

Introduction: Apéritif¹

“What (Will) has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine, and maybe some other points of view that scare him... Perception’s a tool that’s pointed on both ends.”

- *Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal TV Series Season 1 Episode 1: Apéritif*

It is not uncommon for films and television serials to engage its audience so intimately that they form what seems to be a new genre of films entirely — a cult film. Some film scholars argue that it is the audience who turns a film into a cult film (Austin, 1989), while others posit that cult films tend to deviate from the norms of mainstream television by featuring topics that are typically not accepted by the public (Jancovich, 2002). An example of a series that drew a cult audience is that of Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal*, a television series that became recognised as a cult serial due to the overwhelming number of fans who strongly empathise with the titular cannibal and the criminal investigator who is slowly corrupted by him (Nayar, 2016). *Hannibal* spanned three seasons from 2013 to 2015 and is based on Thomas Harris’s novels of the same title, focusing on the cat-and-mouse game between the cannibalistic Doctor Hannibal Lecter and the criminal investigator Will Graham (NBC, n.d.). The series spares no expense in reminding the audience of the immorality of Hannibal’s crimes, but as the seasons progress, much pain is taken cinematographically to elevate his crimes, forcing the audience to begin empathising with both characters as the line between violence and art begins to blur.

¹ French word meaning a drink, typically alcoholic, that is served before a meal to stimulate the appetite

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Will is characterised as an empath who works on gruesome cases where he uses his empathy to visualise himself as a killer to aid the Federal Bureau of Investigation with criminal profiling. The audience watches him struggle against his ability to understand the motivations of murderers, witnessing how his sanity bends and transforms under Hannibal’s manipulation. Hence, when Will ultimately gives in to Hannibal’s puppeteering, the audience is then brought to empathise with and admire Hannibal just as Will does, securing them as a cult audience. Referencing the quote above this section, the audience’s perception is cinematographically engineered to firstly allow them to understand the moral struggles Will faces, before it is turned on them to make them view Hannibal as some sort of dark protagonist to worship.

Hence, this essay aims to explore how *Hannibal* employs various cinematographic and linguistic techniques to create an immersive and appealing viewing experience for the audience, which in turn influences them to become a cult audience. This essay will also explore how such cinematographic techniques are used to gradually elevate Hannibal’s actions, making the audience view his crimes as some sort of elegant “art”. This analysis will be done via cinematographic analysis of various episodes. I posit that each cinematographic technique is intentionally utilised to firstly influence audience viewership and experience, and to also form an intimate viewing experience that blurs the audience’s identity with the characters’.

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Use of Camera and Mise-en-Scène in *Hannibal* to Elevate His Crimes

“Elegance is more important than suffering. That’s his design.”

- *Will Graham, Hannibal TV Series, Season 3 Episode 2: Primavera*

This section argues that the use of camera and mise-en-scene in the series helps to influence the audience’s perspective, initially portraying Hannibal as sadistic and psychopathic, but eventually painting his crimes in a more elegant and “acceptable” light. It not only positions the audience as a voyeur to Hannibal’s crimes, but also allows them to adopt Will’s perspective. Similar to how Bazin believed that camera angles can extend the realms of reality, mise-en-scène (in particular, camera movement, lighting, set design and sound) (Bordwell, 1985) is used to influence the audience’s perception of Hannibal, bending their threshold and understanding of what is morally right and wrong.

In season 1, the camera depicts Hannibal as an aloof, mysterious character whose kills are nonsensically sadistic and violent, while portraying Will as a victim of Hannibal’s manipulation. This is done to influence the audience into sympathising for Will whilst serving as a moral reminder to the audience that Hannibal is a criminal.

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*Video 1: Hannibal murders a doctor in S1*

As seen above², when Hannibal is mutilating a doctor’s corpse (0:21-1:10), there is soft, lilting music playing in the background while the camera slowly starts from a telephoto lens to show the audience what they would see if they had stepped into the room. The lilting music, accompanied with the slow tilting of the camera upwards to zoom into Hannibal’s expression, creates a sense of disquiet in the audience as the lilting music contrasts with the gruesome nature of him carving away at the doctor’s face. The zoom-in reveals that Hannibal’s expression barely changes while he is hacking at his victim’s face, heightening the uneasiness of the audience as they are firsthand witnesses of how nonchalant Hannibal is about murder.

² All videos are hyperlinked in image

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Video 2: Hannibal prepares the meat of his victim in S2

However, in season 2, Hannibal’s process of killing and eating his victims is slowly depicted in a positive, elegant manner. As seen in the video above (7:10-8:30), in contrast to the previously ominous background music that played when he murdered his victims, the scene of his preparation of human flesh is now accompanied by the upbeat sixth edition of [Mozart’s Piano Sonata No.11 in A major](#). His food preparation is always recorded in an overhead shot with the camera occasionally zooming in to the food. All these cinematographic techniques result in influencing the audience’s gaze into one that takes in all of his culinary efforts, making his food preparation appear elegant and exquisite. This cinematic shot gives the audience the impression that his culinary skills are worthy of their undivided attention.

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Video 3: Hannibal and Will commit murder



Figure 1: Slow-motion shot of Hannibal and Will defeating the serial killer



Figure 2: Zoom-out shot of the serial killer dying

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In season 3, when Hannibal and Will fight a serial killer together, the soundtrack slowly descends into that of Siouxsie Sioux’s song, *Love Crime*, which was written specially for the series. The soft crooning of the singer numbs the audience from the violence in the scene, especially when accompanied with the slow-motion shot of the serial killer falling to his knees (Figure 1) and the overhead zoom-out shot of the corpse (Figure 2). Both takes are done in slow-motion, elevating the scene into something artistic and elegant that the audience cannot seem to tear their eyes away from.

The lighting change over the three scenes is also intentional; in seasons 1 and 2, Hannibal’s crime scenes have bright studio lighting to influence the audience into feeling mounting horror at Hannibal’s crimes as they are forced to see it in lurid detail — furthermore, the bright lights imply that Hannibal does not feel the need to hide his crimes and takes a certain amount of pride in his “masterpieces”. Season 1 follows a rather dark and minimalistic colour palette while season 2 has a more varied palette, influencing the audience to start off with recognising that Hannibal’s actions are immoral, but as the season progresses, they are influenced to slowly see his actions as elegant and masterful. This drastically changes in the third season, which we can see in Video 3 has minimal lighting. The darkness, in addition to the aforementioned cinematographic techniques, somewhat censor and cover the brutality of their actions whilst simultaneously portraying them in an elegant manner.

This can be attributed to the concept of the *auteur*, a concept which originated from *Cahier du cinéma*. Although Fuller may be too young to be considered an *auteur*, his

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directorship falls into certain categories — an *auteur* is able to enact his vision closely with the series (Schepelern, 2005), and his team of cinematographers, scriptwriters and so on are able to work closely with him to implement his artistic vision (Sarris, 2007) and incorporate his style in the series. Fuller intentionally elevates Hannibal’s murder tableaus into art so that the audience can view it as something beautiful and elegant; he “want[s] to make it difficult to look away from horror by making horror beautiful” (Thurm, 2015).

In totality, the use of mise-en-scène and camera movements build a multisensory experience for *Hannibal*’s audience. The disturbing visuals, sounds and lighting come into play to build an immersive experience for the viewer, who can then more acutely follow the director’s intention of gradually coming to appreciate the beauty in Hannibal’s crimes (Ndalianis, 2015). This audience influence likely makes them view Hannibal as a masterful, charismatic character, which contributes to them being a “cult audience” who can find elegance in the macabre.

Use of Camera and Intratextuality to Influence Empathy and Identity, and to Show**Character Development**

“[to Hannibal] I am who I've always been. The scales have just fallen from my eyes. I can see you now.”

- Will Graham, *Hannibal TV Series, Season 1 Episode 13: Savoureux*

One of the important aspects to take note of in cinematic characterisation is that of identity (Burrell, 2017); we characterise ourselves, and then we are also characterised by others. The audience is positioned to empathise with Will from the beginning; when Will finds himself understanding Hannibal and empathising with him, we similarly follow him as voyeurs to their complex relationship, hence making the audience that of a “cult audience” as they then somehow relate to both characters despite their crimes.

The loss of the self is a prominent issue that several scholars have discussed with regards to empathy in film and television. Tan posits that, as the voyeuristic audience, we subconsciously “lose ourselves” in onscreen fictional characters (2013, p. 337-8) when we are placed in their point of view too often as we find ourselves absorbing their emotional state. As another scholar pointed out, “the total assimilation of subjectivities stems from viewers losing self-awareness and fusing their egos with that of the character” (D’Aloia, 2015, p. 189). Similarly, because various cinematographic techniques have placed the audience to directly relate to Will, they are similarly drawn in to Hannibal’s dark charisma and find themselves empathising with him, blurring their ability to judge whether Hannibal’s crimes are immoral or elegant.



Video 4: Will threatens to kill Hannibal

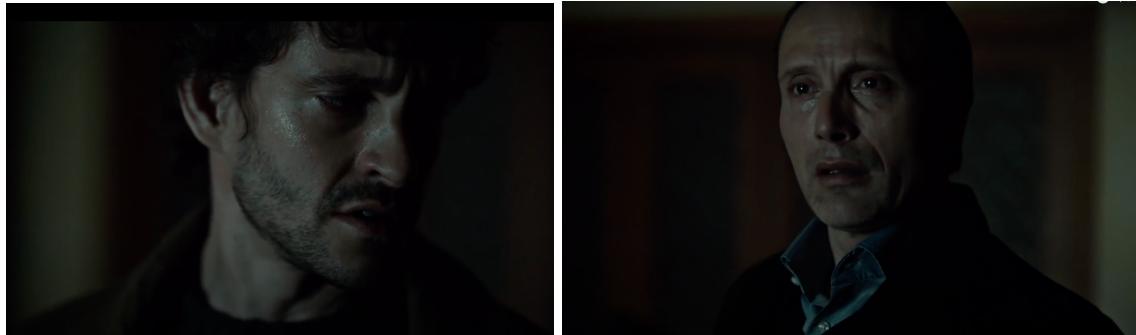


Figure 3: Zoom-in on Will’s contempt and Hannibal’s shock

Towards the end of season 1, when Will’s mental capacity is pushed to its limits from having to constantly place himself in the minds of serial killers, and when his suspicion of Hannibal reaches its peak, he attempts to confront and kill Hannibal. The zoom-in reveals the contempt on Will’s face — the close-up shows his sweat from his anger, and his curled lip — and shows how the usually stoic and composed Hannibal is shocked at Will’s discovery and threat to kill him. Here, we see how the visual close-up elicits a somatic response from the audience; they feel sympathy for Will, who they have seen being manipulated by Hannibal, and are angered at Hannibal’s shocked reaction; they are inclined to hope for Will to have his revenge on him. Béla

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Balázs, a film critic, theorises that when the audience is presented with a close-up of a character’s face on the screen, we “see emotions and thoughts” (2010, p. 100) and that the protagonists’ emotions are not only well-portrayed, but also palpable (Stadler, 2017). Thus, the cinematographic use of camera angles allows the audience to more intimately relate to Will.



Figure 4: Zoom-in on Hannibal’s pride and Will’s resolution

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In season 3, when Hannibal and Will murder a serial killer together, the use of camera angles, movement and intertextuality allows us to witness his transformation from Hannibal’s victim to his accomplice; similarly, we follow Will’s emotional epiphany and feel like we too are in cahoots with the cannibal. The zoom-in in Figure 4 reveals Hannibal’s pride at Will finally giving in to his dark, animalistic side as he joins Hannibal in the crime; the zoom-in to Will’s face shows his determination in finishing the job despite his wounds. The audience similarly adopts Hannibal’s pride for Will claiming his true nature, and absorbs Will’s resolution in murdering the killer. The shot-reverse-shot (00:00-00:20 of Video 3) positions the audience as a voyeur to the exchange in eye contact between the two, allowing them to lose themselves in the emotions of both protagonists.

There are a few intratextual references in this scene too; after the murder is done, Will tells Hannibal (1:30-1:35 of Video 3) “You’re right... blood really does look black in the moonlight.” This is a direct reference to three episodes prior, when Hannibal asks Will “Have you ever seen blood in the moonlight, Will? It appears quite black.” They have effectively completed the question-answer adjacency pair after three episodes; the reference allows the audience to compare Will from a few episodes prior, when he was still trying to deny his underlying bloodlust, to the last episode of the season, in which he has succumbed to it. Hannibal also asks Will in the last episode (1:50-2:05 of Video 3), “See? This is all I ever wanted, Will... for both of us.” The interrogative “See?” is an intratextual reference to the first season, when Will has to shoot a man who almost killed his daughter, and the man asks him in his dying breath “See?”. The repetition of “See?” is referenced in other episodes as well, when Will begins to hallucinate the corpse of the same man he had killed — the man serves as a symbol of Will’s

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moral compass and conscience. The intratextual reference at the end of the season is to show how, even though there is repetition of the same line, Will does not hallucinate of the man’s corpse; it serves to show that, symbolically, Will has lost his morality and in its place is Hannibal’s influence. These intratextual references allow the audience to track Will’s transformation and development by comparing him across the episodes, allowing them to view him in his final formation as Hannibal’s equal.

In totality, the use of camera angles and intratextuality blurs the audience’s feelings with that of the characters’; this causes them to empathise strongly with both Will and Hannibal, ultimately making them sympathetic to their circumstances and supportive of their actions, regardless of their immorality. The support of such an audience, in the face of something regarded as macabre and violent even for television, is what helps transform them into a cult audience.

Conclusion: Savoureux³

“I have let you know me... see me.”

- *Hannibal Lecter, Hannibal TV Series, Season 2 Episode 13: Mizumono*

In conclusion, *Hannibal* utilises various cinematographic techniques to create an alluring, hypnotic viewership experience for its audience by unleashing various sensory assaults on the audience via the camera angles and mise-en-scène. This allows for the audience to gradually appreciate the beauty in the macabre, which is aligned to the director’s intention (Thurm, 2015). The use of camera angles and intratextuality also blurs the issue of the audience’s identity in relation to the on screen characters, an issue that has been discussed by various film scholars. The audience is so immersed in *Hannibal* that they begin to empathise with the characters and find themselves rooting for their dark transformations, which matches the *auteur*’s intention, who views the camera’s role as “provid[ing] point-of-view for the characters” and “to put the audience in the point of view of the killer, who doesn’t feel what they’re doing, in most of these instances, is ugly”. Hence, *Hannibal* allows the audience to aptly become the beast and to find elegance in violence, allowing them to relate to the characters on such an intimate level that they form a cult audience. As seen, the cinematographic techniques place the audience in the

³ The final course of a meal

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perspectives of the characters with an overwhelming familiarity, causing them to be able to empathise with them and hence contributing to its creation of a cult following.

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