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Gone Fishing: New Participatory Cultures In and Out of *Hannibal*

As digital social media allow new paths for human interaction, 22-minute sittings now uphold the bare minimum for watching television. To be a true “fan” of a series, one must also live-tweet it, reblog .gifs of it, upload fanfiction of it. What Henry Jenkins defined as “participatory culture” a decade ago is now commonly referred to those within the culture as “fandom,” a self-organized community focused on the “collective production, debate, and circulation of” artifacts within a particular series (136). Fandom provided the space for one-sided, intimate-at-a-distance “para-social” (as defined by psychologists Horton and Wohl) admiration and interaction; fans could create and share their works with no true consequence or response from the producers and actors.

However, NBC’s 2013 series *Hannibal* flipped this paradigm. Official media outlets such as *Hannibal*’s Facebook and Tumblr pages emulate a “fan voice,” and primary actors Hugh Dancy and Mads Mikkelsen frequently thank “Fannibals” for their support at high-profile events, each adorned in a flower crown, the symbolic headdress of the *Hannibal* fandom. On the flip side of this symbiotic relationship, *Hannibal*’s immense fan support outweighed its lack-luster ratings, leading NBC to renew its contract for a third season. This dual channel of positive communication not only breaks traditional media producer/consumer hierarchies but also exploits audience engagement to lure fans even closer to the show, forming a dynamic, ultra-

timely and hyper-obsessive participatory culture.

The Internet has historically governed the evolution of participatory cultures. In Jenkin's essay "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," he states that the first fandoms were based around science fiction series, a prime genre for the first Internet users, researchers and the military (138). As printed Zines transformed to online fanfiction, so too did the nature of communication within fandom. Because computers were fast, epistemophiliacs now had a perfect outlet to "demonstrate the 'timeliness' and responsiveness" of their love (Jenkins 140).

Combined with *Hannibal*'s serialized format and its fulfillment of what Umberto Eco defines to be "cult status" criteria, the Internet is the perfect platform to host this slightly obsessive, deterritorialized market of knowledge. According to Eco, one requirement of a cult work is to be "encyclopedic;" that is, fans need to be able to master the "rich array" of information the work's "completely furnished world" provides (468). Furthermore, works should emulate "the paradigmatic post-modernist film," saturated with archetypes and stuffed with allusions (Eco 470). Not only does *Hannibal* satisfy both requirements with its lyrical dialogue, baroque cinematography and Dr. Lecter's god-like/satanic ambitions, the show's creator, Bryan Fuller, tweets his intended allusions, original set designs, and other behind-the-scenes bonuses as each episode airs live—twice, for two separate time zones. Fuller's actions have shifted the paradigm of producer-consumer interaction, since *Fannibals* now obtain relevant information to digest as the episode airs, instead of with a DVD package at the end of the season. Fans are allowed to fill in the blanks of each episode immediately after airtime by posting their thoughts and analyses as "metas" on websites such as Tumblr, or by writing "fix-it fic" to bring falsely-

optimistic decency into the carnivorous relationship between Hannibal and Will. As a series, *Hannibal* thrives on its denseness and what professor at the University of Western Ontario Maria Ionita calls “inexpressible subjectivity:” the uneasy ethical space both its protagonist and its beautiful, juxtaposed murder scenes inhabit (14). As an Internet community, the Fannibals thrive on their immediacy, both temporally with quick deconstructive analyses and communicatively with the show runners. The Internet and how both parties use it provides the necessary infrastructure to “sustain a richer form” of content, while *Hannibal* “rewards the enhanced competencies of fan communities” with even more information and gratitude (Jenkins 146).

Such a symbiotic relationship has blended to form a “reading-writing continuum,” a dynamically-driven environment that blurs the “hierarchy of commodity culture” of producer power and possible consumer plagiarism lawsuits, and instead acknowledges and appreciates fan contributions (Jenkins 145). This form of communication contrasts with that of “para-social interaction,” engagement which creates the illusion of a face-to-face relationship. Characterized by “one-sided, nondialectical” interactions controlled by the “performer” (here, the producers and actors,) para-social relationships are “not susceptible of mutual development,” allowing the audience to “withdraw to no consequence” (Horton and Wohl). Most author-fan relationships have historically been para-social; fans may jump in and out of a series as they please, and gush over actors who don’t know they exist.

But because it airs as network television on NBC to a relatively small audience, *Hannibal* is just as dependent on its fans as the fans are dependent on the show. As aforementioned, fan campaigning directly extended *Hannibal*’s lifespan with a third season renewal. Furthermore, the show runners launched a fan art contest to

complement season 2, commissioning the winners to create a special image per each new episode and posting them with their respective air dates. Through fair compensation and publicity, *Hannibal*'s production team not only addressed the legal power hierarchy regarding fan-made material, it also gave fans the opportunity to have the voice of a show runner, breaking traditional power divisions.

However, the relationship between *Hannibal* runners and fans, just like the relationship between Hannibal and Will, is partially para-social in the nuanced case that it is *performative*. Horton and Wohl state that the actors/performers in a para-social relationship speak with spectators directly, as if they were “conversing personally and privately”. The official *Hannibal* Tumblr (nbchannibal.tumblr.com) works this seduction to a charm. Because the blog managers are “first and foremost fans” according to an interview with NBC’s vice president of digital marketing Jeff Goldsmith, they reappropriate fan language as producer language (qtd. in Indiewire). Alongside posts of production updates and contests are reblogs of fan art and cosplays, .gifs of episodes alongside Katy Perry lyrics, and tags such as “#GIRD YOUR LOINS #HOLD ONTO YOUR BUTTS” (a suspenseful announcement) and “#Don't stare too long. It's like the sun #*stares too long*” (a magazine cover shot of Hugh Dancy). Due to their experience as fans, blog runners have the necessary tools to empathetically seduce Fannibals, emulating their finely crafted mannerisms to integrate themselves as Head Fannibal. While they genuinely do cross barriers of traditional interaction, the nbchannibal Tumblr delivers a deliberate performance to achieve such means.

Through similar means of inexplicable, empathetic intrigue and the possibility of interacting with a higher power, Hannibal Lecter consequently psychologically

manipulates the show's protagonist, Will Graham. Dr. Lecter's performance is one obsessed with the "sublimation of violence into art," with the creation of extravagant spectacles (Ionita 12). As a chef, he painstakingly constructs elaborate meat dishes, such as a turkey, adorned with the skulls of woodland animals and its ribcage tied to resemble pairs of small praying hands. As an acquaintance, his dinner parties are excuses to feed guests human flesh on polished silver platters—a glossy aesthetic performance served on just as glossy silverware. As a psychopath, he expends the same detail in his murders, such as reconstructing a totem pole from human corpses delicately stacked on top of each other. And as a psychiatrist, he slowly whittles away Will's sense of moral direction, his sociopathic tendencies allowing him to exploit Will's extraordinary ability to empathize until Will cannot separate himself from the murderer he is trying to catch. Hannibal, like its blog runners, transforms through artifice. When he sees a body, he does not see its suffering like Will, but rather its fleshly, physical qualities. Similarly, the show runners are not concerned with that particular cosplayer's background, but rather their transient embodiment of the show's character; they don't care about the artist, but the art. And just like Will, Fannibals are inexorably drawn to this great deity: exploited, but interacting and entranced.

In Season 2 Episode 10, Naka-Choko, Will Graham finally commits a murder after tense, elongated urgings from Hannibal. In the same macabre indulgence as his psychiatrist/mentor/manipulator Hannibal, he mounts the body parts of a house attacker on the skeleton of a saber tooth tiger. In the beginning of the episode, we see Will's face awkwardly morphed with Hannibal's, foreshadowing his transfiguration from murder investigator to murderer, in line with Hannibal's goal. However,

unknown to the viewers, Will himself is giving a performance: in the season finale, he betrays Hannibal and reveals his over-done act of “murder” was only a stepping stone to gaining trust. (Will, however, does not escape unscathed — both physically and psychologically.) In this sense, *Hannibal*’s show runners also embody Will Graham, using their empathetic abilities with fandom to appear as “just another fan,” while in reality still subject to the systems of commodity power inherent in any participatory culture. Like the overlay of Will’s and Hannibal’s faces, the producers have uncomfortably molded to the consumers, but only under illusions of intimacy. “Did you kill him with your hands?” asks Hannibal to Will of saber tooth boy. “It was intimate,” Will replies, confirming Hannibal’s wishes. “Boundaries will always be subject to negotiation,” says Alanna Bloom to Hannibal, describing his and Will’s relationship. “It’s just hard to know where you are with each other.”

The confusion of boundaries and the visual of overlaid faces make a return in the season finale, Mizumono. As Will talks to Hannibal and FBI head Jack Crawford, each one about catching the other, their faces slowly merge until sharply split center screen. The camera then cuts to Will, also harshly split in two: he is a man literally torn between two sides of ethics, both of law and order, but one of conventionality and the other transcending it. Hannibal, whom Mads Mikkelsen frequently cites as playing as Lucifer, breaks the boundaries of both his and Will’s therapist-patient relationship and those of traditional governance. Similarly, the show runners have broken the creator-fan boundary through releasing timely bonus material, and that of traditional interaction and intervention through their large social media presence.

The constant game of reeling and trapping both show runners and Hannibal play is exemplified in one of the only activities that brings Will Graham solace:

fishing. However, that too is corrupted when Hannibal replaces his lures with human flesh in the season 1 finale, another step towards reeling him in as the ideal “murder husband,” as the Fannibals say. But Will is a seasoned fisherman, and he promises, while ice fishing with Jack in season 2 episode 8,

JACK: Yeah, so how do you catch a fish that isn’t hungry?

WILL: Change your tactics: you use live bait that moves and excites them—you gotta make ‘em bite. Even though he’s not hungry.

JACK: You make him act on instinct—he’s always a predator.

WILL: You have to create a reality where only you and the fish exist. Your lure is the one thing he wants, despite everything he knows.

As Will and Hannibal frantically try to snap each other up, so too do the show runners through an empathetic, quasi-para-social performance to appease their fans. Even so, *Hannibal*’s head honchos pay no regard to each individual fan, but rather go fishing to captivate fandom as a whole. As fandom evolves and develops its own modes of operation, show runners can use their own experiences as fans to control the system from within.

Regardless of its intentions, *Hannibal*’s new modes of creator-fan socialization has shifted the paradigm for televisual canon. With social media posts becoming just as—if not more—important than the actual work, both the need for and the amount of paratext grows. Jenkins predicted that as fandom and social media diversify and expand, they will move away from an exclusive “cult status” and towards the “culture mainstream” (142). This indeed is the case as other shows adopt similar fannish voices. The official BBC3 Twitter has started to live tweet, during *Sherlock* re-runs, popular fan creations (such as a clip from a Lady GaGa music video with the main

character's faces superimposed on the dancers') and emoji-ridden messages supporting Holmes' and Watson's romantic coupling (such as "John getting annoyed with how rude Sherlock's being, #Sherlock getting annoyed with how nice John's being... They are so married it's ridic"). As shows get renewed and as tweets continue to flood in, executives still stay grateful for their shifting (albeit manufactured) symbiotic relationship with fans. As Bryan Fuller reminds his Fannibals (in caps) the show would be nothing without them, and as Jeff Goldsmith thanks the "creative and engaged and passionate" fan base "which still shocks and impresses [him] to this day," fandom continues to enlarge and spill into the mainstream. And as social media fuels the modern American hyper-obsession with televisual and celebrity culture, those within the production system have the resources to create a new one where producer-fan barriers wash away, where information flows freely, and where emulation continues to enrapture the ever-expanding sea of fans.

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