

***Hannibal*, Seasons 1-3 (NBC, 2012-15)**

The TV series *Hannibal* was developed by Bryan Fuller and aired on NBC from April 2013 to August 2015. Unfortunately, the series was cancelled after Season 3 due to falling ratings, although it is now available on DVD and Netflix (and there are rumours that the show may be resurrected in the near future).<sup>1</sup> *Hannibal* focuses on the character that first made his fictional debut in Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon* (1981) and went on to appear in the novels *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), *Hannibal* (1999), and *Hannibal Rising* (2006). Dr Hannibal Lecter then attained even wider fame via the novels' five cinematic adaptations. Lecter (played here by Mads Mikkelsen) is a brilliant, elegant, and refined psychiatrist and an exceptional cook, with a gorgeous office and a polished, almost sterile house in Baltimore.

The series functions as a prequel to the books and four of the films: Hannibal collaborates with the FBI in order to help capture serial killers, but he is himself a manipulative and sadistic murderer who cannibalises his victims' organs. Hannibal is therefore a therapist who can dissect not only the minds of his patients and adversaries, but also the tissues of their very bodies.<sup>2</sup> Each of the titles of almost every episode is the name of a dish, such as 'Amuse Bouche', 'Mukozuke', and 'Antipasto' (respectively in French, Japanese, and Italian). During the first two seasons, each episode largely consists of an investigation into the murders committed by a specific killer, although there are also a number of overarching storylines that span each season and portray the evolving relationships between the main characters. Season 3 departs from this formula, initially focusing on Hannibal's time on the run in Europe (which gives the show the opportunity to showcase the gorgeous settings of Paris and Florence), whereas the story of Francis Dolarhyde, the so-called 'Red Dragon', only develops over the course of the final six episodes.

The show's other main protagonist is Will Graham (Hugh Dancy), a brilliant and empathic young FBI consultant who can assume the perspective of a serial killer in order to precisely reconstruct the events leading to the crime scene and the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of the perpetrators of horrific murders. Will is a disturbed and unstable individual, prone to unsociable behaviour and nightmares, and his condition deteriorates over the course of Season 1 (he sleepwalks, doubts his own sanity, and even comes to fear that he may

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<sup>1</sup> See David Nemet, 'Hannibal Update: Bryan Fuller Says Revival 'Conversations' Are Underway', 13 August 2017 <<http://tvline.com/2017/08/13/hannibal-season-4-bryan-fuller-revival/>> [accessed 7 September 2017].

<sup>2</sup> See also Antonio Sanna, 'A Villainous Appetite: Erôs, Madness, and the Food Analogy in *Hannibal* and *Legend*', in *The Culture and Philosophy of Ridley Scott*, ed. by Adam Barkman, Ashley Barkman, and Nancy Kang (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 145-55 (p. 149).

himself have been involved in some of the crimes he investigates). Hannibal uses Will's vulnerability to his own advantage, playing with Will's mind and frustrating his attempts to discover the real culprit of the murders that Hannibal has himself committed. He also misdirects Will and his FBI boss, Jack Crawford, by falsifying evidence and suggesting solutions which he knows to be false. Over the course of the three seasons, the two characters build up a morbidly co-dependent relationship, one built on affection and betrayal. Indeed, although they attempt repeatedly to kill each other and then forget each other (in a continuous alternation of *eros* and *thanatos*, we could say), Hannibal and Will become inseparable, and their relationship assumes a strong homoerotic component, which is made explicit in Season 3, when Hannibal admits his intimate affection for the profiler.

Mikkelsen and Dancy are the undoubted two stars of the show; their acting is impeccable. The former depicts Hannibal perfectly, effectively dramatising all of the character's nuances, from his imperturbability in the face of death to his courtesy and acumen. Mikkelsen's impenetrable expressions serve admirably to obscure the character's true motives from those around him, even as we watch him close in on his victims from behind or chat amiably with them over dinner before finishing them off for good (for instance, one of the most disturbing scenes of the entire series occurs in 'Futamoto', the sixth episode of Season 2, when Hannibal serves his still-conscious victim a clay-roasted thigh and canoe-cut marrowbone made from the latter's own leg). Dancy's portrayal of Graham pays particular attention to the character's constant emotional torment. The expression of suffering in his eyes is convincing, as is his obvious difficulty in relating to his fellow human beings, which lays the groundwork for the extreme consequences of this detachment from the world around him later in the series. Will's distress is also visually rendered through the visionary depictions of his increasingly vivid nightmares and hallucinations, which include an enormous black stag that later comes to resemble Lecter (called by the showrunner and fans 'Stagman', or the 'Wendigo').<sup>3</sup> These digitally created (and quite effective) special effects eloquently dramatise Will's disturbed psyche.

In addition to the two central characters, the series features many of the primary and secondary characters from Harris's novels, with the sole major exception being FBI trainee agent Clarice Starling, whose presence would certainly have enriched the programme further, but was not permissible for copyright reasons. Other major characters include the Head of FBI's Behavioural Science, Jack Crawford (Lawrence Fishburne), who is Will's demanding

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<sup>3</sup> 'Hannibal: The Wiki' <[http://hannibal.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Stag\\_\(TV\)](http://hannibal.wikia.com/wiki/The_Stag_(TV))> [accessed 7 September 2017].

but loyal boss, and who also gradually becomes Hannibal's friend. Secondary characters include Crawford's wife Bella (Gina Torres), who is diagnosed with cancer early in the series; Dr Alana Bloom (Caroline Dhavernas), a psychologist who works alongside (and is attracted to) Will but has then an affair with Hannibal; and Freddie Lounds (Lara Jean Chorostecki), a tabloid journalist who uses people unscrupulously to write sensationalist articles. The most notable original characters are Abigail Hobbs (Kacey Rohl), the traumatised daughter of a serial killer shot dead by Will in the pilot, who Hannibal and Will then take under their wing, and Dr Bedelia du Maurier (the extraordinary Gillian Anderson), Hannibal's therapist, whose complex relationship with the title character constitutes one of the most suspenseful and exciting storylines in the show.

The plots of the all three seasons are also broadly based on events that occur in Harris's novels, with the exception of Season 1, which focuses for the most part on the FBI's hunt for the Chesapeake Ripper (Hannibal himself). Nevertheless, one of the most fascinating aspects of *Hannibal* is its reworking of and additions to the source texts. Those who are familiar with Harris's novels and/or with their cinematic adaptations will be struck by the many changes, evolutions, and inversions applied to the original narrative. Indeed, Season 1, which is partly based on the events preceding *Red Dragon*, in which Lecter had already been captured by Graham, ends instead with the shocking arrest of the innocent profiler, who Lecter has carefully framed for his own crimes. Similarly, Season 2 includes many plotlines taken from Harris's third novel *Hannibal*, but significantly changes the timing, development, and resolution of these events. This is most notably the case in relation to the arc that involves Lecter's would-be nemesis Mason Verger (Michael Pitt) and his sister Margot (Katharine Isabelle). In both Harris' novel and the TV show, Verger is a child molester who abuses his own sister repeatedly until Hannibal convinces her to kill him (although in the series she is a more glamorous and sympathetic figure than the steroid-taking body builder represented in the novel). In Ridley Scott's 2001 film *Hannibal*, Margot is not even mentioned and the film focuses instead on Mason's revenge against the doctor for the mutilations he suffered years earlier. In the TV series, the tumultuous relationships between the Verger siblings is significantly intertwined with the lives of several of the show's most important characters (both Vergers are patients of Lecter, and Margot has a sexual relationship, first with Will, and later Alana). Margot therefore has more narrative agency and character development than in the novel. Although some 'purist' readers and viewers may not appreciate the less-than-faithful adaptation of the source narrative, the series' clever

reinterpretation of earlier storylines and development of the relationships between the various characters increases suspense and plays skilfully with pre-existing expectations.

Equally successful is the depiction of the secondary villains who feature throughout the series. With the exception of Hannibal and the Red Dragon (and Garret Hobbes, who is briefly mentioned in *Red Dragon*), all of them have been specifically created by Bryan Fuller and his writing staff, and have not been extracted from the novels or the films. A number of the murderers capture the viewer's interest because of the inventiveness of their misdeeds, such as is the case with a serial killer who half-buries comatose diabetics in order to grow mushrooms out of their bodies (in 'Amouse-Bouche', the second episode of Season 1). It is the presence of the killers and their actions that qualify *Hannibal* as proper horror TV, which, according to Helen Wheatley, is characterised by 'a proclivity towards the structures and images of the uncanny [...], is visually dark, with a *mise-en-scène* dominated by drab and dismal colours, shadows and close-in spaces [...] [and is] inclined towards camerawork and sound recording taken from a subjective perspective'.<sup>4</sup> *Hannibal's* status as horror TV in Wheatley's sense is made evident primarily in those sequences that linger irreverently on the mutilated corpses of the victims, as the camera effectively merges the investigative gaze of the FBI agents as much as with the voyeuristic pleasure of the assassins. Close-ups, often accompanied by the show's beautifully ominous electronic soundtrack (considered by critics such as Libby Hill to be TV's scariest soundtrack<sup>5</sup>), frequently show the viewer the devastation caused by human evil, the wounds left by weapons, percolating blood and, most of all, the glistening organs of Hannibal's many victims, which we repeatedly see being meticulously prepared for consumption. Indeed, the series consistently transforms the kitchen into a locus of horror. However, this visual cruelty is relieved somewhat by a heavy dose of irony, and even morbid black comedy, often courtesy of Hannibal's macabre comments and deadpan observations (such as the line '[n]ext time bring your wife. I'd like to have you both for dinner' in the episode 'Apéritif').

By the end of Season 2, although Hannibal's crimes have been exposed, he has escaped the trap set by Jack and Will, and so his misdeeds throughout the first half of the last season are instead enacted in European cities such as Paris, Florence, and Palermo. We even have a return to the character's own decidedly gothic Eastern-European roots, as Will eventually searches for his nemesis in the Lecters' abandoned castle in Lithuania, where the

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<sup>4</sup> Helen Wheatley, *Gothic Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> See Libby Hill, 'Hannibal: 3 Steps to TV's Scariest Soundtrack', 12 June 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/arts/television/hannibal-3-steps-to-tvs-scariest-soundtrack.html?mcubz=3>> [accessed 28 August 2017].

origins of his evil are explored. At the same time, during the first half of Season 3, the narrative assumes a non-linear arc that gradually explains to the viewer how the various characters have survived the catastrophic events that occurred at the end of Season 2, and how they have been changed (and in one important instance, literally haunted) by their horrific experiences.

In Season 3, as in the rest of the series, ‘taste’ in all of its manifestations is an essential component: viewers will may find their mouths watering each time Hannibal serves a beautifully presented meal to his guests, despite what we know of his often-unsavoury ingredients. Our seduction is also auditory; the series is wonderfully sound-tracked by electronic composer Brian Reitzell, who alternates the atmospheric use of natural sounds (such as drops of water) with strident and cacophonous notes made by violins, and the frightening and often abrupt use of percussion. Echoing *The Silence of the Lambs*, here the soundtrack also frequently deploys classical music in sequences depicting Hannibal at work and play. These include Lecter’s own ‘theme’ (the ‘Aria da Capo’ from Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*), Beethoven’s ‘Piano Concert No. 1 in C Major’, Bach’s ‘Dona Nobis Pacem’, and parts of Verdi’s *Macbeth* and Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*.

*Hannibal* is due the appreciation and respect of both readers and viewers already familiar with the original literary and cinematic texts, and those who are encountering the main character for the first time. As all of this suggests, one of the most troubling and intriguing aspects of the show is the fact that, despite what we know of Lecter’s sadistic actions, many viewers may well be hoping that he gets away with it in the end: the character’s penetrating insight, appreciation of high culture, impeccable manners and elegance, combined with an immensely charismatic turn from Mikkelsen, all make him a fascinating anti-hero. On the other hand, those who want the title character to be punished for his heinous crimes will be tormented by his continuous escapes and will cheer for the dogged FBI agents who are trying to bring him to justice. *Hannibal* can rightly be considered a worthy successor of the five cinematic adaptations of the novel and a compelling alternative to them, and should appeal equally to readers and viewers already familiar with the original literary and cinematic texts, and those who are encountering the main character for the first time. So, please, sit down, and bon appétit!

*Antonio Sanna*