



“They don’t have a name for what he is”: The strategic de-characterization of J. Demme’s Hannibal Lecter

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ABSTRACT

This essay challenges the myth of Hannibal Lecter, in Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs*, as an enigmatic and unclassifiable character. Lecter’s enigma is generated through a largely unexplored process of de-characterization, i.e. by recurrently presenting him through the speech of other characters who describe him as unknowable. After considering Lecter’s case against the background of well-known literary unknowabilities, a deductive phenomenological exploration of Lecter’s de-characterization is carried out with the assistance of tools from the disciplines of personality and social psychology, and supported by empirical evidence from those fields. The demystifying of Lecter’s unreadability does not entail a debasement of the film or the character. On the contrary, Lecter’s de-characterization, albeit a form of narrative manipulation, is viewed as responsible for much of the film’s impact and success. It produces sensitivity-boosting effects; it mediates the indirect characterization of the other characters; and it engages the spectators’ self-image thus contributing importantly to the enjoyment and appreciation of the film.

KEYWORDS: Hannibal Lecter, psychonarratology, characterization, phenomenology, unknowability, realism.

1. LECTER’S ENIGMA

Wrapped in a dirty straitjacket, with his vehement stare and an ominous mouthpiece covering most of his face, Anthony Hopkins’ version of Hannibal Lecter in Jonathan Demme’s *The*

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Silence of the Lambs (Demme, 1991) constitutes a forceful and influential expression of evil.¹ His being so tightly tied up and muzzled appears as the symptom of lethal versatility. Stare and attire circumscribe a deadly potentiality wanting to be unleashed. “[O]ur imaginings of the terror he would wreak if he escaped –writes Friend– exceed what that terror could ever be” (quoted in Fuller, 2005: 823). Fascination is mediated by Demme’s use of suggestion. When FBI inspector Jack Crawford (JC) [Scott Glenn] sends Clarice Starling [Jodie Foster] to interview Lecter, he warns her of the possible dangers in a suggestive way:

[1] JC. Be very careful with Hannibal Lecter. Doctor Chilton at the asylum will go over all the physical procedures used with him. Do not deviate from them for any reason whatsoever. And you’re to tell him nothing personal, Starling. Believe me; you don’t want Hannibal Lecter inside your head. (7’30’)

All we are let to know is that there are extreme safety procedures involved in any dealings with Lecter. Mere conversation with him involves risks. Lecter’s malice and versatility are barely hinted at. “The monster resides –Carroll writes– in [...] an unstable threshold world that separates known from unknown” (Carroll 2015:43). Doctor Chilton [Anthony Heald] confesses shortly after: “We’ve tried to study him, of course, but he is much too sophisticated” (7’59’). In *Red Dragon* (Harris, 1982), detective Graham had similarly advanced: “[Psychologists] say he’s a sociopath, because they don’t know what else to call him” (53).² He is unclassifiable, and proud of his own complexity. He makes fun of Starling when she hands him a personality test: “you think you can dissect me with this blunt little tool?” (16’00’). Lecter generates perplexity among the inhabitants of his fictional world. Officer Murray (OM) [Brent Hinkley] asks Starling (CS):

[2] OM. Is it true what they are saying? . . . He’s some kind of vampire?
[3] CS. They don’t have a name for what he is. (63’18’)

Specialized scholarship has further echoed Lecter’s inscrutability as a rule. He has been described as “not a [...] known subject, but a (fatal) object” (Taylor, 1994: 220), “an enigmatic devil” (Grixti, 1995: 87), “a bizarre puzzle” (Platt, 2003: 5), “inscrutable...

¹Reflecting on this influence, Kendrick mentions films such as *Seven* (Fincher, 1995); TV series such as *Dexter* (Manos, 2006), *Bates Hotel* (Cuse et al., 2013) or *The Following* (Williamson, 2013); and a number of documentaries (Kendrick, 2016: 230). To Kendrick’s list we could add the TV series *Hannibal* (Fuller, 2013) and *Mindhunter* (Penhall, 2017).

²In presenting Lecter through perplexed focalizers (Bal 1985, 147), Demme is resorting to a strategy already deployed by Harris in *Red Dragon*. The term sociopath is not empty. It refers to characteristic behaviors that involve arrogance, domineering, emotional shallowness, manipulateness, lack of empathy and inability to experience guilt. Psychopath is the term preferred by those who tend to think this condition to be innate, while sociopath is favored by those who consider it learned (Kendrick, 2016, 183–233).

murky... almost oracular” (Senior, 2003: 215), “a source of mystery and the plague of classificatory systems” (Schmid, 2007: 390) or an “elusive and destabilizing character” (Cenciarelli, 2012: 114).

However, scholarship has also developed more than a shallow acquaintance with Dr. Lecter. They have identified his skills: “[He] has the power to strip away people’s outer defenses” (Persaud, 1991: 1545), an ability to control emotions (Donald, 1992) and to manipulate (DeLisi et al., 2010: 169), and “analytical skills that at times verge on a capacity for empathy” (Cenciarelli, 2012: 117), etc. Scholars are acquainted with his preferences: He is the “campy gay aesthete” (Robbins, 2002: 88), who “will always choose the vulgar as victim” (Platt, 2003: 5) and who “does not suffer rudeness easily” (Carroll, 2015: 48). Some have identified his motivations: He tries to satisfy “his otherwise uncontrollable desire to control [...] anxiety” (Gregory, 2002: 107), possessed by “an overarching desire to get inside the minds or his [...] patients so that he can control them” (Gregory, 2002: 110). Some have reflected on his interactional style: He has an “amusing, if perverse, sense of humor” (Fuller, 2005: 823), is sensitive and mannered (Carroll, 2015: 48), and “plays God with people’s lives to devalue them” (Gregory, 2002: 112), etc. So much for inscrutability.

While specialized scholarship might want to ponder the fact that Lecter seems both inscrutable and, at the same time, recognizable from afar, the general narratologist might be interested in de-characterization itself. In characterization studies, scholars distinguish between information given explicitly about a character –E.g. ‘John is a psychopath’– and information that is derived by the reader/spectator upon observing (or reading about) the character’s behavior (Culpeper, 2001; Margolin, 1986; Pfister, 1988; Rimmon-Kennan, 1983). The source of explicit characterization is relevant because it implies a point of view, and a sometimes limited internal focalization (Bal, 1985: 152); Culpeper distinguishes between explicit self-presentations, where a character presents itself, and explicit other-presentations, where a character presents another character. When Chilton proclaims that Lecter is a psychopath (7’55”), this constitutes an uncontroverted case of explicit other-presentation; but when Graham, Chilton and Starling suggest that Lecter is un-construable, what we have is a case de-characterization, which has so far escaped, as allegedly has Lecter himself, most known typologies. The ascribed attribute paradoxically denies the possibility of ascribing any attributes.

The notion of character un-construability challenges the very definition of character, which for Prince included the condition of being classable (Prince, 1982: 124). Lecter’s de-characterization presents us with a multifaceted theoretical challenge: Either it imposes the unlikely notion of Lecter as a non-character, or it points to a deficiency in the classical definition of character. This classical definition has been challenged from several fronts, but Demme’s Lecter is not enlisted in them. In the following three sections, I will explore some well-known instances of characters challenging construability, in order to determine the extent to which Demme’s Lecter might claim any lineage from them.

2. AMBIGUOUS CHARACTERS

Unclassifiable in narratological terms often means morally ambiguous. Ambiguous characters behave virtuously sometimes, and sometimes reprehensibly. They are neither fully heroes nor fully villains –although they sometimes may function as one or the other, or both. Audiences enjoy ambiguous characters (Krakowiak & Oliver, 2012; Shafer & Raney, 2012). In her recipe for successful stories, Deborah Chester actually recommends designed ambiguity: Protagonists are to be endowed with five virtues against two vices; the ratio must be inverted for antagonists (Chester, 2016).

Characters who behave both virtuously and maliciously are less predictable. Readers and spectators following the ups and downs of such characters are likely to experience mixed feelings –we like them and dislike them alternatively or even at the same time. Such forms of ambiguity are not, however, necessarily beyond understanding, or even systematics – Chester’s proposal constituting a good example of the latter.

Lecter presents a peculiar combination of bad and not so bad traits.³ He is a savage with a literal taste for gore, but also a cultivated man attracted to the artistic and sublime. A refined connoisseur of cosmetics (13’48”), his predator super senses also allow him to smell running blood at the other side of a safety screen (26’54”). Mostly antisocial, he also displays pro-social behaviors: He offers Starling a clean towel when she is soaked with rain (26’16”), and compliments her every now and then. He kills and eats people, yet he thinks of himself as courteous and is deeply offended by discourtesy (18’10”). A gruesome killer, unimaginably complicated at a psychological level, and yet, all he wants from life now is a window overlooking trees and water (29’31”). To conceive of a frame that may encompass all these aspects stands as a challenge for the audience. It is not an impossible challenge though; rather, I would say, it is an enjoyable one.

Moral ambiguity seems somewhat shortsighted when we approach Lecter’s unknowability. There is no doubt in the minds of those who describe Lecter as unknowable that his behavior is unambiguously negative in terms of morality. Nobody dwells on whether he is good or bad; he is clearly bad, and everybody understands that. There are, however, other ways of approaching ambiguity that are closer to the notion of unknowability. If a character’s behavior may be construed as honest when perceived from a particular angle, and dishonest when viewed from another, we are faced with ambiguity and knowledge impasse. This is a common issue that arises when making sense of others. Should we turn it into a fundamental principle, it would sink any construal effort in relation to fictional characters

³ As Baelo-Allué (2002) predicts, we are likely to experience positive affects towards Lecter. Fuller points out the radical difference between Harris’s psychotic criminals –such as Buffalo Bill– and Lecter, with his “impressive erudition, his cultivated aestheticism and some appealing personal qualities” (Fuller, 2005: 824).

into deconstructive entropy.⁴ Such unknowability would not affect Lecter only, but any other existing fictional characters as well as real people. My concern is with whether Demme's Lecter is particularly un-construable.

Let us not discard, however, this second form ambiguity too soon. Knowledge impasse caused by radical ambiguity turns out to be the theme of a particular sequence in the film. The following exchange between Crawford and Starling gravitates around it:

[4] JC. Starling?

[5] CS. Sir?

[6] JC. Miggs is dead.

[7] CS. Dead? How?

[8] JC. They heard Lecter whispering to him all afternoon and Miggs crying. They found at bed check. He'd swallowed his own tongue. [pause] Starling?

[9] CS. Yeah. I'm still here, sir. I just... I don't know how to feel about this.

[10] JC. You don't have to feel any way about it. Lecter did it to amuse himself. (20'46")

This exchange is interesting for the non-verbalized assumptions upon which it stands, and the amount of mind-reading that we are required to construe between Crawford and Starling (Palmer, 2004). Concerning [9], without recourse to mind-reading it would strike us as strange that Starling does not know that she must feel horrified by what has happened. But we know what is in her mind: Miggs [Stuart Rudin] had abused her, and Lecter was visibly disgusted by the event. Lecter might have caused Miggs' death as a punishment. Although brutal, it would mean that he cares for Starling. Should she feel flattered/guilty for such a radical demonstration of affect? Crawford reads Starling's mind with exquisite accuracy: Lecter did not do it by way of retribution, nor because he is emotionally attached to Starling; no attachments here, just line [10]. Crawford is not surprised at Starling's mixed feelings; he understands them as quickly as he discards them. There is logic behind Starling's reaction; but it is countered by Crawford's logic. Two ways of construing a single act: knowledge impasse. Lecter is rather ambiguous in his attitude towards Starling. By the end of the film he seems to have developed either true affect or a clinical/intellectual interest in her. What it is that he truly feels is bound to remain unknown, at this point, and to turn into a matter for debate.⁵ A fuzzy spot, however, does not turn Lecter, necessarily, into an unknowable character.

⁴ Bal's reflection on the resistance of characters is related to this deconstructive entropy, and it is welcomed as such: "Characters give most literary pleasure when allowed to resist the reader" (1985: 114).

⁵ For DeLisi et al. (2010) there is no doubt that Lecter develops a "sentimental, warm connection to Clarice Starling" (175). However, they are considering Lecter as he appears after the novel *Hannibal* has seen the light, and where Hannibal and Clarice actually initiate a romantic relationship. This final Lecter has lost his inscrutable condition: he is simply –and, for some, disappointingly (Schmid, 2007) – a case of paranoid-

Ambiguity constitutes a key element in psychological horror fiction, where it often affects the reliability of representations –like those entertained by the Torrence family in Kubricks’s *The Shining* (1980) (Ebert, 2006); it obstructs our access to the significance of signs that “appear only as form”, their contents “clouded in an ambiguity which we cannot decipher” (Stewart, 1982: 37). Such is the proclaimed void behind Lecter’s façade. While de-characterization is by no means a common technique, it is no wonder that we often find instances of it in horror stories, such as *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), where the possessing entity introduces itself with “I am no one”; an empty form that resembles Lecter’s “I happened” (Harris, 1988: 20).⁶ Emptiness behind form is easier to proclaim, though, than it is to maintain.

3. CONVENTIONAL UNKNOWINGS

We know of characters that are not meant to be known as a matter of convention. In children’s literature, for example, we have the opaque characters of action-oriented stories (Nikolajeva, 2014; Nodelman, 1992;). In folktales, we are not supposed to construe much about the hero’s or villain’s psychology (Todorov, 1977). Conventional flat characters are not to be known because conventions establish that such knowledge is irrelevant. The conventions for psychological horror narratives like *The Silence of the Lambs* are diametrically opposed to those of folktales in this sense.

The unknowable characters of the Theatre of the Absurd also inhabit conventionalized universes. Non-realistic conventions justify their unknowability, which is of a different nature from that claimed for Lecter. The fact that Lecter cannot be captured by psychological analysis within his own world turns him into a rare case in that very world. Absurd characters, on the other hand, are not usually received with perplexity by other characters within their dysfunctional worlds.

Full person-knowability is a realistic illusion without a true correlate in real life. This was Forster’s celebrated intuition, rigorously developed by Weinstein in his analysis of modernist fiction (Forster, 1927; Weinstein, 2005). The reality of the human mind after Freud characteristically includes a hidden and elusive unconscious, stuck in the past but exerting its power over our present moods and actions. Modernist narrative, in Weinstein’s rendering, departs from realist conventions in order to aesthetically recapture the real in its

schizoid post-stress traumatic disorder (Gregory, 2002). I am more concerned here with Demme’s de-characterization of Lecter.

⁶ A more recent example of de-characterization can be found in the presentation of Negan [Jeffrey Dean Morgan], the celebrated antagonist in *The Walking Dead* (Darabont, 2010) who appears first as an un-ascribable gender-ambiguous proper name that commands respect, but seems also imbued with collective properties; we also have Rathman’s [Jordan Gelber] description of Berkowitz in *Mindhunter* (Penhall, 2017): “If we are looking for a motive we can understand, we suddenly find there is none. It’s a void. It’s a black hole” (13’ 45”).

elusiveness, in the form of modernist unknowable characters, like Kafka's or Faulkner's. Or even Toni Morrison's character *Beloved*, existing within the laws of magical realism and constituting what Phelan calls a "paradigmatic case of the stubborn." That is: "Despite the best efforts of many careful readers, her character escapes any comprehensive, coherent account." (Phelan, 1996: 178) Unknowable, *Beloved* is neither flat, nor a mere plot-oriented function; and she is certainly not absurd. But she is not like Lecter, either, in her non-construability. The inhabitant of a crude naturalistic world, Lecter's recalcitrance is not of the kind that will not yield. Some characters claim that he is unreadable, but others read him wonderfully.

The Silence of the Lambs is imbued with Freudian notions. In its story-world, humans have a subconscious dimension palpitating in stagnant past that determines their behavior. The title itself refers to a cardinal experience in Starling's life that explains her becoming a police officer. In this way, the subconscious gets explicitly thematized in the film. The subconscious is not here the object of aesthetic reformulation, but a narrative force that operates within a form of brutal realism. In fact, although the subconscious might be evasive for most people, it turns out to be epically accessible to particular characters. The ability to access other's hidden secrets and to exploit them to the point of turning people into mere puppets is the main issue with Lecter (DeLisi et al. 2010; Hantke, 1998; Persaud, 1991), just as flying is the main issue with Superman. Crawford and Starling fascinate for the same reason. The stronger intellects feed on the weaker intellects. The naturalistic conceptual framework behind the story-world actually depicts a universe where power lies in being able to read, predict and manipulate others, sometimes for legitimate and relatively innocuous purposes –as when Crawford wins the favor of sheriff Perkins [Pat McNamara] by appealing to male chauvinism at the expense of Starling (37'32")– sometimes for less noble reasons –as when Lecter talks Miggs into killing himself. Through *The Silence of the Lambs* we do not enter a universe where humans are ultimately unknowable, but one where they are characteristically and dramatically knowable at their own cost. Lecter is no exception. The following exchange between Crawford and Starling is quite revealing in this sense:

[11] CS. You haven't mentioned anything about the information contained in my report or on Dr. Lecter's offer, sir.

[12] JC. I'm considering it.

[13] CS. That's why you sent me in there, isn't it? To get his help on Buffalo Bill, sir? [Pause] Well, if that was the case, then, I just wish I was in on it, that's all.

[14] CS. If I'd sent you in there with an actual agenda, Lecter would have known it instantly. He would have toyed with you, then turned to stone (36'12")

Crawford knows Lecter well enough to devise the kind of strategy that will make him contribute to the case. Starling herself ends up developing, in relation to Lecter, the kind of

knowledge that allows her to make predictions. After Lecter's escape, Starling's mate, Ardelia (Ar) [Kasi Lemmons], is worried about Starling's safety:

[15] Ar. They found the ambulance in a parking garage at the airport. Crew was dead. He killed a tourist too. Got his cloths, cash. By now he could be anywhere.

[16] CS. He won't come after me.

[17] Ar. Oh, really?

[18] CS. He won't. I can't explain it. He would consider that rude. (81'39")

Starling cannot fully articulate her own intuition, so much for unknowability.⁷ But she has an understanding of Lecter's viewpoint, of the cardinality of courtesy within his value system and the behavioral ramifications of his conception of rudeness. Even clownish doctor Chilton is able to tailor specific forms of torture for Lecter –he turns down the lights on a man who wants a window, and takes his drawings away (29'00"). Supposedly unknowable, Lecter quite often turns out to be the prey of other intellects.

4. INHERITED UNKNOWING

Within the domain of literature we encounter “characters for whom there is an insufficiency of material [...] to release them from their unreadability” (Abbott, 2013: 126). One such character is Melville's *Bartleby*, about whom a narrator claims: “Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable.” (quoted in Abbot, 2013: 127).

A relevant question tangentially considered by Abbott and unavoidable in our particular case is: Whose predicament is this insufficiency of material? *Bartleby's*? If this was the case, we would have to cope with the notion that *Bartleby* is objectively unreadable.⁸ Or is it the narrator/focalizer's predicament, who happens to be unable to read a character that must be, after all, readable? This is Delbanco's solution: to view the narrator's inability as the main issue at hand, so that *Bartleby's* opacity is there to characterize the narrator (Abbott, 2013: 128; Delbanco, 2005: 221).⁹ Finally, the insufficiency of material might simply be our own predicament as readers if the text does not provide sufficient material for our construal task to succeed.

⁷ The source of anxiety in horror fiction has to do with “something felt or intuited rather than perceived or understood” (Hanscomb, 2010: 10). Intuition is knowledge without understanding. Starling intuits Lecter. Some have argued that she represents the rule of technology and reason (Platt, 2013), but her talent, like Graham's, resembles a form of capricious and mysterious intuition.

⁸ Similar issues have been raised concerning the possibility of considering Lecter a materialization of pure evil (Gixti, 1995; Metcalf, 1995; Messent, 2000).

⁹ A similar notion is presented by Bal in relation to focalization: “The image a focalizer presents of an object – Lecter in this case– says something about the focalizer itself” (1985: 153).

The narrator/focalizer's predicament does not necessarily lead to the reader's predicament. Some focalizers are actually designed to see and understand less than readers.¹⁰ Whatever the focalizers perceive, pretending that there is an insufficiency of materials for the spectator to construe Hannibal Lecter in Demme's film is clearly untenable.

Detective-like mind-readers can always construe. Going back to Melville's story, such readers might build upon the fact that Bartleby's chosen answer to extra demands is a polite "I would prefer not to," rather than a convivial "No way, mate," or an obsequious "Yes sir, right away." While Abbott acknowledges that something might be construed from this leitmotiv, he claims, not without reason, that such construal would lack depth (127). In the case of Demme's film, on the other hand, spectators are faced with a richness of material that probably goes beyond what we are able to process consciously. There can be no thought of a scarcity of data when we listen, with Starling, to Chilton's description of Lecter as a monster and his narration of macabre anecdotes (7'55"), nor when we follow her down, through safety doors and noisy barred sliding gates, meeting heavily armed security guards in our way; or when we finally walk with Starling down the last dark corridor where we encounter the other inmates and Lecter, standing army-like, his uniform ironed and clean, his face well shaved and his hair neatly combed, a table crowded with drawing and reading material, and his drawings on the wall (11'56"). There are too many indexes here to maintain the claim of material shortage. Demme has a theory of Lecter. His direction differs significantly in this respect from that of Mann's adaptation of *Red Dragon* in *Manhunter* (1986). Mann, more respectful with the notion of an unreadable Lecter, places him in the claustrophobic whiteness of an empty and totally aseptic cell.

5. CONSTRUING LECTER

Lecter's inscrutability is under suspicion. Admitting that he can be ambiguous at times, the fact is that other characters in the story-world, while expressing puzzlement about him, are able to predict and even manipulate him. I will further prove that Lecter is construable by construing him from available textual data. Let us begin with some conversation analysis. Crawford wants Lecter's expertise and cooperation in the capture of a serial killer, and he sends Starling to interview him. Starling meets Lecter at the psychiatric asylum where the following exchange takes place:

[19] HL. Good Morning!

[20] CS. Dr. Lecter, my name is Clarice Starling. May I speak with you?

[21] HL. You're one of Jack Crawford's, aren't you?

¹⁰ Bal provides the example of James's *What Maisie Knew* (Bal, 1985: 150).

[22] CS. I am, yes.

[23] HL. May I see your credentials?

[24] CS. Certainly.

[25] HL. Closer please. Closer!! That expires in one week. You're not a real FBI, are you?

[26] CS. I'm still in training at the academy.

[27] HL. Jack Crawford sent a trainee to me!?! (12'00")

Conversation analysis shows Lecter's disposition to compete rather than cooperate. From his initial greeting on, Lecter assumes the first part of any adjacency pairs, and refuses to follow Starling's initiative. After she has addressed him by his professional title, and has asked for permission to speak, Lecter denies her individuality by ascribing her to a group and delays an answer to her request by inserting up to five demands. In line [21], Lecter is already leading the conversation at will and exercising control. Starling obediently follows Lecter's commands –infringing security rules. She is mercilessly belittled: “You're not a real FBI” [25] –says Lecter–, implying that there is pretense in her pose. Lecter situates himself above Starling and her boss, betraying a narcissistic sense of superiority.

Lecter's behavior lends itself to a reduction to traits. To exemplify such reduction, I will use the categories of the Five Factor Model of personality (FFM).¹¹ In FFM terms, Lecter's uncooperativeness can be understood as Negative Agreeableness (Costa & McCrae, 1992: 15). It has been elsewhere proposed that this is the defining core trait of villains (Cámara-Arenas, 2011). They “stretch the truth” and are “guarded in expressing [their] true feelings;” and/or they are “self-centered and reluctant to get involved in the problems of others;” and/or they prefer “to compete rather than cooperate,” with no reluctance to “express anger when necessary;” and/or they “believe they are superior people”; and/or they are “hardheaded and [not] moved by appeals to pity,” as people who “consider themselves realists [...] who make rational decisions based on cold logic,” etc. (Costa & McCrae, 1992: 17–18). Many instances of disagreeableness can be found in Lecter's behavior: his venomous tongue, his frivolity in referring to the suffering of others, the debasing nicknames he uses, etc. This supposedly unclassifiable man happens to be characteristically disagreeable.

Starling notices that Lecter's cell is decorated with his own drawings, one of his favorites being that of the “Duomo, seen from the Belvedere” (14'05"). In FFM terms, this is evidence of Openness to Aesthetics, and predicts “a deep appreciation for art and beauty” of someone who is often “moved by poetry, absorbed in music, and intrigued by art” (Costa & McCrae, 1992: 17). The film offers further evidence of this: It shows Lecter, for example, rapt in piano music right after having beaten Lt. Boyle [Charles Napier] to death with a club

¹¹ My analysis here will borrow from Cámara-Arenas' methodological proposal for the analysis of filmic villains (2011).

(71'12").¹² He then ornamentally hangs Boyle's body from the bars of the cell, dramatically darkened against a back white light (76'34").¹³

In establishing a vibrant teacher-student dialectics with Starling (Robbins, 1996), with a discourse full of riddles and anagrams, and in visibly enjoying such interactions, Lecter can be construed as someone Open to Ideas, who shows "an active pursuit of intellectual interests for their own sake" and will "enjoy both philosophical arguments and brain-teasers" (Costa & McCrae, 1992: 17).

Disagreeableness and Openness to Aesthetics and Ideas is what results from a descriptive approach. But we can go further, and look inside Lecter for aspects of his worldview and value-system which may explain some behaviors. Consider the following exchange:

[28] HL. Agent Starling! Come back! Agent Starling! Agent Starling! I would not have had that happen to you. Discourtesy is unspeakably ugly to me.
 [29] CS. Then do this test for me!
 [30] HL. No, but I will make you happy. I'll give you a chance for what you love most.
 (18'10")

As her first conversation with Lecter ends and Starling walks towards the exit, inmate Miggs, in the cell next to Lecter's, abuses her in an obscene fashion. Commotion from the other inmates ensues and Lecter's voice is heard uttering the words in line [28]. He explicitly points to an inner disposition against discourtesy that will be taken up in later scenes (line [18] above), but there are other subtle inferences to be drawn from this passage. Lecter expresses a sense of responsibility for Miggs' misbehavior in line [28]. Both Lecter and Starling assume that the latter has become entitled to compensation from the former, which is so much as assuming that Lecter should have been able and expected to control Miggs. This is a key notion concerning the villain: a pathological need to control others (Gregory, 2002).

This is Lecter's way: first he learns about your inner secrets and conflicts, and then he uses this knowledge to manipulate and destroy you. It is just by talking to Miggs that he pushes him to kill himself. Crawford's advice –line [1]– no to share personal information with the killer makes full sense; Crawford *knows* perfectly well, by the way, what Lecter is capable of once he gets into your head.

In verbal interactions, Lecter is always in control; his discourse traps his victims and strikes hard; such is the dynamics of his exchange with Senator Martin, the mother of a kidnapped girl. Lecter claims to have information that might be used to identify the captor,

¹² The characterizing potential of music in relation to Lecter has been brilliantly described by Cenciarelli (2012).

¹³ Lecter is one of those villains, like John Doe in Fincher's *Seven* (1995), concerned with the aesthetic presentation of corpses; yet another evidence of opening to aesthetics intimately related to serial killing, whose roots in the Gothic genre have been very well traced by Baelo-Allué (2002).

but he gives a piece of information and then says something extremely disturbing to the senator, who wants to go away, only to be lured back with another piece of helpful information, and then more poisoned words. Tied up and muzzled, yet Lecter controls everyone around him. Power and control through knowledge and discourse. Aware of how personal information is the key to control others,¹⁴ it is not surprising that Lecter violently resists any external attempts to gather information about him: “A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans, and a nice Chianti” (17'19"). It is just a matter of character consistency.

There are tools for capturing antisocial traits which might be even more useful than the FFM inventory (Veselka, Schermer, and Vernon, 2012). The need for control is related to one of the three factors of the so-called Dark Triad: Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy. Lecter becomes readable when viewed against the elements of the triad, especially if considered as inner behavioral drives (Rauthmann, 2011: 503): A dark character's behavior is modelled by an urgent need (1) to capture attention and admiration at all costs (Narcissism), (2) to attain power at all costs (Machiavellianism), and (3) to seek thrill and fun at all costs (Psychopathy). The at-all-costs tail links these mottoes to a disagreeable disregard for the well-being of others. Some aspects of Lecter's behavior – particularly his tendency to manipulate others– can be understood as interconnected by an underlying Machiavellian motivation; and I have already presented evidence of his narcissism. A pathological need for intense excitement is a very prominent key element in Lecter's construction. Twice in the film we see him in a state of quasi-mystical rapture: one, in the macabre scene involving piano music mentioned above; the other occurs when Lecter uncovers Starling's motives for becoming an FBI agent (67'03"). It is pleasure and sensations that Lecter is after: “What I want is a view. I want a window where I can see a tree or even water” (29'27"). Demonstrating full acquaintance with Lecter's nature, what Starling offers in return for his cooperation has to do with intellectual stimulation and sensations:

[24] CS. You'd have reasonable access to books. Best of all, though, one week of the year, you get to leave the hospital and go here. Plum Island. Every day of that week you may walk on the beach, you may swim in the ocean, for up to one hour . . . (50'15")

Starling knows what makes Lecter tick. She offers books for his Openness to Ideas, and the physical sensations of a day on the beach. Lecter takes the bait. The unclassifiable villain turns out to be a consistent antisocial character whose behavior can be captured by traits, and some of whose inner drives may be productively hypothesized, and even exploited by other characters.

¹⁴ According to Hantke, in Lecter's world, trying to know others implies an attempt to “penetrate, invade, undermine, and destroy private space” (1998: 184).

Last but not least, Lecter's behavior can also be subjected to causal analysis. In a nutshell, causal analysis helps us determine the extent to which someone's behavior is caused by individual dispositions, or by circumstances, or by exposure to specific stimuli (Culpeper, 2001; Kelley, 1973). Technical calculations can be made in this respect for which there is no room in the present study (Cámara-Arenas, 2010); however, it is clear that Lecter has been constructed in a life-like fashion inasmuch as his behavior is affected by external factors. We are ready to accept, for example, that eight years of isolated imprisonment have softened him to the point of being content with a simple window overlooking a tree. Other characters seem just as aware of the effect of circumstances, as doctor Chilton (Ch) reminds us:

[25] Ch. Crawford is very clever, isn't he, using you?

[26] CS. What do you mean, sir?

[27] Ch. A pretty young woman to turn him on. I don't believe Lecter has seen a woman in eight years. (8'44")

Any heterosexual person who has spent eight years in a cell will gladly receive a young and attractive member of the opposite sex; and although not everybody would be so cruel and poisonous, everybody would be expected to seek retribution when betrayed. Lecter's cruelty against Senator Martin, discussed above, may now be contemplated under a different light: Lecter has been betrayed by Crawford and tortured by Chilton; his maltreatment of the Senator (60'00") might be planned to put them on a tight spot. This is understandable behavior.

6. UNDERSTANDING LECTER'S DE-CHARACTERIZATION

It is now time to face the fact that Lecter is presented as psychologically unanalyzable, when he is clearly otherwise. Although this is a matter of inconsistency, it is clearly not of the kind that will jump at the average spectator. It requires some specialized processing to detect it and it would be unwise to consider it merely a characterization flaw. Demme's de-characterization of Lecter is part of the suggestive dynamics mentioned at the beginning of this essay. It is related to suspense: An information gap is created that generates a state of expectation in the audience (Brewer and Lichtenstein, 1982); it seeks to provoke a complex intellectual-emotional experience on spectators.

Some methodological issues must be addressed before continuing. Experience is private, and there is usually a resistance to accept specialist readers' impositions as to what we are expected to feel when confronted with particular texts. The ensuing discussion will follow deductively from an intuitive set of premises that veer away from imposition towards

the open discussion of the director's likely intentions:¹⁵ (1.) Processing entails experiencing; (2.) some of these experiences can be predicted; (3.) some are, in fact, technique triggered; and (4.) they are both integrative and directional. These premises overcome issues of imposition by suggesting, quite commonsensically, that writers and film directors deploy strategies to evoke ideas, feelings and impulses (Plantinga, 2011; Smith, 2015), and character-effects (Bal, 1985: 113). The support of empirical evidence from the field of psychology will be invoked when available.

In traversing the phenomenological domain, Abbott shows caution, though not impartiality, in relation to technique-triggered experiences. In his discussion of Kathryn Harrison's unreadable Aleut woman, he does not hesitate to propose what a reader *must* feel: "This unreadability is what must be felt, along with its power to captivate. This complex experience is the target of Harrison's considerable creative energy. To allow too great an encroachment of the symbolic mode of response, then, is to risk disengaging from what the novel does so well" (Abbot, 2013: 133).

This unreadability intended to be felt is described in terms of a "combination of anxiety and wonder that is aroused when an unreadable mind is accepted as unreadable" (Abbott, 2013: 124). Although Abbott does not present empirical support for his claims, the fact is that they sit perfectly with well-known theoretical stances within the fields of social psychology and even linguistics. Scholars from both fields have proposed that we are biologically programmed to constantly test and update our mental representations of the world and to develop a sense of control over our environment (Crisp and Turner, 2010: 44; Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 47).¹⁶ Confronting the unreadable causes, consequently, unsettling states at a primordial level. Empirical evidence shows that such unsettling is enjoyable when kept within limits of safety and tolerance (Berlyne, 1970: 279; Litman, 2005).

Upon learning that intradiegetic psychologists cannot reduce Lecter's complexity, spectators are likely to experience curiosity and the pleasures of unsettling person perception challenges. However, in the case of Demme's Lecter, we will not enjoy this particular set of pleasures for long because soon the character begins to yield. He appears in front of us perfectly construable: conscientious in matters of appearance and hygiene, sophisticated and knowledgeable of etiquette, competitive, disagreeable, narcissistic, open to aesthetics and thirsty for intellectual stimulation, etc. De-characterization previous to our encounter with Lecter was introduced in order to bring us to a state of hyper-sensitivity. It acts as a teaser inviting us to exert to the full our mind-reading potential, and ensures that when we finally meet Lecter our cognitive arousal magnifies the character-effect.

¹⁵These premises have already been used in previous phenomenological explorations (Cámara-Arenas, 2018).

¹⁶Similar claims about our natural need to find patterns and make sense have been made in relation to serial-killer narratives in general (Dyer, 1997), and *The Silence of the Lambs* in particular (Halberstam, 1995; Baelo-Allué, 2002).

The technique also triggers a sense of complicity. One of the main issues in the film has to do with whether Starling will manage to decipher Lecter and use his expertise in the case. Lecter's mind is a challenge put to Starling, and to us. We face it directly, and indirectly through sympathy with her. We want it solved personally, so as to resolve the previously induced unsettling; and we also want it solved for the protagonist's sake. Exerting reliable person-perception and mind-reading potential is Starling's, Crawford's, Lecter's and even Chilton's main business in the film.

The de-characterization of Lecter is also responsible for the indirect characterization of Starling and Crawford. This takes us back to Delbanco (2005) and his interpretation of Melville's *Bartleby*. Delbanco's interpretation consists in reducing *Bartleby* to a strategy for "eliciting traits of another character" (Abbott, 2013: 128) –in Melville's case, a focalizing narrator who is obsessed with domesticating *Bartleby*'s unreadability. In the case of Lecter, the mechanism is more complex. Spectators will accept that he is an impossible challenge for some characters within the story, but not so for amazingly intelligent and competent Starling, and Crawford; and us!

De-characterization not only brings about character effects; in the hands of Demme, it goes as far as to engage the spectator's self-image. It is, in the end, a form of manipulation by which we develop the complacent feeling that we are able solve Lecter's grand enigma, when in fact there is nothing extraordinarily difficult involved in this achievement.¹⁷ Starling's claim that Lecter will not be taking revenge on her –[15-18]– is understood by us; our complacency is increased by Ardelia's perplexity.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Demme's Lecter is not any more or less construable than most round characters; like most, he moves along a spectrum limited by resistance and openness at one end, and predictability and reductibility at the other (Bal, 1985: 120). By way of challenging the classical conception of character, he attains much less than modernist, absurd or magical characters. The myth of an inscrutable Lecter emerges out of crafty manipulative de-characterization.

At an elemental level, Demme's de-characterization works as a teaser that intensifies the spectator's natural impulse to construe characters and engage in mind-reading processes. By the time we encounter Lecter, we have been brought, through the directional integration of the de-characterization and other suggestive devices, to a state of arousal and readiness for person perception. The strategy magnifies our experience of the character and the terror he exerts.

¹⁷ According to Stewart, horror fiction generally "operates by a manipulation of narrativity itself" (Stewart, 1982: 33). Harris's and Demme's use of manipulative de-characterization constitutes a rare and effective device.

A consciously entertained belief in Lecter's inscrutability paradoxically overlaps with our ordinary automatic and epi-conscious construal of the character from the many textual cues available. At least two effects are made possible by this conjunction. First, we accept that Lecter is inscrutable but that some special characters like Starling and Crawford are genial enough to achieve the *impossible understanding*, however intuitive or pragmatic. Lecter's de-characterization mediates the indirect characterization of the protagonist as especially brilliant, and in so doing it elicits our positive affect and a sense of admiration towards her. Second, we accept that Lecter is inscrutable for most characters, but become complacent that we have also attained an intuitive knowledge about him comparable to that of Starling. We are capable of incorporating Starling's implicit understandings of Lecter as they manifest in the film.

Although our theories of Lecter, as spectators, are in no way extraordinary, nor any more meritorious than any other theories we constantly entertain about characters and people, they react with the recurring de-characterizations generating a sense complicity and intimacy with Starling and Lecter, and an unfounded but effective sense of satisfaction with our own person perception skills. This complacency prominently adds to the set of experiences that build towards the accumulative enjoyment and appreciation of the film. Although Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* is a remarkable film in many senses, the generally unnoticed de-characterization trick contributes importantly to its success. Should we edit Lecter's de-characterization out of it, the piece would lose much of its impact.

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