

Re-viewing Hannibal Lecter: critical responses to the seriality of horror, performance, and pleasure.

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Hannibal Lecter has been continuously present in contemporary screen culture since *Manhunter* (Mann 1986), the first adaptation of Thomas Harris' novels. The character has appeared onscreen six times and been played by four actors, becoming a cultural icon with Anthony Hopkins' award-winning performance in the second adaptation, *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1990). This paper starts from the positive critical responses which 'routinely enjoyed' Hopkins' – admittedly - brief portrayal of the character (Staiger 2000: 165). This contributed to a wider cultural view of the horror film where the quality of Hopkins' acting, coupled with a literate and suspenseful approach to serial killers, gave the film mainstream, middle-class appeal (Tasker 2002). Significantly, as the character became serialised over the course of two sequels, *Hannibal* (Scott, 2001) and *Red Dragon* (Ratner 2002), the dominant critical response developed into a less celebratory one, with some reviewing Hopkins as 'over the top' and 'camp'.

The aim of this paper is to consider the different performative and reception contexts that exist around Hannibal Lecter in order to investigate the relationship between seriality, genre, acting and pleasure. My consideration of these issues examines one specific mode of reception: the professionally circulated film / TV review. Following Toles (2011) study of critic Pauline Kael's ability to assess and re-project film performances in her reviews, I explore how similar re-projections occur through reviews of the six Lecter texts. These show how reviews continuously re-visit, re-enact, and re-invent performances for their readers, altering interpretations in light of newer versions.

Firstly, my paper will outline the increasingly mixed critical reception in the reviews of Hopkins' three films – a response created around discussions of the 'perverse' pleasure of the character. It will place this in the context of Hopkins' growing star status, extended screen time and Lecter's own character function. Secondly, it will draw comparisons with reviews of other screen adaptations and performances of 'Hannibal the Cannibal' - Brian Cox in *Manhunter*, Gaspard Ulliel as the young Hannibal in *Hannibal Rising* (Webber 2007), and Mads Mikkelsen's own 'serialised' version in the TV series *Hannibal* (2013-15) - in order to consider how familiarity and repetition inform preference. It is from the nexus of Hopkins' culturally dominant performance in *The Silence of the Lambs* that all other versions are viewed and reviewed, and by examining this, I explore how the critical interpretation of Lecter and his subsequent serialisation has been received and revised in public discourse.

References:

Staiger, Janet (2000) *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, New York: NYU Press.

Tasker, Yvonne (2002) *The Silence of the Lambs*, London: BFI

Toles, George (2011) 'Writing about Performance: the Film Critic as Actor', in Alex Clayton and Andrew Klevan (eds.) *The Language and Style of Film Criticism*, New York and Oxford: Routledge: 87-106.

Biography:

Sarah Thomas is Lecturer in Film Studies at Aberystwyth University, UK. She has written on stardom, screen performance, cult cinema, and digital media. Her publications include *Peter Lorre – Facemaker: Stardom and Performance in Europe and Hollywood* (Berghahn 2012), 'Celebrity in the 'Twitterverse': history, authenticity and the multiplicity of stardom' (*Celebrity Studies* 2014), 'Style and Performance in *The Best Years of Our Lives*' (*Movie Journal*), and co-edited with Kate Egan, *Cult Film Stardom: Offbeat Attractions and Processes of Cultification* (Palgrave Macmillan 2012).