Underneath the Skin

Silence of the Lambs cleaned up at the Academy Awards, amid passionate protests. Brett Farmer thinks the protesters had a big point.

In the 1933 musical Going Hollywood, Bing Crosby crooned, "Out where they say, let us be gay, I'm going Hollywood"; he could not have been further from the truth. Jonathan Demme's Silence of the Lambs cleaned up at the 64th Annual Academy Awards in April, in the teeth of concerted demonstrations against it by gay and lesbian activists. But the film is only the latest instalment in Hollywood's long and tawdry record of representing homosexuality in film. Under the iron-clad rule of the Production Code Association, the self-regulatory body established in the late 1920s to monitor Hollywood's 'moral content', the representation of homosexuality "or any inference to it" in Hollywood films was strictly forbidden. As a result, mainstream cinema refused even to acknowledge the existence of homosexuality for decades, creating a celluloid world of insistently heterosexual characters with equally heterosexual ideals.

There is an anecdote about studio magnate Samuel Goldwin who, when informed that his proposed plans to make a film of Radclyffe Hall's controversial novel The Well of Loneliness would never pass the censors because the main character was a lesbian, responded "So? We'll make her an American!" Homosexuality was traditionally seen in Hollywood as an unmentionable evil, as socially and morally subversive and thoroughly "un-American". Indeed, the moral panic that gripped Hollywood in the late 1940s and which culminated in the circus known as the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings identified homosexuality as one of the two greatest threats to national and social stability, the other being, of course, communism.

Even after the relaxation and final disbandment of the Production Code in the late 1950s, this notion of homosexuality as inherently dangerous and socially subversive continued to influence Hollywood's view of gays and lesbians. Joseph Mankiewicz' 1959 screen adaptation of Tennessee Williams' Suddenly Last Summer was one of the first Hollywood films to make any direct reference to homosexuality. Centred around the 'dark secret' of dead poet Sebastian Venable, Williams' rather bizarre play about Southern madness and perversion was extensively 'cleaned up' and transformed into a creepy Freudian horror story or morality tale. In the film, Sebastian's 'secret' dooms him to a horrible fate of outraged moral retribution (eaten alive by a mob of Hispanic street kids, no less) and leads directly to insanity for both his cousin, Elizabeth Taylor, and mother, Katharine Hepburn.

Homosexuality in Suddenly Last Summer is an insidiously evil force and the male homosexual is a monstrous alien, almost contagious in his dangerous depravity. In an unprecedented move, Hollywood's Catholic watchdog, the Legion of Decency, awarded Suddenly Last Summer a special classification prior to release arguing that, "Since the film illustrates the horrors of such a lifestyle, it can be considered moral in theme even though it deals with sexual perversion".

Vito Russo's landmark study of homosexuality in mainstream film, The Celluloid Closet, demonstrates how Hollywood has long employed the homosexual as a privileged source of cinematic horror. Sebastian in Suddenly Last Summer is a prime example of this, but he is far from alone. Indeed, mainstream cinema is peppered with scores of homosexual monsters and villains, all of whom are portrayed as posing a profound threat to heterosexual order and security. Films as diverse as Rope (1948), The Detective (1969), Looking for Mr Goodbar (1977), Cruising (1980), Windows (1980), The Fan (1981), Mad Max 2 (1981) and Deathtrap (1982) all feature a variety of gay and lesbian killers whose sexual abnormality, it is implied, results in wild and monstrous behaviour.

Robin Wood argues that horror films turn on a formulaic structure of "normality, the Monster, and, crucially, the relationship between the two". The Monster in the Hollywood horror film functions as both social and textual Other, simultaneously threatening as well as reassuring 'normality'. By defining the homosexual as the monstrous other, as a threat that must be contained, these films help not only to reinscribe heterosexuality as ideal but also serve to legitimate the often violent ethos of homophobia.

In this way, the homosexual monster helps to define and assert socially prescribed categories of gender and sexuality, while at the same time playing out, and thus allaying, fears and insecurities about the stability and legitimacy of heterosexual social dominance. Mainstream cinematic representations of homosexuality and the homosexual often tell far more about the fantasies and insecurities of heterosexuality, and the cultural mechanisms through which its continued hegemony is ensured, than they ever reveal about homosexuality.

For the handful of readers who may not have yet seen the film, Silence of the Lambs is a psychological thriller/horror film that charts the unusual relationship between FBI trainee Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) and the brilliant psychiatrist turned psychopath Dr Hannibal "The Cannibal" Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). Starling is sent to visit Lecter in his ultra-maximum security prison by the head of the FBI Behavioural Science Unit, Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn), in the hope that Lecter might help the authorities capture "Buffalo Bill"/Jame Gumb (Ted Levine), a serial killer who has committed a number of grisly murders of young women. Lecter agrees to help Starling and provide her with a psychological...
Jonathan Demme, asserts that he "The Exorcist", which is the film's most disgusting corporeal transformation. He embodies, quite literally, a grotesque performance of sexual transgression. Far from simply perfunctory, for both Starling and Lecter, it is the frightening monster to appear on the screen since Linda Blair raised hell in The Exorcist, which is the film's most startling aspect. Indeed, the comparison between Bill and the possessed Regan in The Exorcist may be far from simply perfunctory, for both embody, quite literally, a grotesque performance of sexual transgression. Just as the pubescent body of Linda Blair distorts, putrefies and suppurates with the emergence of a female sexuality in the metaphor of the Devil itself, so too Bill enacts a disgusting corporeal transformation impelled by the murderous drive of a chancrous homosexuality.

In an interview, the film's director, Jonathan Demme, asserts that he strove to ensure that "Buffalo Bill" not be "misinterpreted" as homosexual. "Bill is not gay," he argues. "Rather, this is someone who is so completely, completely horrified by who he is that his desperation to become someone completely other is manifested in his ill-guided attempts at transvestism, and behaviour and mannerisms that can be interpreted as gay" indeed! It is difficult, even impossible, not to read the "Buffalo Bill" character as a gay man.

And how does the film evaluate Bill's homosexuality? Precisely as a source of infinite monstrousness and terror, a pernicious force of unnatural evil that irrupts through the film, unsettling systems of gender and sexuality.

From its opening scene where Starling, bathed in sweat, is battling furiously along an arduous obstacle course, Silence of the Lambs places central focus on the body, and specifically the gendered body. Our introduction to Bill is through a series of Polaroid shots on Crawford's wall of Bill's victims: female bodies rent, mutilated and skinned. The film reveals that behind this sickening trail of murder and dismemberment is a delirious attempt to rewrite the body. Bill wants to become a woman, and because surgical gender reassignment has been denied him he sets about slaughtering women, flaying their corpses and making himself a suit of female skin.

An American cultural theorist, Leo Bersani, argues that behind even the most trivial scenario of homophobia against gay men is "the infinitely seductive and intolerable image of a grown man, legs high in the air, unable to refuse the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman". "Suicidal" because where masculinity is constitutively defined in terms of activity, male anal passivity can only ever signify the negation of masculinity. The representation of Buffalo Bill in Silence accords with this argument. Bill's "psychopathological condition" is related to his transgression of gender categories—epitomised in his desire to become a woman, a perversion that leads him to murder.

The climactic scene of horror in the film spells this out with unavoidable brutality. Deep within the cavernous basement world of Bill's hideaway, the true nature of his abject monstrousness is revealed to us in all its repulsive glory. We watch Bill carelessly apply his make-up and don his jewellery. Then, with the camera in extreme close-up on his painted lips, he taunts, "would you fuck me?", dances around the room, wrapped in nothing but a shawl, one of his victims' scalps placed on his head as a gruesome wig. Obviously rearranging his genitals, he steps back with his arms outstretched and his penis clamped back behind his closed thighs to approximate the appearance of female genitals. The true nature of Bill's monstrousness is crystallised in his desire to be fucked, to identify with the despised position of feminine passivity.

Indeed, this scene of mock castration in Silence is presented as its crowning moment of visual horror, the supreme shock in a film that assaults its viewers visually and emotionally from beginning to end. And, judging by the disbelieving gasps of the audience at the two screenings I attended at least, it is effective in its aim. Silence of the Lambs features a wide range of psychosexual perversions—sadism, cannibalism, necrophilia, exhibitionism—yet it is homosexual anality that is portrayed as the most intolerable, the most threatening and the most horrific.

Yet, like all horror films, Silence restores the balance of social normality by destroying the dreaded monster at the close of the film. Starling hunts Bill down and blasts him away, clear through the wall of his basement lair, letting in a flood of symbolic sunlight, thereby dispelling the threat of homosexual monstrousness and restoring the spectator to heterosexual equilibrium.

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