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Celluloid Cannibals That Feed Our Darkest Fears

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | MARCH 02, 2001 ✓ PREMIUM

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When producer Dino De Laurentiis offered the manuscript of the new movie Hannibal to director Ridley Scott -- at the time shooting *Gladiator* in Malta -- Scott is reported to have replied impatiently that he was already doing Romans, that he'd had his fill of Romans, and was in no mood for going over the Alps. To a generation younger than Scott's, however -- perhaps even to the majority of Americans -- the name Hannibal has nothing to do with Romans and elephants, and everything to do with a charismatic serial killer who likes his human organs washed down with a cheeky little red wine.

The character of Hannibal Lecter -- Anthony Hopkins's urbane, sophisticated cannibal-killer -- is currently enjoying a renaissance with the recent release of the sequel to Jonathan Demme's immensely successful *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). And although he may give psychiatry a bad name, Hannibal Lecter has also made cannibalism fashionable. No longer the distasteful hobby of unappealing lower-class serial killers (could you imagine Jeffrey Dahmer subscribing to *Gourmet* or *Bon Appétit*?), cannibalism is now the sideline de rigueur of the postmodern serial killer.

The final scene in *Hannibal*, for example, shows Lecter, during a plane journey, unwrapping a Dean & DeLuca takeout lunch he's brought on board with him, which includes plenty of the kinds of gourmet treats one might expect from the upmarket delicatessen, such as beluga caviar and sliced foie gras. In the box, however, is also something rather less appetizing -- a plastic container containing a piece of human brain. Did the gourmards at Dean & DeLuca condone this ghoulish example of product placement? Apparently so. *Entertainment Weekly* reported that Dean & DeLuca agreed

to the collaboration because the gourmet-food company liked the idea of being identified with a "hip, edgy" movie like Hannibal.



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Cannibalism in cinema was not always so chic, but it's been a popular theme since Wallace McCutcheon's 1908 silent comedy, *King of the Cannibal Islands*, a film notable for its dandyish, top-hat-wearing cannibal tribe. Less fashion-conscious cannibals appeared in a 1912 movie called *Cannibals of the South Seas*, an exotic faux-anthropological documentary made by husband-and-wife filmmaking team Martin and Osa Johnson. Other landmarks in the jungle-cannibal genre include the Johnsons' *Among the Cannibal Isles of the South Pacific* (1918), and Lee Sholem's highly insipid *Cannibal Attack* (1954). That movie was originally scripted as the last of Columbia's ersatz-Tarzan "Jungle Jim" series, starring an over-the-hill Johnny Weissmuller whose similarly aging chimp sidekick is suffering badly from alopecia. The cannibal theme was picked up again two years later in David Friedman's *Cannibal Island* (1956), an hourlong exploitation shockumentary about the Pygmies of a South Pacific Island, filmed with a "long-distance lens" to avoid the "dangers to man" of ordinary close-up photography.

In the 60's and 70's, sagas of savage "jungle" cannibals began to seem a little passé, and were gradually replaced by films about accidental or circumstantial acts of cannibalism. Those include *Soylent Green* (1973), in which the inhabitants of an overpopulated earth are unknowingly fed on human flesh; Laurence Harvey's last film, *Welcome to Arrow Beach* (1974), about a man-eating Korean War veteran; and the wonderful *Death Line* (1972), in which a tribe of cannibals living in the bowels of the London Underground know only three words of human speech -- "Mind the gap." The 1972 crash in the Andes of a plane chartered by an amateur rugby team inspired a number of cannibal-themed made-for-TV movies and a few decent films. The best-known is Frank Marshall's *Alive*, with John Malkovich and Ethan Hawke, in which the uncooked human flesh laid out for the boys to eat bears an uncanny resemblance to chicken drumsticks, and looks really rather tasty.

In the 80's, moviemakers turned their attention to psychotic cannibals. The trend was perhaps fueled by the media feeding frenzy over real-life cannibal serial killers like Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer. *Motel Hell* (1980), *Eating Raoul* (1982), and *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989) all feature cannibal families in the style of the

earlier classic of the genre, **THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION**  **SECTIONS** **THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION** (1974). The 80's also boasted the great Italian cannibal films, a canon that includes such masterpieces as *Eaten Alive* (1980), *Cannibal Ferox* (1981), *Amazonia* (1984), and *Anthropophagus* (1980), which, if remembered for nothing else, will go down in cinema history as the only film to climax with the villain chewing dementedly on his own intestines.

Of course, cannibal tales have been popular since the beginnings of human civilization. In traditional folk and fairy tales, the cannibal generally appears in the form of a man-eating giant or other terrifying parent figure, such as the old woman in "Hansel and Gretel" or the ogre in "Jack and the Beanstalk." (Hannibal Lecter fits the pattern.) But, mind you, cannibals certainly aren't limited to parent figures. Joseph Campbell has collected examples, mainly from American-Indian mythology, of cannibal husbands, sons-in-law, mothers, and -- naturally -- mothers-in-law.

According to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the act of cannibalism is often a feature of "founding" or "explanatory" narratives, and often plays a significant part in the science and structure of mythology. It represents both a food category and the theme of regeneration -- the devourer drawing strength from the devoured.

Hannibal is essentially a fairy tale for grown-ups. Like *Beauty*, Special Agent Clarice Starling (Julianne Moore) makes a pact with the Beast, who's so smitten by her charm and virtue that not only does he protect her from the fate that meets his other victims, but he allows her a glimpse of the vulnerable man behind the mask. She gives him her trust, and he gives her his power. Moreover, both *Hannibal* and *The Silence of the Lambs* are full of classic fairy-tale motifs: the ogre in the dungeon, the terrible house, the captured princess, the magic skin, people being thrown into dungeons and fed to the pigs.

Like many other forms of violence in narratives, cannibalism is generally associated with regenerative functions -- the killer takes the substance of his enemies in order to recharge his own strength and power. Sometimes the very act of killing gives the killer the power of his victim, as is the case with headhunting tribes, for whom headhunting functions as a symbolic replacement for cannibalism. Or consider, in "Jack and the

Beanstalk " the transformation of plain old Jack into Jack the Giant-Killer.

SECTIONS

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Freudian readings of cannibal tales argue that such stories present the world from the child's point of view -- hence the importance of oral satisfaction, pleasure, and survival (eating or being eaten). In traditional psychoanalytic terms, stories of cannibalism are usually interpreted as a disfigured form of parental aggression, or a projection of the child's own all-consuming oral greed.

Hannibal Lecter, however, appears to be more than the sum of his mythic or pop-cultural parts. Unlike his slasher-movie counterparts (Freddy Krueger, Jason Voorhees, Michael Myers), Lecter isn't just a masked bogeyman bent on revenge but an individual in his own right -- even something of a hero. Unlike the masked killers of *Scream*, *Scary Movie*, and the current *Valentine*, Lecter doesn't disguise his identity, so we can come to know him as an individual personality, and not just a man behind a mask. And unlike your dime-a-dozen cannibal-killers, Lecter is a human-flesh-eater and a gentleman: a brilliant doctor, decadent aesthete, and bon vivant, with a stylish wardrobe and a morbid taste in irony. (Hannibal opens where *Silence of the Lambs* left off, with Lecter planning to "have an old friend for dinner.")

It also seems important that Lecter is a psychiatrist, a psychic lecturer -- modern culture's equivalent of the shaman, whose magic words are the all-powerful mantras of the therapeutic vocabulary. Isn't it a popular suspicion that psychiatrists make a career out of agonizingly drawing out, ingesting, and even nourishing themselves on other people's pain? Lecter's physical hunger for human flesh is equated with something equally scary -- his loverlike hunger for details of other people's lives, especially their "inner" lives.

The most frightening scene in *Hannibal* is that in which Lecter quite literally gets into Ray Liotta's head, just as, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, he literally gets under the skin of a police officer, whose face he borrows. These are the physical equivalents of his prying into Clarice Starling's grim childhood or asking the mother of one of psychopath Buffalo Bill's victims whether she had breastfed the daughter who's been abducted. Why should the literalization of metaphors to do with closeness and understanding be so scary? Is it because getting close to another person -- whether psychiatrist or nemesis or lover -- seems to erode our individuality, to diminish or even engulf us?

Hannibal closes with Lecter offering a fastidious young boy a taste of his cerebral snack, urging him to try something new, with the implication that a taste of Lecter's brain food will transform the child into a fledgling flesh-eater. Clearly, there's more going on here than an admonition against accepting candy from a stranger. This scene may help to shed some light on why recent years have brought an unprecedented glut of cannibal films to the big screen: Delicatessen, The Silence of the Lambs, Seven, American Psycho, Ravenous, not to mention Flesheater, Cannibal! The Musical, The Necro Files, The 13th Warrior ... the list goes on.

Fears of food contamination resulting from the outbreak in Europe of mad-cow disease, transmitted specifically through brains, are especially apt in a culture increasingly dependent on fast food, where contamination folklore was already commonplace (earthworms in taco meat, a factory worker's finger in the cheeseburger, and the like). Our culinary laziness leaves us wide open to all kinds of paranoia about cheap, easily available, preprepared food. Are we all being fed something terrible for the sake of economic convenience, like the unknowing cannibals of Soylent Green?

Much of the folklore surrounding food contamination reflects the anxiety of the individual in the face of the gigantic corporate franchises that feed us our daily diet of meat from the mother lode -- meat that looks nothing like it does in the advertising pictures. The stories reflect our ambivalence toward major changes in society associated with industrialization -- manufactured foods; large, impersonal organizations; urbanization; and new technology -- even when the stories' plausibility is questionable (anybody who buys live bait could tell you that a pound of earthworms costs far more than a pound of taco meat).

While devouring, or being devoured by, our own kind is an archetypal obsession, perhaps our increasing anxiety about being fed something nasty is what lies beneath the most recent spate of cannibal films. Like most food-contamination stories, modern-day cannibal tales imply a strict admonition against eating out -- eating that which is strange, and among strangers. They also cater to our guilt about the fact that it's other people -- often anonymous, ethnically diverse "others" -- who prepare most of our food.

After all, with a prepackaged lunch, you never know quite what you're going to get --

even when it's offered to you by a most urbane gentleman, and from a box labeled DeLuca & DeLuca.



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Mikita Brottman is an adjunct assistant professor in the department of English at Shippensburg University and author of *Meat Is Murder!* (Creation Books, 1998), a history of cannibalism in the cinema.

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