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“It’s Only Cannibalism If We’re Equals”: Carnivorous Consumption and Liminality in *Hannibal*

Michael Fuchs and Michael Phillips

In a 2014 blog post, self-proclaimed vegan Amy Roberts celebrates a television show that centers on its main character preparing and subsequently consuming meat. She notes that the series is “tense, smart, artful and ultimately, satisfyingly horrific… But what [she is] really interested [in]… is the meat.”¹ She goes on to explain that the show in question treats viewers “to an assortment of stunning culinary fare, all of which (regardless of [her] diet) [she] love[s] watching.”² If a vegan’s embrace of a show revolving around meat-eating were not enough, the gourmet dishes the main character prepares are sourced from a very specific kind of animal—humans. As the blogger stresses, this particular aspect makes the show attractive to her because:

> every time [the main character] serves up human to somebody who thinks they’re simply getting animal, [she] cackle[s], applaud[s], revel[s]. [The main character]’s monstrous appetites are just as monstrous to me as the appetites of everyone who eats animal. I can’t separate one flesh from another.³

The gourmand in question is, of course, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, one of the main characters in NBC’s reinterpretation of *Hannibal* (2013–2015). Lecter’s gourmet predilection is accompanied by a refined taste for the arts, as he appreciates classical music and recreates and appropriates Damien Hirst and Sandro Botticelli, but using human bodies as his artistic medium of choice. Tellingly, in the episode “Primavera” (3:2), Commendatore Rinaldo Pazzi, a policeman who pursued Lecter in Italy some 20 years before the events depicted in the show, notes that he noticed that Lecter...
gazed at Botticelli’s painting day after day and “recreate[d] the *Primavera* in pencil, just as he did in flesh.” Lecter unites opposites: he is both a connoisseur and creator of fine art and a ruthless serial killer; to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) advisor Will Graham, Lecter is a friend and a foe; to his guests, he is a most generous and hospitable host—who serves human meat; and to viewers, he is a figure of both horror and intrigue.

As such, Lecter embodies the concept of liminality. *Liminality*, the state of in-between-ness, is characterized by openness, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. It “is often marked out spatially as a threshold, or margin, at which activities and conditions are most uncertain and in which the normative structure of society is temporarily suspended or overturned.”4 The key word here is *temporarily* because the social structure is typically either re-established or renewed after the transgressive act. However, in this article, we will argue that *Hannibal*, the show, and Hannibal, the character, consistently resist this pull toward comforting closure and instead embrace the essential ambiguity of liminality, thereby drawing viewers ever deeper into this terrifying yet seductive state of indetermination. In this context, we will examine how the show employs images of meat procurement, preparation, and consumption to undermine comfortable, traditional assumptions about what makes us human and the “proper” human role in the natural order.

**Food, liminality, and eating meat**

Food itself is an inherently liminal object because it transgresses the borderlines between the inside and the outside, the Self and the Other. Tellingly, Michael Goodman and Colin Sage open their introduction to *Food Transgressions* (2014) by stating, “For the human body… there are few things more essentially transgressive and boundary-crossing than food.”5 However, one must keep in mind that “[t]ransgressive behaviour does not deny limits or boundaries,” as “[w]e need to know the collective order, to recognize the edges in order to transcend them.”6

Despite, or perhaps even due to, its inherently liminal and quite literally transgressive traits, food can in fact be used to define or reinforce cultural boundaries and value systems. For example, the definition of what is edible and what is inedible helps demarcate different cultures and subcultures. Food, as Harvey Neo and Jody Emel have correctly pointed out, “functions not merely as a source of sustenance,” but “is also a means of identity building.”7 In this context, “eating conjoins us in a network of the edible and inedible” and “the human and the non-human.”8 Crucially, although different cultures may have divergent concepts of what is and what is not edible, the taboo against cannibalism is nearly universal because it codifies
and reinforces an essential distinction that helps maintain a comforting sense of human superiority over the rest of the natural world.

Of course, in light of the growing environmental awareness, an underlying discomfort hovers around this Western notion of human dominion over the planet, which *Hannibal* draws on to enhance the sense of liminal ambiguity that pervades the show. Using a variety of characters and storylines, the show exposes the largely subconscious assumptions that dictate human behavior toward the natural environment, particularly as this behavior is acted out on sentient life forms, while steadfastly refusing to provide consistent judgments about these underlying values.

### The hunter’s code

In the *Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (2012), Margo DeMello stresses that “the relationship that modern Americans have to the meat that they consume… is… very different from the relationship enacted in traditional societies.” Indeed, she highlights that capitalist societies’ relationship with food—and meat, in particular—“is not natural at all.”

DeMello argues that technological developments, along with sanitary and other concerns, removed animals from urban spaces, while ongoing urbanization was simultaneously concentrating the human population within these urban spaces. Thus, other than the presence of pets in some homes, “[f]or most human beings, especially those in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with nonhuman animals is at mealtime: we eat them.” However, the disappearance of animals from human lives and the attendant physical as well as symbolic transformation from animal to meat essentially means that, “animals in name and body are made absent as animals.” As Carol J. Adams has explained, “Without animals, there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food.”

One emerging form of resistance to the blind consumption of mass-produced meat is a movement that advocates only eating the meat of animals one kills oneself. While some of its proponents prefer killing farm-raised animals, others enjoy the thrills of hunting in “the wild.” In *The Compassionate Carnivore* (2008), Catherine Friend outlines one of the central ideas guiding the movement, remarking that being a “compassionate carnivore … means to pay more attention to the animals we eat.” Instead of “protecting ourselves from the truth that we are eating animals,” these people celebrate their consumption of meat, which thus becomes an anchor for a shared culture, a nostalgia-infused vision that harkens back to pre-industrial times.
In *Hannibal*, Garret Jacob Hobbs, the serial killer Will Graham shoots in the first episode, embodies this “eat-what-you-kill” ethos. As viewers learn in the course of the show, Hobbs introduced his daughter, Abigail, to hunting—a shared practice that establishes a bond between father and daughter. As a hunter, Hobbs is a marginalized figure positioned at the fringes of society, since hunters spend much time in the wilderness, away from civilization. Symbolically, hunters are thus placed between human culture and nature. The American imagination has charged this liminal position with positive connotations, as the American Adam and the American nation were created at the frontier. Indeed, a wide variety of American icons have been forged through their liminal experiences or the depictions thereof, ranging from the purely fictional Natty Bumppo to mythologized historical figures such as Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, and even Theodore Roosevelt.

The third episode of *Hannibal*, “Potage” (1:3), taps into this liminal ideal by opening in a forest somewhere in Minnesota. Hobbs is on the lookout for game, his daughter standing by his side. Both characters are carrying rifles. Hobbs spots a female white-tailed deer and instructs his daughter, “Easy, Abigail. Be patient and wait for your shot” (1:3). The audience is allowed to share Abigail’s view through the viewfinder, as the deer appears dead center in the crosshairs, thereby visually highlighting the objectification of the animal’s body and placing the viewer in the role of hunter. She shoots once, but the animal tries to escape through the thick underbrush. She shoots a second time and kills the creature. Hobbs begins to grin and kisses his daughter on the side of her head. However, Abigail does not seem to share her father’s elation, as she just stands there, apparently disturbed by what she has just done.

In *Meditations on Hunting* (1954), the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset notes that “[e]very good hunter is uneasy in the depths of his conscience when faced with the death he is about to inflict on the enchanting animal.” In an interview with *The New York Times*, First Nation park ranger Dylan Eyers explains that he overcomes this uneasiness by “acknowledg[ing] the ecosystem has provided life for the animal and that energy is stored in the meat that [he] will eat. And [he] promise[s] to respect and use every last bit of that energy.” Hobbs uses a similar logic when responding to Abigail’s observation that deer are “complex emotional creatures” whose intelligence is said to be “the equivalent of a four-year-old human being” (1:3). Hobbs replies, “They are a lot like us, and we’re gonna honor every part of her. Her hide is gonna make a beautiful rug. Her leg bones we can carve into knives. None of her is gonna go to waste” (1:3).

The type of human–animal relationship Hobbs espouses is typical of pre-industrial societies. As John Berger has explained, animals used to be
“subjected and worshipped.” In other words, human beings killed animals for a number of different reasons, but they appreciated the animals for providing them with essential nutrients, among others. In addition, by highlighting that “[e]ating her is honoring her” (1:3), Hobbs bestows a “sacrificial nobility” upon the deer. At the same time, his hunter ethos of using every part of the animal body and his intimate relationship with the animal make Hobbs noble, too. Indeed, Hobbs is a naturalist who rejects the spoiled life and oblivious (and simultaneously conspicuous) consumption characteristic of mainstream society.

However, as a pitchman for this value system, Hobbs is less than ideal. Beyond the obvious fact that he is a serial killer, both the methods and targets of his crimes make it easier to reject the views he personifies. That is, in his criminal mode, he “hunts” only weak “animals” (i.e., young girls), and he also allows his daughter to do much of the work, essentially luring them into his clutches by befriending them. Thus, while the show gives screen time to an alternative animal and environmental ethics, this message is ultimately undermined by the weakness of the character that embodies it, thereby conveying a disconcerting sense of ethical ambiguity.

Taking animals out of the picture

In contrast to the Hobbs storyline, the scenes portraying Lecter’s cannibalistic practices rely on a blend of Lecter’s charisma, visually stunning cinematography, and a carefully constructed soundtrack to obscure ethical questions regarding the human consumption of animals. In the sonic realm, the consistent use of classical music (which frequently becomes the exclusive or dominant sonic component in scenes devoid of dialogue) lends these scenes an air of pseudo-magical transcendence. In the visual realm, popular critics have consistently lauded the show’s exuberant style and impactful effects. For example, Todd VanDerWerff and Sonia Saraiya of The A.V. Club proclaimed that “Hannibal’s powerful visuals [made] it one of the best shows of 2013,” while Daniel Payne of The Federalist explained that “from the cannibalistic ‘food porn’ to the moody, washed-out Baltimore background to the elegance of Hannibal’s living spaces and psychiatry office, the show consistently draws you in with the captivating beauty of its visual style.” Indeed, while Hannibal “attack[s] … the audience” by exploiting the multimodal medium of television, the show simultaneously “absorb[s] the ‘viewer’ on the level of the sensorium.” In particular, the show’s succulent food imagery “create[s] an affective response and whet[s] viewers’ appetites.”
The food preparation and presentation scenes in Hannibal draw on the visual aesthetics of food pornography to engage viewers corporeally. Like all visual pornography, food pornography is based on the principle of spectacle. In his seminal piece on the “cinema of attractions,” Tom Gunning argues that spectacle “emphasiz[es] the direct stimulation of shock or surprise.” Due to its direct address of the human body, the artistic strategy of spectacle becomes particularly pertinent in “body genres”—horror, pornography, and melodrama. Accordingly, the visual—or sometimes audiovisual—seduction of Hannibal strives to touch the viewer. The viewer’s involuntary reaction then invests the televisual sign with a corporeal dimension. Considering that, generally, food is corporeal and “precedes literacy,” the spectacular images’ somatic address operates in concert with food’s “primacy in our lives.” Other characters’ reactions to Lecter’s meals further enhance the corporeal illusion. Although verbal compliments such as “That is delicious” in “Apéritif” (1:1), “Very nice” in “Coquilles” (1:5), and “Oh, Madonna! It smells divine” in “Secondo” (3:3) give viewers a taste of Lecter’s dishes, it is particularly shots of characters’ pleasurable chewing and orgasmic moaning that draw the audience into the world of the cannibal’s feasts. Of course, while Lecter’s guests do not know that they are eating human meat, the audience is very much aware of this fact; still, the audiovisual feast succeeds in drawing them into the show and its gustatory promises (unless, of course, one is disgusted by the very idea of eating meat).

Crucially, however, Julian Hanich has suggested that the generation of bodily responses characteristic of the horror genre returns viewers to their lived bodies, as they come to (re)recognize their organic existences. As Hanich explains, while watching a film or a television series, viewers oscillate between immersion and their awareness of their bodily presence outside the diegesis. Affective responses, such as the sudden craving for meat, support this projection into the diegetic world, which is—somewhat paradoxically—attended by the constant awareness of not being part of the fictional space. In moments of explicit corporeal address, however, the body “become[s] foregrounded and claim[s] our attention.”

While the audiovisual spectacle of Hannibal draws viewers in, it thus simultaneously makes viewers aware of their own bodies, as the television show “loses its center-stage position.” At least for a moment, viewers gain critical distance from the televised image and recognize it for what it is—a representation of human meat. In a first step, they grasp that the show has succeeded in whetting their appetites for human meat (and that they might just as easily have been victims of Hannibal’s games as his unknowing guests). On a more general level, viewers come to understand that what they see is not meat (no matter whether human or animal), but a
representation of meat, which need not be meat in the first place. The representational layer adds another dimension between viewers and meat, as the television apparatus removes viewers from the meat’s source. In the corporeal engagement with the show, because viewers readily accept the meat to be sourced from animals, the various layers of displacement (animal > human > meat > representation) replace the animal, as animals disappear from our world. As a result, the referential link between actual animals and the images of meat becomes not only increasingly loose, but rather entirely lost. Thus, caught in the web of displacement, viewers struggle to cling to the taboo against cannibalism (i.e., convince themselves that they are horrified by the idea of eating human meat), whereby the question of animal ethics is almost completely erased.

**Meat makes the man**

The resultant blurring of the boundary between human and animal meat is both a dominant motif and a key theme in *Hannibal*. In fact, as early as its first episode, the show begins to challenge the notion of a clear distinction between human beings and other animals. When crime scene investigators tell Will that the liver was removed and subsequently sewn back into the body of Elise Nichols, one of Hobbs’s victims, Will concludes, “There is something wrong with the meat” (1:1), before telling the team that they are looking for a cannibal. Similarly, when he ponders the significance of a killer (Lecter, as it turns out later) impaling the body of another girl upon antlers, he concludes that her “killer thought she was a pig” (1:1). While Will’s wording and line delivery suggests that the slaughter of pigs is an accepted part of American society, the choice of this particular animal metaphor has further implications. Indeed, “pigs” are associated with a lack of cleanliness and moral degradation. Accordingly, even this early in the series, Will’s statement foreshadows Lecter’s preference to kill (and eat) the “rude” (as well as people who directly threaten him in one way or another).

More specifically, the sentence points out that Lecter does not differentiate between human beings and animals (and pigs, in particular)—an idea that recurs frequently in the show. For example, in “Sorbet” (1:7), Will tells his class at the FBI Academy that the Chesapeake Ripper (one of Hannibal’s personas) “kills in sounders of three.” Likewise, when Will explains to Jack in “Futamono” (2:6) that Hannibal is, in fact, the serial killer they have been looking for, he uses the same term for a group of wild pigs to describe Hannibal’s *modus operandi*: “The Ripper kills in sounders of three or four in quick order… Because if he waits too long, then the meat spoils.” Finally, during a discussion with Hannibal in “Naka-
Choko” (2:10), Will implies that he himself has not only killed reporter Freddie Lounds but also turned her dead body into food, remarking, “She was a slim and delicate pig” (2:10). Accordingly, the linguistic metaphors used in the show echo the audiovisual equation of human and animal meat.

From the audiovisual to the linguistic, all of these elements combine to undermine the presumed fundamental difference between human and animal, which is the underlying rationale behind a carnivorous (or omnivorous) human existence. However, the suggestion that human and animal are not as different as we sometimes think can lead to two radically different conclusions. In one regard, if one embraces the concept of the sanctity of human life, one could extend that to animals and decide that people should not be eating them any more readily than they would eat humans. In another regard, if one removes the assumed sanctity of human life, this leads to the conclusion that eating human beings is just as acceptable as eating other animals. As we shall see in the following sections, Hannibal inhabits the liminal space between these two radically different ethical propositions.

A modest proposal

In the opening pages of her book Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows (2011), Melanie Joy imagines a scene at a dinner party in which a guest asks the hostess about the recipe of a delicious dish she has prepared and is told that the recipe starts with “five pounds of golden retriever meat.”

*Golden retriever? You probably freeze midbite as you consider her words: the meat in your mouth is from a dog... If you are like most Americans, when you hear that you’ve been eating dog, your feelings would automatically change from pleasure to revulsion.*

In this way, Joy emphasizes that the basically random assignment of names and cultural values to certain objects can obscure essential similarities between them, leading to irrational behavior and even involuntary physical responses. By pointing out this logical disconnect, Joy questions the right of human beings to kill and consume nonhuman animals.

In Hannibal, this animal rights perspective is espoused primarily by female figures. This viewpoint first arises in episode five, in which Lecter serves foie gras to Jack Crawford, head of the FBI Behavioral Science Unit, and his wife, Bella. Disgusted by the idea of eating the liver of a duck or goose that has been artificially enlarged via months of force-feeding, Bella complains that the dish is “too cruel” (1:5). In response, Hannibal explains, “First, and worst, sign of sociopathic behavior: Cruelty to animals... I have
no taste for animal cruelty, which is why I employ an ethical butcher” (1:5). Bella wonders, “An ethical butcher? Be kind to animals and then eat them?” (1:5). Besides raising some serious doubts as to how any butcher offering foie gras could possibly be considering animals’ well-being, Bella’s concluding question suggests that there is no ethical way of eating meat, as it requires the death of animals.

In “Antipasto” (3:1), Bedelia, Lecter’s former psychiatrist and later lover/hostage, takes this perspective to the next level, suggesting that in order to become an ethical meat eater, one should try “not to eat anything with a central nervous system.” Both Bedelia and Bella’s food choices are centered on the idea of inflicting as little suffering as possible—Bella by rejecting certain feeding practices; Bedelia by refusing to eat anything with the biological capability to feel pain. This discourse may be traced back to Jeremy Bentham, who, in his 1789 *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, critiqued the legal treatment of animals as things. As he famously put it, in order to be endowed with legal protection, the question should not be, “Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”

In the world of *Hannibal*, the only true vegetarian is Freddie Lounds, a female tabloid reporter focusing on stories about murder. Lounds not only shares a sex and culinary leanings with Bedelia and Bella, but also a fundamental lack of agency. In the course of the show, Bella’s attempt to commit suicide to end the pain of her cancer is first thwarted by Lecter’s injection, and she then goes on to die a slow, presumably painful death; Bedelia is coerced into becoming Lecter’s partner in crime, and her efforts to bring him down ultimately lead to the final episode’s post-credits scene, in which she sits at a table waiting for Hannibal to join her in dining on her own leg; and Lounds is essentially used as a pawn by the principle male characters in their struggle against each other. In short, although various female characters explicitly raise ethical concerns about the treatment of animals, this critique is ultimately overwhelmed by “meatification,” as meat-eating becomes “a symbol of male power” whereas eating vegetables symbolizes “becom[ing] a vegetable, and by extension … becom[ing] womanlike”—passive, weak, and easy to manipulate. Thus, as with Hobbs and his naturalist value system, the vegetarian perspective is undermined by the portrayed weakness of its advocates.

**A man-eat-man world?**

Drawing on the perceived similarity between humans and animals, the food ethics espoused by the female characters in the show envision a common empathy shared by all humans, and then suggests that this empathy
may be transformed into compassion, “a cultivated aspiration to benefit other beings.” In contrast, in “Shiizakana” (2:9), Lecter opines, “Animals are far more like humans than we ever realized. And humans are far more like animals.” Lecter finds his guiding principle in the second half of this remark. That is, in the similarity between humans and other animals, he sees a confirmation of our inherent savageness, a perspective that, taken to the extreme, justifies the killing and eating of humans and animals alike. Only the strong survive. And in this context, Lecter’s firm belief in his own superiority makes it his right, if not responsibility, to consume lesser beings, which means just about everyone. In fact, Hannibal even rejects the term *cannibalism* for situations when one eats a lesser being. One of his victims is Abel Gideon, another psychiatrist-turned-killer who lays claim to some of Lecter’s victims. In one scene, while compelling Gideon to eat his own body parts, Lecter offers his personal definition of *cannibalism*, suggesting that “It’s only cannibalism if [living beings are] equals” (3:1).

Considering Lecter’s belief that he has no equals, *Hannibal* can be viewed as a search by a lonely outsider for a kindred spirit. While Hannibal engages in two on-screen affairs with fellow psychiatrists who come close to his level of intellectual and psychological insight, his ultimate target is Will Graham, whose prodigious gift for understanding the workings of the “abnormal” human psyche draws Lecter to him. From this perspective, the relationship can be viewed as Lecter “therapeutically ‘helping’ Will Graham blossom into something more like him, viewing Will as his potential partner in a true kinship of equals.”

In addition, Will’s introverted, sensitive personality and outsider lifestyle seem to attract Lecter as well. Although Will and Lecter share a deep insight into the darker workings of the human mind, they are temperamental opposites. Will is clearly feminized throughout the show. Where Lecter uses his talents and ability to act and impose his will upon others, Will uses his gift to react in an effort to help others. Here again, the show uses animal imagery to highlight this difference. Whereas Lecter lives in a cold, sterile, castle-like dwelling, where the only animals that enter are destined for the dinner table or mounted on the wall as skeletal trophies, Will lives in an isolated house in the countryside along with his cadre of rescued stray dogs. Furthermore, while Lecter hunts (people, of course), Will fishes, a far more passive activity where he casts a lure and hopes that the fish will come. Indeed, it is Lecter’s courtship of Will—or his effort to mold him into a suitable companion—that provides the driving narrative force of the show. Symbolically, the relationship between the two male characters centers on questions of consumption and transgression that destabilize the border between human and animal meat and create an atmosphere of ambiguity that is both disconcerting and alluring for the viewer.
A carnivorous courtship

The courtship begins with Lecter’s *modus operandi*—“tricking” Will into eating human flesh. On their first “date”, Lecter brings Will a “little protein scramble” (1:1) for breakfast, a cue to the audience that the dish contains human meat. This knowledge shared by character (i.e., Lecter) and viewer aligns the two and draws the viewer into the diegetic world, which gives rise to conflicting emotions: the viewer knows she should be revolted by Lecter’s manipulation of Will, but the intimacy of the staging and the genuine care Lecter projects serve to assuage this sense of outrage and draw the viewer into the budding romance between these two characters.

The next scene we will look at transpires when Crawford and Dr. Frederick Chilton (a psychiatrist working for the FBI) attend one of Lecter’s parties to get samples of the food, which they believe contains human meat. The party scene consists mainly of a series of shots of exotic yet somehow grotesque gourmet dishes, many of which are designed to look both potentially appetizing and possibly of human origin (e.g., hors d’oeuvres which look like fingers). Here, the ambiguity of the meat involved once again comes into play. Although the dishes look intriguing, the sequence seemingly seeks to incite guilt in the viewers for thinking that they would probably eat these dishes, if they (along with Chilton and Crawford) did not know that they contain human flesh. However, the “reveal” moment occurs when the FBI laboratory analysts later report that there was, in fact, no human meat in those dishes. Once again, Lecter is shown to be in control—deceiving both characters and the audience alike by manipulating their beliefs about the food involved.

In the next two scenes discussed here, the war of wits between Lecter on one side and Will and Crawford on the other is again carried out on the culinary battlefield, with both parties seeking to gain the upper hand by selecting the food to be consumed. First, Will and Jack arrive at Lecter’s house for a dinner, but bearing their own meat—in this case, fish that Will and Jack caught while ice-fishing. This offering is a subtle declaration of war to let Lecter know that they are on to him, but also a symbolic choice, as even many people who reject eating “real” meat include fish in their diets. In response, as if to call his bluff, Hannibal invites Will for dinner and then serves him ortolan bunting, a dish that one regularly finds on “cruelest meals” lists. In this early scene in the episode “Kō No Mono” (2:11), Lecter explains, “Among gourmands, the ortolan bunting is considered a rare, but debauched, delicacy. A rite of passage, if you will. The preparation calls for the songbird to be drowned alive in Armagnac. It is then roasted and consumed whole in a single mouthful.” Here, Hannibal challenges Will (and, implicitly, the viewer) to consider what really lies
behind the taboo against eating human flesh. Is it the assumed cruelty or suffering involved with obtaining the meat? If so, should one not also reject a dish such as this, which involves significant suffering for the animal? Once again, both Will and the audience are forced into an uncomfortable liminal space, which challenges the inconsistent or even contradictory ethics behind our food choices.

In the episode “Su-zakana” (2:8), Will seeks to deceive Lecter further by bringing a cut of pork with him that he implies is actually from the body of reporter Freddie Lounds, whose death Will and Crawford have faked as part of their plan to ensnare Lecter. At least momentarily, Lecter seems to take the bait, as he comments, “We’ll make [the meal] together. You slice the ginger” (2:8; a reference to Lounds’ bright red hair). Arguably, this scene presents the first—and only—time that Will seems to gain the upper hand in the game of power with Lecter, as well as the first time the viewers believe they know something about the meat involved in a scene that Lecter is unaware of. At the same time, uncertainty looms over the scene, as Will acknowledges Lecter’s “refined… palate” (2:8), thereby making viewers wonder how Lecter could really be deceived about the source of the meat he is preparing and eating.

For the last scene to be discussed here, we move to the series’ final episode, “The Wrath of the Lamb” (3:13). In the scene in question, all the cards are on the table, and Will and Lecter talk openly about the culinary–ethical implications and complications of their relationship. Lecter comments that his “compassion for [Will] is inconvenient,” to which Will replies, “If you’re partial to beef products, it’s inconvenient to be compassionate toward the cow” (3:13). Since Lecter suddenly expresses compassion for his potential meal, Will’s response highlights the reconsideration of food ethics. Although the two characters have reached an impasse, it is important to recognize that this is one of the very rare moments in the show devoid of subterfuge. That is, both the characters and the audience know the stakes. Here again, food symbolism is used to represent this is (i.e., this is one) state of affairs, as the two characters share a bottle of wine which all parties (including the audience) can be sure is not human-derived, as the bottle is opened on-screen.

However, this mildly nostalgic scene, reminiscent of a conversation between two former lovers, is suddenly interrupted by a bullet from Francis Dolarhyde’s (i.e., the Red Dragon) gun, which shatters the wine bottle, strikes Lecter, and plunges the scene back into moral ambiguity. This shot sets in motion the final surge of violence that will cap the entire show. As Dolarhyde sets up the camera to film Lecter’s death, he suddenly attacks Will and begins to carve him up. Will fights back, but the Dragon is clearly overpowering him, until Lecter grabs the Dragon from behind.
However, Dolarhyde quickly gains the upper hand over Lecter, as well. With Lecter suspended over an abyss, it is now Will’s turn to attack the Dragon from behind, setting off a final burst of graphic, slow-motion violence, in which Will and Lecter practically consume the Red Dragon, with Lecter feasting on his neck as Will fillets his midsection with a knife. Here again, the sudden re-entry into a liminal space of ethical ambiguity is reinforced by food imagery. Dolarhyde’s transition into the Dragon has transformed him into a mythical monster—neither fully human nor fully animal—who arguably deserves his fate, a fact which is visually reinforced by his repeated appearance with dragon’s wings as the final scene unfolds.

Finally, having vanquished the Dragon, the show doubles down on the ambiguity with the final memorable embrace between Lecter and Will. Bleeding profusely from their multiple wounds, the two gravely injured main characters embrace at the edge of a cliff, and Lecter murmurs, “This is all I ever wanted for you, Will” (3:13). Will then replies, “It’s beautiful” (3:13), and brings his arm up around Lecter’s neck, as the two characters then plunge over the side of the cliff. However, ambiguity lingers. Did they fall off from exhaustion? Did Will push Lecter off the cliff? Did Lecter pull Will down? The ambiguity deepens as the camera approaches the cliff and then peers over the edge, showing a treacherous drop and a moonlit beach far below, but no bodies. Showrunner Bryan Fuller explained the clear reference to the famous Sherlock Holmes story, “The Final Problem” (1893), in which Holmes allegedly fell off a cliff to his death, only to be revived by Arthur Conan Doyle two years later due to popular demand:

We had talked about Moriarty and Sherlock going over Reichenbach Falls. We needed something along those lines to give us a big, powerful season ender, but also if we were to do a fourth season, allows us to say, And this is how they survived or didn’t survive, and here’s the continuation of our story.39

Thus, the two protagonists, having shared a symbolic (possibly) final meal of dragon/human meat, are left suspended in a netherworld, as the liminality of Hannibal prevails in the end. For the final time, the series highlights the complicated and ambiguous nature of modern culinary values and practices, and refuses to provide a comfortable resolution. Thus, Lecter—the alluring anti-hero, the paradoxical ultra-civilized monster—cannot be definitively vanquished, despite all efforts to bring him down or contain him. And rather than conquering him, the audience is compelled to embrace him, as Will does in the show’s final seconds, thereby joining him in the liminal zone of unresolved values, where the boundaries between human and animal, friend and foe, hunter and food, characters and viewers, and even life and death, dissolve.
Notes

2. Ibid., para. 5.
3. Ibid., para. 7.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
15. VanDerWerff and Saraiya, “Hannibal’s Powerful Visuals Make it One of the Best Shows of 2013,” in AV Club.
18. Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” in Film Quarterly.
20. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 585.
23. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 61.

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