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‘Bring Up the Bodies’: Imaging and Imagining the Violent Bodies in *American Psycho* and *The Hannibal Lecter* Series

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Abstract:

An actor is anchored within the visual matrix of the screen through their corporeality wherein they share a character’s manufactured consciousness. Since, the physicality of the body in itself serves a crucial performative function in cinema, the inertia of the literary body requires certain transformations to enable a body to ‘perform itself’ (Harradine 69) and thus establish its own presence. In case of adapted cinema, while translating and transposing a fictional body during the transition from the literary to a visual medium of representation, a certain amount of amplification or sublimation can be said to occur. This process is tied to the expectations of the ‘somatic society’, a term coined by Byron S. Turner in his book *The Body and Society* (1996), where politicised bodies are turned into veritable ideological minefields. The visual realisation of a body, especially in acts of violence, delimits the imagination of the reader-audience. At the same time, there is a kind of finality in concretising a fictional body, in giving it an identifiable and irrevocable shape, a recognisable face. The anxiety and cultural hysteria surrounding the body politics in popular culture lends special credence to such adaptive body images in films and fictions. In my paper, I will focus on the politics inherent in the visualisation of the body in films adapted from fictions and try to ascertain the implications of the same within a society dominated by the psychosexuality of physical violence and trauma. I will cite Bret Easton Ellis’ 1991 novel *American Psycho* (cinematised in 1999 by Mary Harron) and Thomas Harris’ *Hannibal Lecter* series (1981-2006) in investigating the diverse theoretical and ideological frameworks surrounding the violent imaging and imagining of the body in films and fictions.

Keywords: *Hannibal*, *American Psycho*, **Abjection of the body, Body violence, Adapted cinema, Performance of violence**

Outing the Monster from the Closet: Adapting Violence in Cinema

We, as a global culture, are obsessed monsters - or, at least, the idea of monsters. Even when it disgusts, disturbs and distorts us, we crave glimpses of the forbidden and the forsaken. So much so that we have created lucrative cultural industries, employing both visual and literary media, which commodify monstrosity and criminality under the glossy wraps of aesthetically constructed violence and pseudo-psychosis. In a dissertation on violence in post-dramatic theatre, particularly in the works of Heiner Muller, Brechtje Beuker writes: “...the driving force behind art’s preoccupation with what cannot be endured is precisely the wish to endure it.” (24)

‘Performing’ violence is a complex psychological act. The primary praxis of performative violence in adapted cinema is that the body acting or being acted upon in violence is not ‘real’ or even a representation of the real. It is merely a physical signifier of the disembodied, biopolitics of violence that underlies the hyperrealistic, reiterative function of the visual body, which is to enact aggression in a vicious unending loop. It is a form of

violence that is written on carefully choreographed bodies that the audience can revisit, reinterpret and re-contextualise at leisure, across time and space. The insulation afforded to a literary body – a body constructed, literally, with words – is ruptured when adapted to a visual media. The effect of an intense literary work is no less than that of a film, but there is definitely an ambiguous relationship between the creative adaptations of violence from the printed page to the screen.

From the Aristotelian emphasis on spectacle of gory violence to the body horror and aggressive physicality of 1960s Hollywood, the violent effect on and of bodies has persisted in both theatre and cinema. The conception as well as the conceptualisation of the body in all visual media has moved away from being a vessel of superimposed action and intent to a material, cultural presence acted upon by complex ideological denominations such as ‘class’, ‘gender’, ‘race’ and ‘sexuality’. The discursive body, in both fiction and film is, thus, forever subject to “cultural interventions”. (Harradine 69) The idea of adaptation of a literary body to a visual one, thus, automatically raises the issues of fidelity, acceptability and effect. While directors can often assume the role of independent interpreters and may choose to recreate or re-envision a character by situating and analysing it in particular socio-political contexts, the commercial demands of acceptance become paramount.

In cinema, the textuality of the body is deconstructed through technological stylisation, the performance of violence is more visually realised despite lacking the immediacy of the theatre. The abject can find more comfortable visual space in cinema than in theatre. Novels like *American Psycho* or the *Hannibal* series cannot be satisfactorily staged for, in them, violence is expressed through a plethora of physical expressions and actions that obsessively emphasise the abjection of the human body, through explicit scenes involving sex, rape, masturbation, bloodletting, ritualised killing, cannibalism etc. The disruptive, often debasing, reality of the body is made evident through the basest of physical functions, rupturing the cultural idealism of the body industry and this, consequently, becomes integral to the imaging and imaging of the violent body in the cinematic experience of *American Psycho* and the *Hannibal* films.

The Meditative Monster: Shaming of the Flesh in the *Hannibal Lecter* films

In an early scene in *The Silence of the Lambs*, FBI trainee Clarice Starling visits Dr. Hannibal Lecter in prison, where an inmate – Miggs - in an act of blatant sexual perversion, masturbates and then flings his semen at her. In retribution, Hannibal verbally tortures him into committing suicide. The scene is disturbing, primarily in the latent violence underlying Miggs’ attempt at the desperate reclamation of his masculinity. The target, interestingly, is a female officer, who holds institutional power over him, and must therefore be punished and put in her place by being reminded of her biological inferiority as a woman, by being branded with the crude evidence of the inmate’s manhood. It can be seen as an animalistic branding of the female body by an incarcerated man, stripped of his entitlement to women’s bodies, powerless in every way, who feels compelled to assert his dominance by an exhibition of phallic potency. Therefore, this brief scene of deliberate soiling of the female body takes on a resonance that goes beyond the scope of just a psychological thriller or a pop-cultural serial killer flick.

Images of dismembered and disfigured bodies crowd the screens of all the four films in the series: *Red Dragon*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Hannibal* and, the prequel, *Hannibal Rising*. The emphasis of the last film, however, is more on the explication of Hannibal’s cannibalism where an attempt is made at historicising, and even rationalising, his perversions, by retelling

his early years. The former three are much more unrestrained in their visualisation of violence. In *Red Dragon*, Will Graham attempts to capture the 'Tooth Fairy', a pseudonym given to Francis Dolarhyde, a serial killer, with the help of Dr. Lecter, who once served as a psychiatric consultant for the FBI in an earlier case, before being committed to prison for multiple homicides. The tortured victims, with their eyes gouged out with glass, represent the disposable nature of the human body. Robbed of their eyes, the victims can only submit quietly to the killer's panoptic and, at times, voyeuristic gaze - their bodies arranged in gruesome displays of almost pornographic horror. Dolarhyde's self-hatred with his face and body plays out meticulously in his obsessive need to take the eyes of the victims. He can see them - his masterpieces, his handiworks - while they are denied vision. In another scene, a nurse had her tongue ripped out by Hannibal while attending him, reinforcing the images of sensory deprivation. In *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), 'Buffalo Bill' - a serial killer pursued by the FBI, with assistance from an imprisoned Hannibal Lecter - strips his female preys to the flesh, literally, by skinning them, forcing on them the most extreme form of nakedness. The shaming of bodies becomes a recurrent theme in throughout the *Hannibal* series.

Thomas Harris' suave, intellectual psychopathic protagonist is brought brilliantly to life by Anthony Hopkins. Harris' Hannibal Lecter recreates the Romantic fascination with violence, presenting the killer as an artist of sort, whose victims become grotesque human canvases. (Black 113) He combines the quiet sophistication of the handsome doctor with his attractive Slavic lilt and the ruthless, psychotic killer who not only cannibalises his victims but prefers to sneakily pass on the legacy of his atrocities to unsuspecting guests by serving them delicacies cooked with human organs at formal dinner parties. The insistence of the *Hannibal* films is not only on the violence but the travesties wrought on bodies by forcing the ultimate indignity on them. He literally serves his crimes on silver platters for all to see. In a brutally explicit scene in *Hannibal*, the third film of the series, Lecter carefully cracks open the skull of his victim while he is still alive and conscious, exposes his brain, scoops up his portions of his grey matter, cooks it and feeds it with casual nonchalance to the victim himself. He forces a man to consume his own flesh. The bodies of Lecter's victims become, not only testaments of his own monstrosity, but monstrosities in themselves.

Psychoanalytic meta-theories tend to qualitatively clump together horror, thriller and slasher films within a broad and somewhat inchoate generic category that is centred on the explorations of both mental and bodily violence. A discussion on the *Hannibal* films requires a peek into this particular rabbit hole. For instance, a psychoanalytic approach can satisfactorily explicate the perverse pleasure often drawn from body horror and violence by substantiating it with the pleasure-pain/ Eros-Thanatos conjunction. Lecter's displaced deathwish, reiterated and reinforced through serial murders and cannibalism, is strategically countered by his almost obsessive fascination with Clarice Starling, which begins in *The Silence of the Lambs* and later develops into a dysfunctional romance through mutual reciprocation in *Hannibal*.

Furthermore, a psychosocial analysis of these films automatically hinges upon the pervasive centrality of the idea of the Freudian 'other'. Hannibal is one of the many signifiers of this otherness. On a different note, Hannibal is also haunted by the 'others'. In *Hannibal Rising*, we see a desperate, recently orphaned young child, striving survive with his younger sister, stranded and snow-bound in a cabin at the close of World War II. They are taken prisoners by rogue Russians who ultimately kill and cannibalise his younger sister Mischa, when they run out of food in the dead of winter. Thus begins Hannibal's persistent projection and transference of this infantile trauma through ritualised cannibalism. The repeated projection of the Russian looters in his victims created a skewed justifiability in his mind. As

Barbara Creed points out, in his compulsive transference and counter-transference, Hannibal “literally ‘devours’ the other.” (Martin 53)

The Consumerist Culture and Choreographed Body Violence in *American Psycho*

The crux of Ellis’ novel *American Psycho* and its subsequent cinematization by Mary Harron lies in their consumerist take on the reductive quality of the human body of when situated within a materialistic culture that thrives on narrow body-images wherein bodies become monetised and, therefore, interchangeable, dispensable and, ultimately, disposable. This savage deconstruction of the American dream features as its protagonist Patrick Bateman, a young Wall Street investment banker, submerged in the world of consumerism, greed and superficiality, who indulges in impersonal, violent sexual exploits, does drugs and fantasises about killing during his free time. The psychopathological obsession with the body becomes a conjunct to Bateman’s drive for power, money and violence. The problem facing the reader-audience is the notion that the entire narrative may finally prove to be a figment of violent imagination or the hallucination of a disoriented, schizoid mind. Bateman’s fantasies of violence becomes an extension of the body hysteria that accompanied the late ‘80s masculine anxiety towards the rapidly advancing technologised world where the urban metrosexual culture was posing the threats of ‘feminisation’ to the prevalent stereotypes of manhood.

In a world of too many ideological abstractions and varied strains of irreconcilable socio-cultural theories, the physicality and definitive concreteness of the body presents us with an interesting paradox. While we strive to etch our ideological on our bodies, the physical reality of the body itself often counter to it. Thus, the reconfiguration of bodies, through transformative acts like tattoos, surgeries, dieting etc - or in case of Ellis’ psychopathic hero Patrick Bateman, violence and disfiguration - speaks a crucial psychosomatic urge to imprint our ideological fidelities and desires on the visible body itself. The film begins with Christian Bale’s voice-over: “I believe in taking care of myself”, followed by a list of his daily routine, including exercise, diet and moisturising regimen. His obsession with appearance colludes with the superficiality bred by the hollowness of the American dream and contributes to the specificity in the representation of violence in both the book and the film. In his study on *American Psycho*, Alex E. Blazer writes, “Patrick Bateman [...] exists in the banal hollow of popular culture... as such Bateman is an idea, an image, but empty and void of deep reality.”

The replication of such emptiness translates into violence on disposable bodies. In his murderous fits (whether real or fantastical), Bateman mostly targets homeless people and prostitutes, the dredges of society. Sex becomes an accepted outlet for his urges. His misogyny translates into painful, often humiliating, sexual acts involving multiple partners simultaneously, forced into choreographies of abject debasement. Bateman buys the cooperation of women with money and finds particular satisfaction in their reluctance. It is another exhibition of his lust for power, ownership and control over commodifiable female bodies. In the films we are shown explicit threesomes where he directs the performance and often takes pleasure in looking at himself engaging in the same, with strategically placed mirrors and video recorders. The images of bodies in choreographed coitus and unwilling submission satisfies his rape fantasies and their powerlessness becomes his ultimate aphrodisiac.

While, he does not have a preferential type or ritual, the pattern of Bateman’s violent trajectories point towards the ‘void’ Blazer has spoken about. The Lacanian ‘lack’ which can never be fulfilled. He becomes an anthropomorphised extension of pure violence itself.

Ultimately, Bateman's psyche reflects the American capitalist culture endemic of a generation driven by greed, superficiality and power. Bateman lives in a state of constant paranoia, a fear of being outdone by his 'friends'. In a highly significant scene, we are presented with Bateman's reaction to his friends showing off their fancy calling cards, with stylized fonts and expensive paper. His jealousy translates into violence, and he attempts to murder his colleague Luis, only to be halted by his intended victim's revelation of desire towards himself. So the attraction of another man soothes his ego enough to placate his pathological need for aggression, though he does exhibit bouts of homophobia.

Throughout the film, identities are seen as interchangeable, fluid almost non-existent. People mix up names. Bateman is often misidentified, which he accepts with a strange calm borne of his own lack of self-knowledge. For instance, he calls his favourite working-girl 'Christie' and often buys her services for his sexual 'scenarios', thus creating, controlling and commodifying her body as well as her selfhood for certain periods. Christie, in turn, overlooks her own physical need for safety, in exchange for money, when she allows Bateman to hire her despite previous unfavourable experiences at his hand. (Tanner 97) *American Psycho* is replete with reminders that everything is available for a price. The monetisation of human beings relate directly to Bateman's psychosis bred of Ellis' consumerist nightmare where mindless replications create a cornucopia of expendable bodies. As the violence escalates, the audience is confronted with lewd images of violence. As his control slips, Bateman spins into a psychopathic spiral that ends in a vicious scene involving his cannibalistic attempt to literally 'eat' one of his sexual partners while engaged in an act of oral gratification and killing Christie with a wrench. In the final scenes, the previously hidden bodies of his victims are randomly discovered as stowed away in closets and posh apartments around the city. The carnival of bodies steeped in violence induces an apathetic, almost deliberately conditioned response from the audience. The visual reaction at the plenitude of horror becomes muted, and therefore, more disturbing.

Conclusion

The politics of bodies, both male and female, thus remain deeply entrenched in the popular cultural mires of gendered and accepted perceptions about body images. In these adapted films, bodies, especially female bodies are treated by a discontent male gaze, which tears apart their subjectivity through, what Linda Bardley calls, 'fetishised' violence, carefully orchestrated trauma and punishments. The female body is peculiarly implicated in the performance and visualisation of violence. The audience targeted is quintessentially male, who are positioned in a choric space of 'narrative codes' that project their unconscious desires on passive female, or alternatively, de-masculinised male bodies – almost androgynous - in their powerlessness. (Bradley 103) The female viewer, on the other hand, reconstructs the language of the gothic, a narrative particularly suited to voice the trauma, the guilt, the rage of the victim, creating a dual critique - one targeted at the male culture of generic horror and the other driven against the passivity of the prolific image of the female victim herself. In the end, we are constantly confronted with the implacable certainty of violence, because, ultimately, the transition from imagined to visually visible violence hinges upon a mimetic loop, an unavoidable repetition of the 'sameness' of dehumanisation.

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