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Humanities Core

4 June 2021

Tailored Bodies and Reconstructed Illusions: The “Authentic” Transgender Figure in *The Silence of the Lambs*

The groundbreaking psychological thriller *The Silence of the Lambs* features a stunningly independent and emotionally reserved detective heroine who battles with her own fears and anxieties amidst constant scrutiny and the manipulation of the movie’s “monsters”—the epitomes of social deviance in the forms of Hannibal Lecter, a former psychiatrist and cannibal, and Jame Gumb/Bufalo Bill, a transgender individual who murders and flays women to make a suit out of their skins. While Lecter derives his monstrosity from the taboo of viewing fellow human beings as food, he still manages to evade the revulsion and disgust that surrounds Jame Gumb, who is made an object of ridicule for what the movie frames as a pathetically artificial, perpetually fruitless quest to transform the body into one of a different sex. *The Silence of the Lambs* instills in the serial killer Jame Gumb a combination of contradictions that serve to wholly remove the character from being categorizable into a set of the recognized social dichotomies found in biological bodies, gendered appearances/behavior, mental states, and, most importantly, the label of gender itself. The development of Gumb as a failed transgender figure serves to reveal the extreme disconnect between the transgender condition and the outsider’s understanding of it—even with medical expertise, criminal profilers, and the insight of a fellow killer, the rest of the cisgender, heterosexual, *categorizable* cast utterly fails in its search to lay

bare the core of Buffalo Bill's fragmented, impermissible state of existence. Instead, Gumb's personal identity as a transgender woman is dismissed as a desperate, self-serving lie, and the audience's attention is wholly redirected to the aspects of Gumb's character that, put together, constitute a sensational kind of monstrosity that is condemned and reviled for the threat it poses to cisheteropatriarchal norms of gender. This wrong, inauthentic transgender-ness becomes synonymous with social instability, its refusal to comply with the greater cultural understanding of the gender dichotomy taken as proof of its own hideous artificiality.

According to the American Psychological Association, the term transgender encompasses all whose "gender identities or gender roles differ from those typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth." Conversely, cisgender people's gender identities and gender expressions align with the sex that they were assigned at birth (APA). Assigned male at birth, Jame Gumb's personal gender identity remains unclear despite the story's numerous attempts to remove the character from the transgender label, which contradicts Gumb's own genuine efforts to transition into the body of a woman. For the purposes of preserving the uncertain, ambiguous nature of this character's gender—which is central to Gumb's portrayal as a psychologically damaged, delusional, and unconditionally threatening antagonist—I will not use pronouns for Gumb until their inclusion becomes relevant to my arguments.

Nowhere is Gumb's transgender-ness more bold, more believable, and more confrontational than it is in the iconic dance scene of the secret basement. There, Gumb fully sheds the costume of the brutalizing, cold-blooded, masculine violator and killer, and steps into the idealized form of a "real" woman. The transgender predator is absorbed in the euphoria of being beautiful, gaze turned towards the self, while we are confronted with the increasingly

desperate face of Catherine Martin—the latest in a long series of victims abducted for their skins—as she attempts to carry out her escape plan from the dark bowels of a bloodstained oubliette. But far above, the predator preens. Glossy pink lipstick glistens on a pair of parted lips, barely moving as a brush traces the contours of the mouth, every stroke deliberate and precise. The camera cuts to shots of jewelry dangling against an obviously flat chest; a steady hand applying black liner to a creased eyelid; a dark tattoo slashing over the underside of a pectoral with drops of inked blood falling from the gash; painted fingernails idly toying with a delicate nipple piercing. The lips flutter, and a deep, disembodied, almost distorted voice asks, “Would you fuck me?” There is a contemplative pause; we are irritated, dismissive, clinging onto Catherine Martin’s desperate, tear-streaked face as despair dawns on her. The dolled-up predator in the other room is a petty nuisance, a distraction that we unwillingly entertain. When the voice speaks again, it is decisive, sultry, unsettling, and infuriatingly narcissistic. “I’d fuck me hard. I’d fuck me so hard.” Finally, Gumb’s face is revealed, painted in gaudy makeup, a scalped wig haphazardly clinging to the head. Gumb moves back from the camera, swaying to the rhythm of the rock music blasting in the background, clad in a bright, richly-colored, patterned gauzy shawl. As the music intensifies and reaches its climax, Gumb stands back, arms spread, naked and pale body cut in sharp relief against the intense hues of the shawl, resplendent as a human butterfly with wings of cloth like stained glass, bejeweled and decorated with all the traditional accessories of femininity. We are confronted with Gumb’s direct gaze, the sheer confidence and pride and anticipation expressed in a breathlessly heaving tattooed chest, the sexually provocative pose that bares the body as an unquestionable object of desire (01:33:39-01:36:25).

In the tenuous relationship formed between the audience and the characters in a movie, enabled by the voyeuristic gaze of the camera, Andrew Schopp finds a disturbance in the line drawn between the normal and abject, the natural and artificial, the victim and the monster. His article “The Practice and Politics of ‘Freeing the Look’: Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs*” analyzes the theory of *suture*, which states that the audience’s engagement with the narrative is always inclined towards a safe perspective, and that any disruption of the audience’s gaze must be “sutured” by the gaze of another fictional character or narrative point (Schopp 135-136). When Gumb asks us, “Would you fuck me?” we are temporarily shoved into the role of the gazer, where, as cinema establishes, we are meant to feel as if we have power—we see what we want to see; every scene is constructed to satisfy us, and our ability as viewers to seamlessly slide between different perspectives is how we derive pleasure from watching a film. However, in the dance scene, *we* become the ones subject to the controlling gaze of another—Gumb is a sexual object who has the power to gaze back at us, and this discomfort evoked from the removal of a power imbalance forces us into the position of the self-aware predator and monster. Sut Jhally’s documentary *The Codes of Gender* explores how the particular forms of femininity and masculinity recognized as “legitimate” are considered mutually exclusive in American culture, and how this strict, socially constructed separation is maintained through a constant subliminal stream of messaging embedded in every single aspect of media, from advertisements to blockbuster hits. Gender roles cannot be considered biological or natural at all, but they constitute such a fundamental part of our culture that if the boundaries between the two genders are ever blurred, if the categories are ever muddled, it becomes nearly impossible to proceed in any form of social interaction, such as the interaction between the

audience and the characters in a film (Alper). We are made to look at the lean, flat-chested, nearly castrated, naked body—delivered to us the way a traditional female body would be presented: adorned with flimsy clothes, the stance delicate and unsteady—and consider, even briefly, that this image, if all went according to Gumb’s wishes, is meant to be irresistibly, attractively, pornographically *feminine*. The flimsy clothing, makeup, and jewelry we see is coded as “submissive, powerless, and dependent”—which goes against the inherent nature of American-defined masculinity, or the concept that is bestowed upon Gumb’s physical body (Alper).

Of course, the average viewer would not consider Gumb to be attractive by any means; the ridiculous notion that such a disturbed, crass, unapologetically and glaringly *transgender* individual with silver nipple piercings, a gaudy shawl, and tucked genitals could ever be sexually desirable serves to underline the supposedly inherent futility of transgressing the gendered categories of expected appearance and behavior. In her article “Assuming Identities: Gender, Sexuality, and Performativity in *The Silence of the Lambs*,” scholar Lynne Stahl also points out that one crucial fact established in this scene is that Gumb—who is equivalent to the average white able-bodied cisgender male in economic standing, physical strength, and religious beliefs despite the actions taken to physically transition into a female body—violates the inferior standing of femininity that is written into American culture, and thus threatens to destabilize society at one of its fundamental values: the power hierarchy that enshrines cisgender heterosexual white men at the very top of the pyramid. (Stahl 28). Gumb’s choice to descend to the position of the objectified, sexualized woman is deeply unsettling because the power derived from the original, predestined masculinity cannot be wholly destroyed in the transition from male

to female, so long as the body remains physically identifiable as the former sex. The transgender person becomes the monster that is both the objectified and the objectifier, the gazer and the subject of the gaze, the predator and the prey, neither wholly male nor female—and we, forced to be the camera and mirror of Buffalo Bill for those painful few moments, do not want to look it in the eye.

Gumb's gender identity, even if we consider it to be congenital, is only ever shown to remain within the bounds of a patriarchally defined kind of femininity—one that strives to align with the male-dictated standards of female beauty, one that willingly subjects itself to the gaze of the voyeur and predator, one that is, paradoxically, both innate and only skin-deep. The transgender feminine hunts, kills, and skins her own kin, wearing their hulled-out corpses, believing that the shells of her more fortunate cisgender cousins will also grant her that same status as a being who no longer covets, but instead is *coveted*. Given that the movie's director and the book's author are both heterosexual cisgender white American men, it comes as no surprise that this conflation of nonconforming gender expression and the brutal methods used to fulfill the internalized narrative of "authentic" femininity wholly undermines the validity of Jame Gumb as an accurately written transgender character.

The Silence of the Lambs dismisses Gumb as troubled and mentally disturbed, having somehow deluded himself into thinking that he is a transgender woman—the misconception helped along with a heaping dose of criminal history and "severe childhood disturbances" (00:57:19-00:57:23). Gumb supposedly wholeheartedly believes that her male body is the wrong body; and perhaps we would humor her delusion, if we were presented with enough evidence, framed in a way that clarifies her gender dysphoria as "authentic" to the general audience in a

cisheteronormative society. And yet, Gumb is shown presenting a cisgender, masculine figure anywhere she is seen outside of the tailoring room, and, most crucially, the *audience* does not see any outward expression of discomfort in these instances. Already, we doubt the authenticity of her transgender-ness before she is even given a chance to flaunt it—and so do the rest of the characters. Clarice Starling, the ever-reliable trainee and academic overachiever, echoes the judgements of the medical authorities: “There’s no correlation in the literature about transsexualism and violence. Transsexuals are very passive” (00:55:52-00:55:56). Hannibal Lecter, the psychiatric genius, the infallible mastermind, confirms her argument by explaining that Gumb was most likely rejected by the three medical institutions that offered sex reassignment surgery because “he wouldn’t test like a real transsexual...Billy’s house drawings will show no happy future...No baby carriage...no pets, no toys, no flowers,” drawing the conclusion that “Billy hates his own identity...and he thinks that makes him a transsexual” (00:56:50-00:57:37). Perhaps the halfhearted attempt to remove the transgender label from Buffalo Bill and replace it with the pure, simple classification of *monster* would have been successful, if not for how the movie makes use of every opportunity to portray Jame Gumb as a desperately feminine, pathetic man who alternates between dehumanizing his female victims and objectifying his own reflection in the safety of his little, glittering cocoon of sewing supplies, tailored garments, mannequin busts, and generous stashes of makeup and jewelry.

Are we, the audience, supposed to agree with the verdict of the medical jury, then, when presented with such a jagged, contradictory, flimsy patchwork of Jame Gumb’s transgender condition? Medical diagnoses and the manifestations of symptoms that clearly point to another condition are not mutually exclusive events; doctors are still human, biased, and prone to error.

Stahl also seems to ridicule Lecter's argument, stating that it is hardly scientific or correct to assume that all transgender women's life goals align with the socially prescribed standards for cisgender women. Furthermore, it is ridiculous to even rely on the ideal of baby carriages, flowers, and pleasantly domestic houses as a baseline for the evaluation of an individual's gender when cisgender women themselves cannot all be said to conform to these expectations (Stahl 7-8).

In regards to the matter of violence and mental illness, the doctors' passing claims that transsexualism has no association with the two become trivial and meaningless in the face of Gumb's own unwavering belief that she is a transgender woman—a belief that is flagrantly disturbing in its exhibition. As discussed by Julie Tharp in her article “The Transvestite as MonsterGender Horror in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho*,” Buffalo Bill's transsexuality is attributed to a severely disturbed childhood, a causal relationship rooted in the “general anxiety over the Freudian Oedipal paradigm so well fostered by the 1950s...totalitarian grip of the nuclear family...[which] mandated strict gender roles” (Tharp 108). Bill's unbridled success as a villain in one of the most iconic thrillers of American cinema is fueled by the character's role in overturning the conventional Freudian notions of gender dynamics that are so prevalent in the horror genre. K.E. Sullivan's article “Ed Gein and the figure of the transgendered serial killer” addresses the phenomenon of popular media conflating “monstrosity or deviance...[with] transgender individuals, allowing for little...sympathy from spectators” (Sullivan). The monstrous, forbidden femininity of Buffalo Bill and many other supposedly “transgender” murderers/violent villains in media was inspired by real life serial killer Ed Gein, who was reputed to have been transsexual. This gravitation towards femininity was attributed to his

unusually close relationship with his mother, an Oedipal attachment that detracted from the legitimacy of his masculinity, turning him into the monster of being an effeminate, mentally disturbed man that upsets the traditional American obsession with maintaining a strict divide between the binary genders (Sullivan). This foundation of deep insecurity and anxiety when it comes to “proper” gender roles, masculinity, motherhood, and sexuality in mainstream American culture is distilled in the character of Buffalo Bill, whose “queerness becomes the privileged signifier for psychotic violence” (Sullivan). Aberrations in gender presentation, performance, and identity are blamed on the rearing of the disturbed individual, the phenomenon localized to a particular family unit (most notably the mother) that has violated the social conventions of favoring masculinity over femininity in the process of raising what *would* have been a “normal,” healthy male. Buffalo Bill’s unnamed family members shoulder the burden of having created a mutant child, neither wholly feminine nor wholly masculine, resistant to definite labels for sexuality or gender, and, as Sullivan argues, mentally unstable and prone to violence as a result of a chaotically gendered upbringing.

Jack Halberstam, however, argues in his essay “Skinflick: Posthuman Gender in Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*” that Jame Gumb is not an example of transphobia or homophobia; rather, Gumb’s discomfort with the body and the subsequent pursuit of changing the surface appearance exemplifies the shallowness and performativity that is gender at its very essence. Gumb is “imitating gender, exaggerating gender, [and]...is prey to the most virulent conditioning heterosexist culture has to offer. [Gumb] believes that anatomy is destiny[, and that]...skin...is identity itself” (Halberstam 577-582). So perhaps what makes Gumb so effective as a monster is that it goes beyond simply transgressing gender boundaries—it ignores them

entirely, and remakes gender into something barely recognizable to our culture; an uncanny-valley skin suit that imitates femininity, but embodies something else entirely. The Silence of the Lambs' attempted portrayal of Gumb as an inauthentic transgender individual simultaneously reinforces notions of the binary gender construction and, with its emphasis on the superficial value of physical appearance, also happens to completely destroy the supposed infallibility of gender as an integral, immovable, indisputable aspect of existence in American society.

In the end, Jame Gumb is a violator of the American psyche's need for categorizing individuals and concepts into neat, discrete packages, a violator that makes its audience balk like no other, because every aspect of its character is designed to unseat deeply rooted conceptions we hold of our own identities. Gumb supposedly fails to be a legitimate transgender figure because of her propensity for violence and neurodivergence—and yet, these are the two traits that are most weaponized in her search to envelop herself in a perfectly tailored, horrifically gruesome costume of artificial, flimsy femininity. The conflict between the medical community's flawed diagnosis and her own firm belief in her transgender-ness contributes to the disintegration of the boundary between the masculine and feminine, which in turn is used to justify the pathologization of her gender nonconformity and the intermingling of this gender identity with the brutal, narcissistic violence of a serial killer. While performing for the camera beneath dazzling disco lights in her basement, Gumb deliberately transforms herself into the sexualized, submissive object of the audience's gaze, but the second gaze—of society itself—remains forever beyond her control. As a non-cisgender individual, Gumb's own labels are ignored and ridiculed in favor of the professional judgements delivered by medical professionals who

supposedly understand more about their patients' own psyche than the patients themselves, based on the collections of literature written by their equally esteemed predecessors. Gumb's chosen style of clothing and bodily alterations are denied to her by the very institution that is supposed to care for her health and enable a comfortable existence living in her own body; forced to turn to much more taboo and immoral means of achieving her goal, she nevertheless remains trapped within the sphere of social interaction that regulates every minute detail of gendered behaviors and appearances, closeted both figuratively and literally in her dazzling wardrobe of painstakingly acquired costumes that she fruitlessly hopes to inhabit and bring to life.

But society is not finished with merely dissecting and suppressing the mutant creature that is the unrecognizable, self-proclaimed transsexual—it needs to sever the transgender figure from the very identity of “human,” to make it something entirely alien, something without the capacity to receive sympathy or understanding, in order to preserve the structural integrity of the power hierarchies built into the favored binary gender model. Gumb sheds all semblance of humanity when she begins to hunt and skin other accepted members of society; loses the inherent privileges and powers granted to the male body when she slips into the chrysalis of femininity; forgoes any claim to equal treatment and protection in the eyes of society when she makes it known that her very existence goes against what popular culture considers to be law and order. Jame Gumb receives no happy ending for its crimes; the abomination is shot in the dark, its last minutes of life spent in close confrontation with a feminine figure who embodies everything it has coveted—and with its death, stability is restored to the natural world. Gender solidifies into its two opposing components of the masculine and feminine, neatly partitioned once again, the patriarchal values of American culture resting solidly on its throne. Nothing has changed; the

human was mutilated, and the monster created from their mismatched remnants, feared, hunted, vivisected, trapped, and destroyed—and the system responsible for its tormented existence will move on without a second thought, washing its hands clean of the slow, methodical slaughter of a human being.

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